This Is How It Always Is

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LAURIE FRANKEL

Prior to 2011, writer Laurie Frankel worked as a college professor teaching writing, literature, and gender studies; however, she transitioned to writing full-time after the publication of her first novel, *The Atlas of Love*, which was a finalist for the Pacific Northwest Book Award. Frankel's second novel, *Goodbye for Now*, was published in 2012. *Goodbye for Now* was the winner of the 2013 Endeavor Award, an annual award for outstanding science fiction writing by a Pacific Northwest writer, and was also a *New York Times* Editor's Choice. Frankel published her third novel, *This is How it Always is*, in 2017 to popular and critical acclaim. The book won the 2018 Washington State Book Award and has been translated into over 20 languages. *This is How it Always is* was a *New York Times* bestseller and was named a Best Book of the Year by *People* magazine, the Chicago Public Library, and Amazon. Frankel is also the author of several essays, including "Raising a Transgender Child in the Age of Trump" and "We Adopted by Choice not Necessity," and she has published work in the Guardian, Lit Hub, and *People* Magazine. Frankel is at work on her next novel, and she also teaches for several nonprofit organizations. She lives in Seattle with her husband and daughter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *This is How it Always is*, Penn researches sex reassignment surgery, particularly vaginoplasty—the surgical construction of a vagina, usually from existing penial and scrotal tissue—in case Poppy considers surgical options when she gets older as treatment for her gender dysphoria. The first official surgical intervention for gender dysphoria in the United States was in 1917 when Dr. Alan L. Hart underwent a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus) to lessen his symptoms of gender dysphoria, but the kind of surgical intervention Penn is talking about—the construction of functioning sex organs—was not attempted for several years. Dora Richter was the first known transgender woman to undergo an orchiectomy (removal of the testicles) in Berlin in 1922, followed by a penectomy (removal of the penis) and vaginoplasty in 1931. Dora is thought to have died in 1933 during a Nazi attack in Berlin. In Dresden in 1931, Lili Elbe—whose experiences are chronicled in the novel *The Danish Girl* by David Ebershoff—was also treated surgically for symptoms of gender dysphoria and underwent vaginoplasty, an orchiectomy, an ovarian transplant, a penectomy, and ultimately died after her body rejected a uterine transplant. The first known transgender man to undergo phalloplasty (construction of a penis from vaginal tissue) was Michael Dillon in London in 1946 by Dr. Harold Gillies, viewed by many as the father of modern plastic surgery. Dillon, who was also a surgeon, is the basis for the book *The First Man-Made Man* by Pagan Kennedy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Laurie Frankel's *This is How it Always is* focuses on Poppy and her experiences growing up as a transgender girl. Poppy struggles with gender dysphoria, which is the stress created when one's gender identity is at odds with the gender they were assigned at birth, and the book chronicles her transition from a boy named Claude to Poppy, a free-spirited and happy young girl. Other books that explore similar issues of gender and identity include *The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater, *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, and Jeffery Eugenides's *Middlesex*. Frankel also explores secrets and the damage that can be done in keeping important information from others, a theme that is found in *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. Lastly, *This is How it Always is* examines the complexity of family and the connections formed by such a bond, a theme that is central in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *This is How it Always is*
- **When Written:** 2017
- **Where Written:** Seattle, Washington
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Madison, Wisconsin; Seattle, Washington; Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand
- **Climax:** Poppy embraces her true gender identity while living in Thailand, and Penn publishes his book, *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stefanie.*
- **Antagonist:** American society's traditional gender roles and the discrimination of the LGBTQ community.
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Giving Back. Laurie Frankel is a member of Seattle7Writers, an organization of writers in the Pacific Northwest who promote literacy efforts in their communities by creating pocket libraries

in shelters, food banks, and prisons.

Rooted in Experience. *This is How it Always* was inspired by Laurie Frankel's own transgender daughter, although Frankel admits that there are few similarities between Poppy and her daughter.

PLOT SUMMARY

Roo is Penn and Rosie's first son, and they decide to hyphenate his name, Roosevelt Walsh-Adams, so he doesn't sound "too presidential." Next is Ben, and then the twins, Rigel and Orion, because Penn and Rosie thought they would have "just one more." Now, even though Rosie is a doctor and a woman of science, she is rearranging her bedroom furniture in the middle of the afternoon because the ancient laws of the Talmud say that daughters are conceived in the afternoon and in beds with an east-west orientation. Claude is conceived that afternoon, and since this is Rosie's forth pregnancy and fifth child, people keep asking her if she is Catholic and if she understands how birth control works. After nine months, Rosie goes into labor, which, by now, she is a professional at. She immediately knows when it is time to push, and with Penn telling her to breathe, she hears the doctor yell, "It's a boy!"

Penn is an only child, and when he first told Rosie this, she responded with sadness, as if he was dying. Penn is a writer, and he and Rosie were first fixed up by a woman from Penn's MFA program. On their first date, Rosie told Penn that she had a sister named Poppy who died of cancer when they were just kids. That night, after Penn dropped Rosie off, he came to the "realization" that he would one day have a daughter named Poppy. All through Rosie's residency, Penn sat reading in the hospital waiting room, and on Rosie's breaks, he would tell her stories of Grumwald, a knight of his own creation. Penn and Rosie fell in love over Grumwald stories, and now he tells Grumwald stories to their five kids each night before bed. Bedtime is the busiest and most difficult time of the day, and since Rosie is often working at the hospital, Penn is usually flying solo. Claude is five years old now, is interested in science and dinosaurs, and when he grows up, he wants to be a "girl scientist." When Claude and his siblings put on a play for Ben's birthday, Claude is the princess, and he refuses to take the dress off. He even wants to wear the dress to preschool, and Rosie and Penn are forced to make up elaborate excuses to get him out of it.

On the first day of kindergarten, Claude comes down for breakfast wearing the princess dress. Penn "accidentally" spills down the front of the dress, forcing Claude to change into shorts and a t-shirt, but Claude insists on using one of his grandmother Camry's patent leather purses as a "lunch tote." After school, Rosie is informed that the school doesn't allow peanut butter sandwiches, and boys with purses are a "distraction." Claude insists the purse is a "lunch tote" and continues taking his lunch in it every day. He also continues to wear a dress every day, but only after he gets home from school. Penn and Rosie tell Claude he can wear a dress to school if that is what he wants, but he says no. His teacher, Miss Appleton, already thinks he is weird, and he doesn't want the other kids to make fun of him. Claude says he is fine just changing into his "real clothes" when he gets home from school. Near the end of fall, Penn and Rosie make an appointment at the school to talk about Claude. He wants to start wearing a dress to school, and Penn and Rosie want to make the transition as easy as possible. The principal, Dwight Harmon, is understanding. He has had transgender students before and has experience working with children with special needs, but Victoria Revels, the school district's representative, is mostly concerned with pronouns and which bathroom Claude will use. If he isn't changing his name, she says, they won't worry about pronouns, but Claude *must* use the bathroom in the nurse's office from now on.

On the first day that Claude wears a dress to school, Penn goes with him and sits quietly in the back of the classroom, just in case. The kids, however, seem relatively indifferent to Claude's clothes. They ask him a few questions, but that's it. The older kids are different story though, and as time goes on, the playground becomes an increasingly miserable place for Claude. To escape the older kids, Claude begins eating lunch in the bathroom, but the nurse catches him and tells him to stop. After that, Claude begins going into the boys' bathroom, but Miss Appleton soon catches him doing that, too. He *must* use the nurse's bathroom, she says. She tells him only little boys use the boys' bathroom. If Claude wants to wear a dress, then he must use the nurse's bathroom. Claude says he should just use the girls' bathroom then, and Miss Appleton replies through gritted teeth: "But you're not a little girl." Victoria Revels calls Penn that night and says that Claude will have to decide if he is a boy or a girl. If he has gender dysphoria, Ms. Revels says, that is one thing, but if Claude just wants to wear a dress, then he is being "disruptive" and must stop. And in the meantime, she adds, he *must* use the nurse's bathroom. Later that night, Claude goes to Rosie and Penn and tells them that he has decided to change his name to Poppy. Penn and Rosie think it is "perfect."

One day, Rosie drops Poppy off at her friend Nicky's house, but Rosie doesn't get far before Poppy calls crying and tells Rosie to come and get her. Rosie calls Penn, who is closer, and races toward Nicky's house. Penn is just pulling up when she gets there, and as they get out of the car, Poppy runs out of the house, crying. Nicky's father, Nick, comes to the door and, calling Poppy a "faggot," says she is never welcome near his son again. Nick lifts his shirt to reveal a gun tucked into his pants, when Nicky's mother, Cindy, pulls up and pushes him back inside. Cindy texts later to apologize, but Rosie doesn't bother

to answer.

Later, while Rosie is working a shift in the emergency room, an ambulance brings in Jane Doe, a transgender woman who has been shot and nearly beaten to death by a bunch of fraternity boys at the local university. Between Nick Sr. and Jane Doe, Rosie knows she must move Poppy to a safer city, one that is more open-minded, and she finally decides on Seattle. It is a city, but there is still access to parks and nature trails, and there are plenty of hospitals. But most importantly, it is a diverse city, and it is more open and accepting of people who are different.

Rosie gets a job at a private family practice in Seattle, and they buy a house near the city. On Rosie's first day alone in the house, the neighbors, Frank and Marginny, stop by to introduce themselves. Marginny and Frank have two daughters, Aggie and Cayenne, and when Marginny asks about Rosie's kids, she blurts out Poppy's whole story in a single breath. The next day, at a barbeque at Frank and Marginny's house, Marginny tells Rosie that she and Frank don't intend to tell their kids the truth about Poppy. Aggie will be in Poppy's class at school, and if the idea is for Aggie to treat Poppy like a girl, Marginny and Frank don't see the point in confusing things by telling Aggie the truth. Rosie and Penn agree that is probably best and decide to keep the fact that Poppy is transgender a secret. Poppy and Aggie become close friends and, along with Kim and Natalie, are inseparable. Poppy and Aggie's bedroom windows face one another, and they promise to be best friends forever and "rival princesses in neighboring castles." Poppy and her family manage to keep Poppy's secret for years, until Poppy is 10 years old. One afternoon, Poppy calls Rosie at work. "Mom. They know," Poppy says. "Everyone knows."

It all started when a boy named Jake Irving said he heard Poppy has "a giant dick," and it went downhill from there. By the afternoon, the entire school was talking about Poppy, and she walked out and immediately came home. She is not, Poppy says, going back to school. That night, Penn and Rosie go to Poppy's room to check on her and find her dressed like Claude with her head shaved bald. Poppy insists on being called Claude and refuses to leave his room. Rosie stays home with him for three days, but when she checks in with her office on the fourth day, Howie, the doctor who owns the practice, says Rosie must start doing extra work if she wants to continue working at the practice, and he wants her to go to Thailand and set up a refugee clinic. Later at home, Rosie finds Penn researching sex reassignment surgery and vaginoplasty. He isn't advocating for any surgical intervention now, he says, but if Poppy decides it is something she wants later, he wants to educate himself. Poppy is 10, Rosie reminds him, and now insists on being called Claude again. Rosie goes to bed that night feeling unsure about everything. It is impossible to sleep, and near dawn, she gets up and sends a text to Howie. She will go to Thailand and set up the clinic, as long as Poppy—who is now going by Claude—can go with her.

When Claude and Rosie get to Bangkok, Claude is shocked to see how many people walking around are just like him. The women have long hair and wear dresses, but Claude can tell by their hands and feet that they are transgender. As Rosie works every day at the clinic, Claude works at the school, teaching the children how to speak English by telling them Grumwald stories. The children think Claude is a monk because his head is shaved bald, but he doesn't know if that means they think he is a girl or a boy. Claude considers the children a "blind test." If they think he is boy, then he is; however, if they see him as a girl, then that is what he is. Penn says the important thing is what Claude sees when he looks at himself. "I see nothing," Claude says. A woman named K helps Rosie at the clinic during the day—K serves as the mechanic, nurse, physical therapist, social worker, and security detail—and Rosie can't help but notice she is transgender. It is called *Kathoey*, K says, and in Thailand, there is no stigma attached to *Kathoey*. "We all Buddhist," K says, "Is karma. Is life. Is just another way to be."

There are **Buddha statues** all over Thailand, and Claude notices how feminine they all look. A local named Nok tells him that Buddha is depicted as more feminine because it makes him look peaceful and gentle. According to Nok, Buddha had many bodies before he reached enlightenment. In Buddhism, nothing belongs to you, not even your own body. Claude instantly likes this idea. Buddha is a person who was born male, shaved his head, "got enlightened, and then ended up looking like a girl." Buddha understands that bodies don't matter, and from that moment on, Claude is a Buddhist. Late that night, Rosie gets a text from Penn, telling her to come home. When she finally gets ahold of him the next day, he tells her that he has sold a book, *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie*, and she must come home so they and celebrate. In Penn's new story, Grumwald is cursed by a witch and forced to live each day as a knight and each night as Princess Stephanie. It is Poppy's story, he says, and others need to read it, so they can understand. Rosie does return home, with Poppy, who has finally agreed to go back to school. Poppy even attends the school Valentine's Day dance and dances with Jake Irving, who apologizes for treating her so badly. Rosie says that their fairytale has a happy ending after all, but Penn promises they are nowhere near the end.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Claude/Poppy – Rosie and Penn's daughter and sister to Roo, Ben, Orion, and Rigel. At the age of five, Claude tells his family that he wants to be a "girl scientist" when he grows up and begins wearing dresses to school. His teacher, Miss Appleton, thinks he is "weird," and she scolds him for bringing a purse to school and for using the wrong bathroom. After Claude transitions to Poppy, Poppy and her family move to Seattle, and

things are much better for her. No one knows about Claude, and she doesn't have to pretend anymore. Poppy meets Aggie, who lives next door, and they quickly become best friends, along with Kim and Natalie. One day, when Poppy is 10 years old, she goes to school and everybody suddenly knows that she is transgender. Kids stop her in the hall and make crass comments, and they humiliate her in front of everyone during class. Poppy runs home, shaves her head bald, and reverts back to Claude. Claude refuses to go to school, and when Rosie must go to Thailand to set up a new medical clinic, Claude goes with her. In Thailand, Claude teaches the local children to speak English through his father's Grumwald stories, and he learns from Nok, a local, about the **Buddha statues** that are all over the country. The Buddha statues are vaguely feminine, because femininity is comforting, Nok says, but also because Buddha had many bodies before enlightenment. In Buddhism, nothing is permanent, not even the body. Claude feels an instant connection to Buddha and becomes a Buddhist for life. Buddha, Claude thinks, is just like him: a guy who was born male, shaved his head, "got enlightened, and then ended up looking like a girl." Claude's trip to Thailand and Penn's stories give him the courage to return home as Poppy, and she proudly returns to school as herself. Poppy represents the transgender community and the discrimination and rejection queer people face in America's transphobic society, but she also underscores the importance of being honest about one's gender identity and not living in secrecy.

Rosie – Camry's daughter, Penn's wife, and mother to Roo, Ben, Orion, Rigel, and Poppy. Rosie is a doctor, and she meets Penn during her residency as an emergency room physician. She falls in love with Penn over his stories of Grumwald the knight, and even though she has always dreamed of having a daughter named after her late sister, Poppy, Rosie gives birth to five boys. Rosie's job at the hospital means that she works a lot, but Penn stays home with the kids, and they are able to make it work. When Rosie's youngest son, Claude, decides that he wants to be a girl when he grows up and starts wearing dresses, Rosie is concerned, but she never has enough time to worry about one thing for too long. Soon, it is clear to Rosie that Claude is transgender (even if she doesn't admit it to herself) and when he transitions to Poppy, she thinks Poppy's choice of name is "perfect." After the incident with Nick Calcutti, a transgender woman, Jane Doe, is brought into the emergency room after she is violently assaulted, and Rosie begins to seriously worry about Poppy's safety in Madison. They decide to move to Seattle, where Rosie and Penn keep Poppy's transgender identity a secret. Rosie starts a new job at a family practice, and the doctor who started the practice, Howie, expects Rosie to do extra PR work for the office, and he wants her to go to Thailand and set up a clinic. Howie frequently makes sexist comments to Rosie, and after she takes a week off to spend with Poppy when she is outed as transgender, Rosie must agree to go to Thailand for fear of being fired from her job. In Thailand, Rosie befriends K, a transgender woman, who helps her to better understand Poppy's gender identity and help Poppy find her place in the world. Like Penn, Rosie upends traditional gender assumptions, but she also reflects the discrimination of women, especially in the workplace, in American society.

Penn – Rosie's husband and father to Roo, Ben, Orion, Rigel, and Poppy. Penn is a writer, and he meets Rosie when he is in graduate school getting his MFA. Penn is not a realist, and he believes in "fairy tales" and "happily ever after," but he doesn't believe in love at first sight. Still, he falls in love with Rosie almost immediately. Rosie falls in love with Penn when he tells her Grumwald stories in the hospital waiting room, and after they get married and have a family, Penn tells Grumwald stories to their five kids. Rosie is a doctor with a demanding schedule, so Penn stays home and raises the kids. He cooks and cleans, takes cate of laundry and bath time, and picks up endless toys and scrapes gum from the walls. His is writing a novel, but most days he doesn't get the chance to even think about it. After Claude tells Penn he wants to be a "girl scientist" when he grows up, Penn is concerned, but he is hoping it is just phase. Soon, it is clear Claude is not going through a phase, and after he transitions to Poppy, Penn vows to make Poppy feel as normal and accepted as possible. Nevertheless, Penn is concerned about Poppy's safety, which is why he agrees with Rosie when she wants to move to Seattle, and it is also why he agrees to keep Poppy's gender a secret once they get there. Penn is committed to keeping Poppy's secret, and he researches "penis-minimizing underwear" and sex reassignment surgery; however, after Poppy is outed at school as transgender and humiliated, Penn is committed to telling as many people as possible about Poppy and writes *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie*, a fairy tale about a transgender knight. Like Rosie, Penn defies traditional gender roles and exposes them as ridiculous and antiquated, and he also represents the power of storytelling. By telling Poppy's story through Grumwald, Penn makes visible the transgender community and helps others to see that they aren't so different.

Roo/Roosevelt – Penn and Rosie's son and brother to Ben, Orion, Rigel, and Poppy. Roo, the oldest of the siblings, plays the flute and is the quarterback of the football team. When Penn and Rosie decide to move the family to Seattle because it is safer for Poppy, Roo is angry. He doesn't want to leave his life in Madison, and he doesn't think it is fair to make him move just for Poppy. Living in Seattle, Roo is miserable. He is suspended from school for fighting with a kid named Derek McGuiness who is constantly making transphobic and homophobic slurs, and Roo gets into trouble when his history project on LGBTQ rights in the military is misunderstood for bigotry, even though he is trying to highlight the injustice. Roo tries to keep Poppy's gender a secret like Penn and Rosie ask, but he thinks their secrecy is the same as shame. He believes that if Penn and Rosie truly supported Poppy, they would tell others who she is,

instead of hiding her gender from the world. Roo thinks his parents are hypocrites; they accuse him of being transphobic because of his history project, but he thinks they are the ones who are transphobic. Roo represents the importance of family in the novel, but he also highlights how loving and supporting one's family members is not always an easy thing to do. Roo doesn't want to go to Seattle, and he resents that he has to go for Poppy, but he goes anyway, and he never takes his anger out on Poppy herself.

Grumwald/Princess Stephanie – A character in one of Penn's fairy tales. Penn creates Grumwald when Rosie is in her residency, and he tells her Grumwald stories in the hospital waiting room on her breaks during long shifts. Penn and Rosie fall in love over Grumwald stories, and after they are married, Penn tells Grumwald stories to their kids. When Rosie and Poppy are in Thailand, Penn sells a book, *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie*, in which Grumwald is cursed by a witch and forced to live each day as a prince and each night as Princess Stephanie. Grumwald hides his secret identity, and after many years, he goes to the witch and asks her to lift the curse. The witch agrees; however, she can't remember if Grumwald was originally Grumwald or Princess Stephanie. Grumwald says he wants to be both, not one during the day and one during the night, but both man and woman at all times. The witch says Grumwald is "betwixt," which is more complex than just in between. Grumwald is "betwixt" a knight and a princess, the witch says, and she makes him swear he will never again keep his gender identity a secret. Secrets cause loneliness and "panic," but if Grumwald is honest about who he is, he will find others who are "betwixt," too. The witch says that telling Grumwald's secret can "change the world," which is what Penn is trying to do by writing the story. Grumwald *is* Poppy, who is also "betwixt" a girl and boy, and in telling Poppy's story, Penn is hoping to build awareness and acceptance.

Aggie – Frank and Marginny's daughter, Cayenne's sister, and Poppy's best friend and next door neighbor. Aggie is a "tomboy," and she spends her time digging in the dirt, catching bugs, and playing with trucks. She and Poppy are inseparable and have sleepovers practically every weekend, but Aggie has no idea that Poppy is transgender. Aggie, whose bedroom window faces Poppy's, says they will be best friends forever and "rival princesses in neighboring castles," and she says "it would be the worst thing ever" if Poppy had been born a boy like all her brothers. If Poppy was a boy, Aggie says, they couldn't be best friends. After Poppy is outed as transgender at school, Aggie refuses to talk to Poppy and says she hates her because Poppy lied to her. Poppy should have trusted her with the truth, Aggie says, and it isn't until after Poppy returns from Thailand that Aggie finally forgives her. Frankel ultimately argues that Poppy should not have kept her gender a secret; however, in the case of Aggie, Aggie gave Poppy little reason to believe that she would accept her if Poppy told her secret. Aggie does accept Poppy in the end, but their friendship is not the same. Like nearly everyone else in the novel, Aggie upends stereotypical gender assumptions, but she also represents the painful rejection many transgender teens face. When Aggie finds out that Poppy is transgender, she stops being her friend, which, as Mr. Tongo points out, is a common occurrence after a transgender teen is outed.

Mr. Tongo – A social worker at Rosie's hospital in Madison and a specialist in gender dysphoria. Mr. Tongo meets with Rosie and Penn throughout the book and helps them through the process of Claude's transition to Poppy. Mr. Tongo is a pleasant and enthusiastic man who thinks everything is an occasion to celebrate. He congratulates Penn and Rosie when Claude begins to wear a dress, and when Poppy is unexpectedly outed and humiliated at school, Mr. Tongo cries: "Perfecto!" Mr. Tongo helps Penn and Rosie to understand that there is nothing wrong with Poppy, that she just sees herself differently than the world sees her, and he helps them to accept that Poppy *is* queer, something both Rosie and Penn deny for some time. Mr. Tongo educates Penn and Rosie about what to expect when Poppy gets to puberty, and he talks with them about medications like hormone blockers to ease Poppy's struggles with gender dysphoria. Mr. Tongo also educates Rosie and Penn as to the other struggles transgender people face, such as rejection, discrimination, and violence, which leads to a high number of suicides. Some 40% of transgender teenagers have attempted suicide at least once, Mr. Tongo says, and Poppy's life will not be easy. The character of Mr. Tongo underscores the challenges the transgender community faces, but he is also committed to educating people and helping others understand those challenges in hopes of correcting them.

The Witch – A character in Penn's fairy tale, *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie*. The witch curses Grumwald, forcing him to live each day as a man and each night as Princess Stephanie. Before the witch lifts the curse, Grumwald asks to be both man and woman, and the witch instantly understands. Grumwald is "betwixt," she says, which is not the same as in between. "Betwixt" is complicated and has many layers, and it is best understood as "both-and" instead of "neither-nor." Grumwald is "betwixt" a prince and a princess, but he must not keep who he is a secret, the witch says. Secrets lead to fear and loneliness, and if Grumwald is open about who he is, he will "get magic. Twice," she claims. In telling his secret, Grumwald will find others who are "betwixt," too, and he will "change the world." According to the witch, "story is the best magic there is." The character of the witch underscores Frankel's argument that one's gender identity should never be kept a secret, and she helps to shed light on Poppy's unique gender identity, which can also be understood as "betwixt." The witch also illustrates the power of storytelling. Stories offer a vicarious experience and help people understand those who are different, and the witch reminds Grumwald, and by extension

Poppy, of this valuable truth.

Ben – Penn and Rosie's son and brother to Roo, Poppy, Rigel, and Orion. Ben is the second oldest of the siblings, and he is also the smartest, which is why he skips the sixth grade. Ben is quiet and likes to read, and he often gets bullied at school. When Claude is young, before he transitions to Poppy, and he wants to wear a dress to school, Ben begs his parents not to let Claude do it. It is fine, Ben says, for Claude to wear a dress at home, but at school he will get beat up, and Ben doesn't want to see Claude get hurt. After Claude transitions to Poppy, Ben is supportive of her choice, and when she begins to struggle with her gender identity, Ben helps Poppy to see that she *is* a girl. Ben falls in love with Cayenne, the girl next door, even though he thinks it is terribly cliché, and he tells her that Poppy is transgender when she asks to know a secret about his life. Penn and Rosie want to keep Poppy's gender a secret, but Ben comes to learn how wrong their decision is, especially where Cayenne is concerned. Ben underscores the problem with secrets, and he doesn't think it is right to keep secrets—particularly big secrets with steep consequences—from those you love.

K – A transgender woman who works in Rosie's medical clinic in Thailand. K is the clinic's mechanic, and she is also the nurse, social worker, physical therapist, and security detail. K's husband is Burmese, and they have four children together—two girls and two boys—who were orphaned during the conflict in Myanmar. K and Rosie become close friends, and K tells Rosie that there is no stigma attached to being transgender—*kathoey*—in Thailand. K stands for *kathoey*, which is "ladyboy" in Hindi, and she says there are lots of *kathoey* in Thailand. "We all Buddhist," K says. "Is karma. Is life. Is just another way to be." K also teaches Rosie about Buddha and the "middle way," which is finding a way to be happy in a world that isn't always pleasant and accepting. Finding the middle way is difficult, K says, and it is done over many lifetimes. "Learn mistake and fix and tell. Not-knowing to knowing." K represents the transgender community in Frankel's novel, and she helps Rosie to understand that Poppy's gender isn't something to attach a stigma to and that being transgender "is just another way to be."

Howie – A doctor who started the medical practice in Seattle where Rosie works. Howie is the one who hires Rosie, and he is the kind of doctor who calls his patients' mothers "Mom." Howie is big on marketing the practice, and he wants Rosie to go to Thailand and set up a medical clinic so he can brag about it on the practice's website. Howie expects Rosie to do work outside her scheduled appointments and on-call hours, and he gets angry if Rosie's family obligations keep her from this extra work. Howie is demeaning and patronizing when he speaks to Rosie. He calls her "girl," implies that she is incapable of doing her job or taking care of her family, and he makes her feel like she will lose her job if she doesn't go to Thailand. Howie represents the sexism and discrimination women often face in the workplace. He makes Rosie work twice as hard as the men in the practice, and he places himself in a position of authority over Rosie, even though he isn't her boss.

Victoria Revels – A representative of the school district in Madison, Wisconsin, where Claude goes to school before his transition into Poppy. Penn and Rosie meet with Ms. Revels, as well as the school principal, Dwight Harmon, and Claude's teacher, Miss Appleton, when Claude decides to start wearing a dress to school. Ms. Revels is only concerned with Claude's pronouns and which bathroom he will use, and she tells Penn and Rosie that Claude must use the nurse's bathroom from now on. When Claude is caught using the boys' bathroom, Ms. Revels calls Penn and tells him that Claude has to decide which gender he is. She says if Claude is a girl that's fine, but if he is just a boy in a dress, than he is "disruptive" and must dress "normal." Ms. Revels's treatment of Claude and his family amounts to little more than discrimination, and it represents the discrimination that many LGBTQ adolescents face in schools.

Chad – A fraternity boy who assaults Jane Doe because she is transgender. Chad meets Jane Doe at a party, and after he places his hand on her thigh and discovers she is transgender, Chad begins to beat Jane and then invites his fraternity brothers to join in. The beating gets out of hand, and Chad can't get his friends off Jane, so he grabs a gun, meaning to discharge it into the air and frighten them. Chad is unsure how to use the gun, and when he shoots, he accidentally shoots Jane in the shoulder, narrowly missing her vital organs. Presumably, Jane Doe later dies in the emergency room during Rosie's shift. Chad and his fraternity brothers represent the extreme hate and violence against the LGBTQ community—particularly transgender women, who are disproportionately assaulted and murdered—in American society. Chad and his friends are transphobic and homophobic and they kill Jane Doe just because she is different.

Miss Appleton – Claude's kindergarten teacher in Madison before he transitions to Poppy. Miss Appleton thinks Claude is "weird," and he swears she doesn't like him very much. She keeps Claude after class when he brings a purse to school and tells Rosie that little boys don't need purses, and when Claude wears a dress to school, she tells him that little boys don't wear dresses. Miss Appleton gets angry when Claude uses the boys' bathroom, and when he asks if he should just use the girls' bathroom, she says through gritted teeth: "you are not a girl." On the surface, Miss Appleton seems like a friendly kindergarten teacher, but she bullies Claude, too, making his school experience even more miserable. Miss Appleton, too, represents the bullying of LGBTQ kids, especially transgender kids, in American schools.

Orion – Rosie and Penn's son, Rigel's twin, and brother to Roo, Ben, and Poppy. Orion is a bit of a prankster, and he is known at school for his silly and "inventive" outfits. Like all his brothers,

Orion loves Poppy and supports her transgender identity, but he, too, is unable to keep her gender a secret. Orion blurts it out at a barbeque, and when a kid at school tells Orion he is "like Poppy," Orion tells him all about Poppy in case he needs someone to talk to. The character of Orion underscores the importance of being honest about one's gender identity. The boy at school who is "like Poppy" likely would have had no one to talk to if he had not known that Poppy was also transgender.

Rigel – Rosie and Penn's son, Orion's twin, and brother to Poppy, Ben, and Roo. Orion and Rigel are the middle children, and they are loud and rambunctious boys; however, they are also kind, and they are very protective of Poppy. Like Rigel's brothers, he finds it impossible to keep Poppy's gender a secret, and when a kid at school says he is "like Poppy," Rigel tells him all about Poppy in case he needs someone one to talk to. Rigel illustrates one of the reasons why Frankel argues one's gender identity should not be kept a secret. Without knowing about Poppy, the boy at school might not have known that Rigel was an ally and safe to open up to.

James – One of the doctors at the medical practice in Seattle where Rosie works. James is pleasant, and he and his husband spend every evening at happy hour and fine dining restaurants. When Howie grows angry after Rosie takes time off to be with Poppy, James calls Rosie to warn her. One day, James tells Rosie that he was apprehensive about hiring her to work at the practice. Five kids is a lot, he says. This sexist assumption implies that Rosie can't be a good doctor because she has to take care of her kids, even though Rosie's husband, Penn, handles most of the childrearing. James is an example of the discrimination women face in America's sexist society.

Cindy Calcutti – Nick Calcutti's wife and Nicky Calcutti's mother. After Claude begins wearing a dress to school and transitions into Poppy, Cindy Calcutti calls Rosie and invites Poppy over for ice cream and to play with her son, Nicky. After Rosie drops Poppy off, Cindy's husband calls Poppy and "faggot" and threatens her with a gun. Cindy later texts Rosie to apologize, but Rosie doesn't bother to respond. Cindy Calcutti represents those Rosie says are only nice to Poppy because of "PC bullshit and a strange Poppy cachet." Cindy invites Poppy over not because she really wants Poppy to be friends with her son, but because she is curious about Poppy and wants to appear open-minded.

Marginny Granderson – Frank's wife and Aggie and Cayenne's mother. Marginny and Frank live next door to Penn and Rosie in Seattle, and they are the first people Rosie tells that Poppy is transgender. Marginny and Frank decide not to tell Aggie and Cayenne about Poppy's gender. Marginny thinks that if the point is for her daughters to treat Poppy like a girl, it is better not to confuse things. Rosie agrees and decides it is best to keep Poppy's gender a secret from everyone. Marginny and her family have dinner once a month with Rosie and her family, and the two women have a comfortable and supportive friendship.

Camry – Rosie's mother. Camry's name is a combination of her real name, Carmelo, and Grammy, and she is anything but an ordinary grandmother. Camry comes to stay with Rosie, Penn, and the kids during holidays and summer vacations, and before Claude transitions to Poppy, Camry buys him a pink bikini and a new wardrobe of dresses and skirts. Camry is supportive of Claude, and later Poppy's, gender identity, and she encourages Rosie not to worry. Like Rosie, the character of Camry defies stereotypical gender roles and instead is who she wants to be: a nontraditional grandmother who smokes and swears and loves her family unconditionally.

Nok – A man Poppy and Rosie meet in Thailand. Nok drives Rosie and Poppy around and guides them through cities, and he is the one to tell Poppy about the **Buddha statues**. He also tells Poppy about the Thai tradition of assigning days of the week colors, and he encourages Poppy to find out what day of the week she was born on, so she will know her color. "Find out," Nok says. "Is important." Poppy was born on a Monday, which means her color is yellow—an ambiguous color that is not overtly feminine and not overtly masculine, just like Poppy.

Jane Doe – A transgender woman who is beaten and shot by Chad and a group of his fraternity brothers at the local university. Rosie is on shift in the emergency room when Jane Doe is brought in, and while it isn't explicitly stated, Frankel implies that Jane Doe dies from her injuries. After treating Jane Doe, Rosie decides that their town isn't safe for Poppy and moves her family to Seattle, a city Rosie thinks is more diverse, inclusive, and open-minded. Jane Doe represents the extreme violence and hate the transgender community faces in American society.

Nick Calcutti – Cindy's husband and Nicky's father. When Cindy invites Poppy over to play with Nicky, Nick calls Poppy a "faggot" and threatens her with a gun. He says that Poppy is not welcome in his home or near his son, and he threatens Rosie and Penn with a gun, too. Nick Calcutti represents the extreme hate and violence leveled against the LGBTQ community in American society. Poppy is just a six years old when Nick threatens her, but he is so angered by Poppy's gender, the fact that she is a child makes little difference.

Frank Granderson – Marginny's husband and Aggie and Cayenne's father. Frank and Marginny live next door to Penn and Rosie in Seattle, and when they stop by to introduce themselves, Rosie blurts out that Poppy is transgender. Frank and Marginny decide not to tell their kids about Poppy, and their decision kicks off the secrecy of Poppy's gender in Seattle. Frank is accepting of Poppy's gender, although he occasionally says insensitive things without thinking. The Grandersons and Poppy's family have a monthly get together they call "Dueling Dinners," and they all enjoy a nice and easy friendship.

Dwight Harmon – The principal of Claude's school in Madison, Wisconsin, before Claude transitions to Poppy. Mr. Harmon is a

nice guy, and since Penn has had five kids at his school, they know each well and get along easily. Penn and Rosie meet with Mr. Harmon, as well as Ms. Revels and Miss Appleton, when Claude begins wearing a dress to school. Mr. Harmon is accepting of Claude's gender identity and offers to accommodate all his needs, but Ms. Revels is the one who makes all the decisions regarding Claude's needs at school.

Jake Irving – A kid a Poppy's school in Seattle. The day Poppy is outed as transgender, Jake, under the influence of Marnie Alison, says terrible transphobic and homophobic things to Poppy. Afterward, Jake texts Poppy to apologize, and when Poppy returns from Thailand, Jake asks her to dance at the Valentine's Day dance at school. Jake represents those who are encouraged by bullies to give LGBTQ kids a hard time. Jake turns out not to be such a bad kid, he simply follows his peers at Poppy's expense.

Derek McGuiness – A bully at Roo and Ben's school. Derek McGuiness is forever making transphobic and homophobic comments, and Roo gets into frequent fights with him. Roo is ultimately suspended from school for fighting with Derek, and Rosie must stitch up a cut on Roo's head. Derek McGuiness represents the abuse and bullying LGBTQ kids often encounter at school, which, Frankel implies, contributes to the disproportionate rate of suicide for transgender adolescents.

Cayenne – Frank and Marginny Granderson's daughter, Aggie's sister, and Ben's girlfriend. Cayenne dates Ben, but she initially has a crush on Roo. On Cayenne and Ben's one year anniversary, she begs Ben to tell her a secret, so she will know that he really loves her. As a result, Ben tells Cayenne that Poppy is transgender.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kim – One of Poppy's closest friends. Poppy, Kim, Natalie, and Aggie are inseparable and have frequent sleepovers, and like Poppy's other friends, Kim has no idea that Poppy is transgender. After Poppy is outed at school as transgender, it doesn't matter to Kim, who accepts Poppy regardless of her gender.

Nicky Calcutti – Cindy and Nick Calcutti's son and Poppy's friend in Madison, Wisconsin. Cindy invites Poppy over for ice cream and a playdate, but after Nicky's father yells transphobic and homophobic slurs at Poppy and threatens her with a gun, she never plays with Nicky again.

Natalie – One of Poppy's closet friends. Natalie, Kim, Poppy, and Aggie are inseparable all through elementary school, and the friends have frequent sleepovers. Like Poppy's other friend's, Natalie doesn't know that Poppy is transgender; however, after Poppy is outed, Natalie easily accepts her.

Marnie Alison – One of the bullies at Poppy's school in Seattle. When Poppy's secret that she is transgender comes out, Marnie encourages Jake to bully Poppy.

Elizabeth – One of the doctors at the medical practice where Rosie works in Seattle. Elizabeth is competent and quiet, and the other doctors in the practice know very little about her personal life.

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.

GENDER AND BINARIES

Gender and binaries are central to Laurie Frankel's *This is How it Always is*. When Penn and Rosie discover their son Claude has gender dysphoria—the term given to the stress one feels when their internal gender identity does not match their outward gender appearance—gender and gender binaries quickly become a big part of their lives, just as those things have always been a big part of Claude's life. By way of highlighting Claude's differences, Mr. Tongo, Rosie's friend and a social worker specializing in gender dysphoria, suggests Rosie and Penn keep lists of Claude's behavior and then place each individual behavior into either a male or a female category. Penn and Rosie quickly discover that putting everything into either/or categories isn't so simple. To them, some of Claude's behavior, like wearing a dress, is clearly feminine, and some behavior, like wrestling with his brothers, is clearly masculine; however, some behavior seems to be neither, like playing with LEGOs. Through *This is How it Always is*, Frankel implies that gender is not always—if ever—a clear choice between male and female, and she argues that gender and people are "both-and," not "neither-nor."

Claude is not the only character who doesn't fit neatly into either a "boy" or "girl" category, which speaks to the idea that many people, not just those struggling with gender dysphoria, aren't entirely male or female. Rosie is a doctor, and Claude and his brothers constantly tell her that she works a "boy job." A doctor is a scientist, they reason, and scientists are usually men; therefore, Rosie has a "boy job." Rosie clearly identifies as a woman but her job is undeniably masculine. Penn, on the other hand, is a writer, and his children see his profession as much more feminine. From their perspective, being a writer is romantic and mysterious, not masculine and rough. Plus, since Penn doesn't make any money, and Rosie is at work all day at her "boy job," Penn has to cook, clean, and raise kids, which, his children argue, is definitely a "girl job." Penn, too, is quite certain that he is a man, but his role in life is considered stereotypically female. When Rosie goes to Thailand to work in a Burmese

refugee clinic, she is surprised to find that K, the mechanic, is a woman, since most people in that profession are men. Furthermore, Penn and Rosie's oldest son, Roo, plays the flute—an instrument that is usually viewed as feminine—and is also the quarterback of the football team. Gender and people are complicated in Frankel's novel, and they don't easily fit into categories.

Even after Claude transitions into Poppy and starts living as a girl—the way Poppy truly identifies—life is still difficult, which further suggests people and gender are not "neither-nor." Before Claude transitions fully to Poppy and starts using female pronouns, he begins to wear a dress to school and is made to use the bathroom in the nurse's office. Claude uses the bathroom in the nurse's office for a while, but he eventually goes back to the boys' bathroom. His teacher, Miss Appleton, catches him and firmly tells him that if he is boy, he can't wear dresses, and if he is a girl, he must use the nurse's bathroom. Claude says girls use the girls' bathroom, but Miss Appleton says Claude "is not a little girl." For Claude, it seems, he is neither a little girl nor a little boy. As Poppy grows up and moves closer to puberty, Penn and Rosie consider "hormone blockers" to keep Poppy from growing facial hair and developing a deep voice as she ages. With the medication, Poppy will remain a girl, but she won't grow into a woman like her friends—no matter what Poppy does, her body won't naturally grow and develop like her female friends' bodies will. However, Penn and Rosie know that even if they don't allow "hormone blockers" and Poppy goes back to living as Claude, he will never be entirely a boy. A part of Claude will always be Poppy, and he will always be "a girl with a penis." Again, no matter what Poppy does, the discrepancy between her female gender identity and her male anatomy dictates that she doesn't fit neatly into either a male or female category.

Penn explains Poppy's gender in a fairytale he writes about a prince named Grumwald, who, after being cursed by a witch, is forced to live as Grumwald by day and as Princess Stephanie by night. When the witch goes to lift the curse and asks Grumwald which gender he wants to be, Grunwald wants both, and he wants to be both at once. Grumwald is "betwixt," the witch says. He is not merely "in between," but is more complicated and layered. "Betwixt a prince and a night fairy is neither-nor as much as both-and," she explains. Poppy is "both-and" just as Grumwald is, and, Frankel thus implies, so are many others.

SECRETS AND MISUNDERSTANDING

After Penn and Rosie discover their son, Claude, is really a girl, secrets become a big part of their lives. Penn and Rosie aren't sure how much of Claude, and later Poppy's, gender identity should be shared with others, and they don't know what they should keep completely to themselves. Rosie is an emergency room physician, and after she treats Jane Doe, a transgender woman who is shot and nearly beaten to death by a bunch of fraternity boys at the local university in Wisconsin, Rosie can't imagine ever telling anyone the truth about Poppy again. To keep Poppy safe, Rosie decides it is best to move the family across the country to Seattle, and since no one knows who they are, it is easy to keep Poppy's secret—at least it is at first. In the end, Rosie and Penn learn that Poppy's secret really shouldn't be a secret in the first place. Though *This is How it Always is*, Frankel argues that keeping secrets—especially big secrets with consequences, like one's gender identity—is never a good idea and only lead to fear and misunderstanding.

While Rosie and Penn don't initially plan to keep Poppy's gender identity a secret when they get to Seattle, they quickly decide it might be a good idea, and they vow as a family not to tell. When they get to Seattle, Rosie does tell the neighbors, Frank and Marginny, the truth about Poppy, but Frank and Marginny decide not to tell their kids. Their daughter, Aggie, is Poppy's age and will be in her class at school. If the idea is for Aggie to treat Poppy like a girl, they feel it is better not to confuse things. Rosie and Penn agree and decide to keep Poppy's secret. Mr. Tongo, Rosie's friend and a social worker specializing in kids like Poppy, says that Poppy's gender is really no one's business, other than a doctor's, of course, and that is only in certain contexts. Rosie wouldn't talk to people about her other children's penises, so she shouldn't be talking about Poppy's. For Mr. Tongo, Poppy's gender identity isn't so much a secret as it a privacy issue, but it basically boils down to the same thing, as he's committed to keeping Poppy's secret. Penn, too, is invested in keeping Poppy's secret, and he spends much time researching "penis-masking underwear" and sex reassignment surgery, if, at a later date, Poppy decides surgery is something she wants. Penn is clearly prepared to do whatever they must to keep Poppy's secret.

Despite their efforts, however, Poppy's brothers aren't able to keep her secret, which suggests that Poppy's gender identity shouldn't be a secret in the first place. Poppy's brother, Ben, tells his girlfriend, Cayenne, who asks him to tell her a secret to prove he loves her. Ben does love her, and he doesn't need to divulge a secret to prove it, but he knows it will make her happy, and he also knows that keeping Poppy's secret from Cayenne isn't right. When something is "this significant, this consequential," Ben says, it can't be kept a secret from the person you love. Poppy's brothers, the twins, Rigel and Orion, also let Poppy's secret slip. Orion accidentally says that Poppy is a boy at a barbeque, but no one seems to notice. Then, another boy approaches Orion and Rigel and says he is "like Poppy," so they tell him everything in case he needs someone to talk to. Rigel and Orion know they promised to keep Poppy's secret, but that didn't seem like the right thing to do when the kid was obviously struggling. Lastly, Poppy's oldest brother, Roo, also tells her secret. After a kid at school, Derek McGuiness, makes a disparaging comment about transgender

people in general, Roo beats him up while saying: "That's. My. Sister. You're. Talking. About. Asshole." Roo knows he was supposed to keep Poppy's secret, but Derek McGuiness had it coming, Roo says, and he couldn't help himself.

Penn also explains the trouble with secrets in the fairytale he writes about Grumwald, who is cursed by a witch and made to live each night as a princess and each day as a prince. Grumwald keeps his secret, too, but when the witch lifts the curse and allows him to be both male and female at once, she says he must never keep who he is a secret. "Secrets make everyone alone," the witch says. "Secrets lead to panic," and they result in fear and hysterics. With Grumwald, Penn decides that Poppy's secret should be told, so others can know who she is and try to understand. Penn, and by extension Frankel, imply that secrets like Poppy's lead to fear and panic, like the violent situation Jane Doe faced. Gender identity, Frankel argues, should be openly discussed to avoid such tragic misunderstandings. Open discussion is not a guarantee of acceptance and understanding, but, Frankel implies, it is a start.

VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

Lurie Frankel's *This is How it Always is* focuses on Claude, a boy who struggles with gender dysphoria—meaning his internal gender identity is at odds with his outward gender appearance—and discrimination and violence are, unfortunately, a major part of his life, both before and after transitioning into Poppy. Poppy's parents, Rosie and Penn, keep a "no-fly list," which identifies the kids Poppy shouldn't play with because either the kids or their parents don't quite understand Poppy's gender. For instance, one girl's dad makes an off-color joke about drag queens, and one woman asks Rosie way too many questions about Poppy's genitals. When Poppy is just five years old, Nick, the father of one of Poppy's friends, calls her a "faggot" and threatens her whole family with a gun. Poppy is not the only character to face violence and discrimination, and other members of the LGBTQ community face similar treatment in the novel, as do women more broadly. With the representation of violence and discrimination in *This is How it Always is*, Frankel highlights how those who are considered different from the mainstream are often subject to abuse, and how unfortunately such discrimination and violence seems inevitable.

It isn't just Poppy who experiences discrimination and threats of violence, but other members of the LGBTQ community as well, which underscores the widespread discrimination against LGBTQ people within American society. Rosie is an emergency room physician, and one of her patients is Jane Doe, a transgender woman who is shot and nearly beaten to death by a group of fraternity boys at the local university. Chad, a fraternity boy, and his friends beat Jane because they discover that she is transgender, and their ignorance manifests as hate and violence. When everyone at school discovers Poppy's secret, Mr. Tongo, a social worker and Rosie's friend, asks Penn and Rosie how Poppy is handling being outed. Kids often aren't kind to transgender kids, Mr. Tongo says, and many are bullied and beaten. According to Mr. Tongo, some 40% of transgender kids commit suicide because they are bullied so badly by other kids. At school, a boy named Derek McGuiness calls Poppy's brother Roo "gay" and beats him up. Roo isn't gay, but it really doesn't matter. Derek assaults Roo because he *thinks* Roo is gay, which also reflects the violence and discrimination that the LGBTQ community faces.

Although the book largely focuses on the deep discrimination and hatred that the LGBTQ community faces in America, the book also highlights through the character of Rosie how women in general are often subject to similarly poor treatment. Rosie is constantly told that her career as a doctor is a "boy job," and when she begins her residency as an emergency room physician, people are surprised that she doesn't pick a more feminine specialty, like pediatrics or obstetrics. Because Rosie is a woman, it is implied that she can't handle the grittiness of working in the emergency room. After Rosie and Penn are married and Rosie leaves the emergency room for private practice, James, one of the doctors she works with, says that he was wary about Rosie when she first came to the practice. Five kids is a lot, James says, implying that its Rosie's responsibility as a woman to care for her kids herself (even though, as the book shows, her husband does a lot of the childrearing and housekeeping tasks). Rosie is shocked and says that James can't hire people based on how many kids they have. Because Rosie is a woman and has five children, it is assumed that she can't also be a talented doctor. Howie, the doctor who started the private practice and hired Rosie, tells her that she must "start pulling her weight" if she wants to keep her job. Rosie already has a full patient schedule and keeps emergency and on-call hours like the other (male) doctors at the practice, but Howie wants her to do more. If Rosie can't because she has five kids and too many distractions at home, she will have to be a doctor somewhere else, Howie says. Rosie is forced to choose between her family and her career, a decision that many men aren't forced to make.

Penn and Rosie know that there will always be people in the world who don't understand Poppy. K, a transgender woman Rosie meets in Thailand, gives Rosie similar advice. K tells Rosie that Poppy will have to find the "middle way" and learn to live with those who don't accept her. The novel ends in a positive and uplifting way, as Poppy finally embraces who she is, and her family is together and happy; however, Frankel's message regarding the discrimination and abuse women and the LGBTQ community face is a bit more pessimistic. Many people face violence and discrimination in Frankel's novel, and, as the title suggests, this is how it always is. All anyone can do is be aware, be guarded, and try their best to accept that the world will not radically change anytime soon.

STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a primary theme in Laurie Frankel's *This is How it Always is*. The novel focuses on Claude, a young boy struggling with his gender identity who ultimately transitions to a girl named Poppy, but Claude, and later Poppy's, struggles are only half the story. The novel also focuses on Poppy's parents, Rosie and Penn. Penn, a fiction writer, has long since been working on a novel of his own, and stories, particularly fairytales, are an important part of his life. As such, stories are therefore an important part of Penn's family's lives as well. As Poppy's struggles with her gender build and she moves toward puberty, Rosie, who happens to be a physician, doesn't know if Poppy will be okay. Knowing if Poppy will be alright in the long run takes "prognostication" not "prognosis," and that is out of Rosie's wheelhouse. "Then that's *my* skillset," Penn says. Poppy needs a fairytale, he says, not a doctor. Through *This is How it Always is*, Frankel underscores the power of storytelling and argues that stories are the only thing that can save Poppy, and the world in general.

Stories are central to Penn's life and his family's, which underscores the importance of storytelling in the novel. When Penn and Rosie are just dating, Penn is in graduate school getting his MFA, and Rosie is in her first year as a resident in the emergency room. Rosie's hours are grueling, and so is Penn's reading schedule, so he spends all his time reading and writing in the hospital waiting room. When Rosie comes out on breaks, Penn tells her about Grumwald the knight, a story he writes just for her that has no beginning and no end. Penn and Rosie fall in love over the stories of Grumwald, illustrating the importance of storytelling in their lives and in the novel. After Rosie and Penn are married and have five children, Penn tells their children the stories of Grumwald the knight. Grumwald is really Rosie's story, Penn says, but the children are part of Rosie's story, so Grumwald is their story, too. When Claude is in kindergarten, he dresses up as Grumwald for Halloween. Claude wears his regular clothes, but his costume includes a cardboard cutout of a knight, which has words and phrases pasted all over it to represents the infinite words of the never-ending story of Grumwald, a story that belongs to him. Just as the story of Grumwald is central to Penn and Rosie's lives, it is clearly important to Claude as well.

As Claude transitions to Poppy, storytelling, particularly the story of Grumwald, is essential to her transformation. When Claude makes the transformation to Poppy, Penn modifies the story of Grumwald to include Grumwald's identity as Princess Stephanie. As the story goes, Grumwald is cursed by a witch whose magic turns him into Grumwald by day and Princess Stephanie by night. Through the story, Penn offers Poppy a reflection of herself—something she doesn't often see in mainstream society—which again highlights the power of storytelling. When Poppy is 10, after she is outed as transgender and goes back to her identity as Claude, Rosie takes Poppy on a trip to Thailand where Poppy, or Claude, teaches the local children to speak English by telling them Grumwald and Princess Stephanie stories. The children also tell Claude Thai and Burmese fairytales, and through these stories they form a powerful connection. Plus, since Grumwald and Princess Stephanie stories are a representation of Poppy, Claude gradually gets the courage to return to her identity as Poppy, further underscoring the power of storytelling.

While Rosie and Poppy are in Thailand, Penn publishes a book called *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie*, which details the story of Grumwald and his secret identity as Princess Stephanie. Of course, Grumwald's story is Poppy's story, and Penn thinks it is important that other people read it. In Penn's fairytale, the witch who curses Grumwald says sharing his story "will change the world," and Penn is hoping to do the same. By writing down Poppy's story, Penn claims "others can read it, and then it can grow." In sharing Poppy's story, Penn hopes to create acceptance and awareness for the LGBTQ community, and this is precisely what Frankel does in *This is How it Always is*.

FAMILY

Family is an exceedingly important part of Laurie Frankel's *This is How it Always is*. The novel tells the story of Rosie and Penn and their family, and the lengths Rosie and Penn are willing to go to make sure their five children are happy, healthy, and safe. The importance of family is first reflected when Rosie and Penn name their oldest son Roosevelt after his grandfather, and it is later reflected in Rosie's desire for a daughter, so she can name her Poppy after her sister, who died of cancer when they were just kids. Naming her daughter Poppy would keep Rosie connected to her beloved sister, allowing a small part of Poppy to live on even after her death. Rosie's mother, Camry, is also a big part of Penn and Rosie's life, and she visits the children during summers and over Christmas vacations. What's more, family and the support it provides proves to be essential when Rosie and Penn discover that their son, Claude, is transgender. Through *This is How it Always is*, Frankel highlights the significance of family and ultimately argues there is nothing more important, even if being a part of one isn't always easy.

When Claude first discovers he is transgender, his family supports him unconditionally, which underscores the significance of family in the novel. Penn and Rosie are willing to do whatever they must to make sure Claude feels accepted regardless of his gender, including letting Claude wear a dress to school and carry one of Camry's old purses. Claude is their child, and Penn and Rosie want Claude to know that they love him no matter what. After Claude decides to wear a dress to school, his brothers Ben and Roosevelt, or Roo for short, "stage an intervention." Ben and Roo beg Penn and Rosie not to let

Claude wear a dress. They know it is important to accept Claude no matter what, and they do, but they know other kids won't be so accepting. A dress is bound to get Claude beat up, and Ben and Roo don't want to see their brother suffer, which again speaks to the importance of familial solidarity and support in the novel.. After Claude makes his transformation into Poppy and lives as a girl, Roo beats up Derek McGuiness, a kid at school who says disparaging things about transgender people. "That's. My. Sister. You're. Talking. About. Asshole," Roo says as he beats Derek. Poppy is Roo's sister, and he won't let anyone say bad things about her, even indirectly.

However, Penn, Rosie, and their kids discover that supporting Poppy unconditionally isn't always easy. Once Poppy begins to wear dresses in kindergarten when she is still Claude, her brothers Orion and Rigel take a lot of abuse for being the brothers of the kid in a dress. "Your little gay brother is so gay," the kids say cruelly to Orion and Rigel. Poppy's brothers, however, never complain, and they never blame Poppy for the other kids' actions, which highlights their connection as siblings. When Rosie and Penn decide they must move across the country to Seattle to keep Poppy safe, Roo is miserable. He doesn't want to leave the life he has in Madison, but in the end, he knows that he must. Going to Seattle is what is best for Poppy, so Roo does it, even though it is hard. After Poppy is outed as transgender in Seattle, Rosie takes several days off from work, even though she knows taking time off might get her fired. Rosie chooses Poppy over her job, because as Rosie's child, Poppy is more important than anything else.

After Rosie and Penn move their family to Seattle for Poppy's safety, Roo grows more and more distant and unhappy. Making him move just because it is what Poppy needs isn't fair, and he wants his mother and father to recognize that. Rosie agrees—it *is* terribly unfair that Roo is forced to move because of Poppy, but he must do it anyway. That is what family means, Rosie explains. "I hate family," Roo says. "That too, I'm afraid," Rosie responds. Rosie implies that supporting family isn't always easy, and sometimes it is really difficult and even miserable, but that is what families do. Rosie's insistence, and Roo's eventual agreement, underscores Frankel's argument that nothing is more important than family.

SYMBOLS

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

THE BUDDHA STATUES

The Buddha statues that Poppy notices in every city and village in Thailand symbolize Poppy's complex view of gender and the Buddhist "middle way" in Laurie Frankel's *This is How it Always is*. As a young transgender woman, Poppy is immediately drawn to the Buddha statues because they are unmistakably feminine. Poppy knows that Buddha is a boy, but each of his statues have long, shapely fingernails, and his face and lips are full and womanly. Nox, a local Thai man, tells Poppy that Buddha is represented as feminine because femininity is "peaceful, gentle, [and] nonaggressive." Furthermore, Nox explains that Buddha's body is often feminine because Buddha had many bodies before enlightenment, since in Buddhism, nothing is permanent, not even one's body.

As Poppy's gender identity is at odds with her physical body, she is drawn to the Buddhist belief in the impermanence of bodies. In this light, Poppy's body is less important than how she feels and identifies on the inside. Poppy feels a certain connection to Buddha, a man, she says, who was born male, shaved his head, "got enlightened, and then ended up looking like a girl." Poppy is so drawn to Buddha and his beliefs that she vows to be a Buddhist for the rest of her life. The Buddhists believe in the "middle way"—which the novel describes as finding happiness in a world that isn't always so happy and accepting—and this is what Poppy swears to do as well. In the Buddha statues, Poppy finds the courage to continue in a world that has largely rejected her, and she sees a reflection of herself—someone who is neither entirely male nor entirely female.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Flatiron Books edition of *This Is How It Always Is* published in 2018.

Part I: Bedtime Story Quotes

❝ Bedtime stories were a group activity. And because showing the pictures all around to everyone involved a great deal of squirming and shoving and pinching and pushing and get-outta-my-ways and he-farted-on-mes and you-got-to-look-longer-than-I-dids, Penn often resorted to telling stories rather than reading them. He had a magic book he read from. It was an empty spiral notebook. He showed the boys it was blank so that there was no clamoring to see. And then he read it to them. Like magic.

Related Characters: Rosie, Claude/Poppy, Rigel, Orion, Ben, Roo/Roosevelt, Penn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs when Penn and Rosie's family is introduced near the beginning of *This is How it Always is*, reflects the importance of storytelling within the novel. Penn and Rosie fell in love over stories in the hospital waiting room, and now Penn tells the same stories to their children. Penn describes nightly story time in chaotic terms. It is "a group activity," and it involves all four of Penn's young sons at once. When Penn reads stories from books, each of the boys wants to see the pictures, which, inevitably leads to fighting (and "squirming and shoving and pinching") and arguing ("get-outta-my-ways and he-farted-on-mes").

Storytime is time consuming at the end of a long day and likely takes more patience than Penn has. As a writer, Penn is uniquely equipped to make up stories in real time and remove the temptation of picture books with his blank "magic book." Penn's ability to so easily weave new stories on the spot *is* "like magic"; however, so is his ability to capture the attention of four young boys. The boys, who were just moments ago fighting and arguing, are now still. To Penn and his children, the stories are "like magic," which is why Penn turns to stories at the end of the novel to help Poppy. Stories have the power to bring people together, Frankel argues, like they do for Penn and his family.

❝ In all, a successful bedtime and an accomplishment on par with finishing a particularly difficult chapter or a tax return. It wasn't diagnosing a pulmonary embolism, but it was not unimpressive, and it allowed a pulmonary embolism to be diagnosed. It could not, unfortunately, be followed up by work or by house cleaning, dish doing, lunchbox packing, exercising, or any of the other things that needed doing. Bedtime could only be followed by TV. Or drinking. On the night Claude became—the fruition of which, of course, would only make bedtime worse—Penn thought both at once sounded best and gave it a good try but was asleep on the couch before he was very far into either one.

Related Characters: Orion, Rigel, Ben, Roo/Roosevelt, Claude/Poppy, Rosie, Penn

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, too, occurs near the beginning of the novel, as Penn is describing the kids' bedtime routine. This passage foreshadows Poppy's gender identity, but it also reflects the subversion of traditional gender roles that is present through most of the novel. Penn is the one who does most of the childrearing in the family, which is stereotypically viewed as a woman's job. Penn's wife, Rosie, on the other hand, goes to work most days as an Emergency Room physician, a job that is traditionally viewed as a man's. Penn and Rosie have swapped traditional roles, which destabilizes these antiquated views.

Penn downplays the importance of his work at home. It isn't "diagnosing a pulmonary embolism," he says, but he still acknowledges its importance. Penn's domestic chores never end, not even at the end of the day, but by then, he is too tired to care about dishes or cleaning. On this day, Claude was conceived earlier in the afternoon, and as Penn falls asleep in front of the TV that night, Claude is beginning to form. As Claude forms, Penn thinks television and a drink "both at once" sound best, which harkens to Claude's future gender identity. By the end of the novel, after Claude has transitioned to Poppy, she says she is both male and female. For Poppy, "both at once" sound best, just like Penn says on the night she is conceived.

Part I: Losers Quotes

❝ "Girls in fairy tales are losers," said Roo.

"No they aren't," said Claude.

"Yes they are. Not like losers. Losers. Girls in fairy tales are always losing stuff."

"Nuh-uh," said Claude.

"Yuh-huh. They lose their way in the woods or their shoe on the step or their hair even though they're in a tower with no door and their hair is like literally attached to their head."

"Or their voice," Ben put in. "Or their freedom or their family or their name. Or their identity. Like she can't be a mermaid anymore."

"Or they lose being awake," said Roo. "And then they just sleep and sleep and sleep. Boooring."

Claude started crying. "A princess could do cool stuff. A princess could be better than Grumwald. She wouldn't have to sleep or lose her shoe."

Related Characters: Ben, Claude/Poppy, Roo/Roosevelt (speaker), Grumwald/Princess Stephanie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange occurs during story time, when Claude asks why there aren't any princesses in the stories of Grumwald, and it is significant because it reflects the sexism that pervades most of the novel. Roo doesn't mean to say girls in fairy tales are no good ("Not like losers. Losers."), he just means to say girls in fairy tales are always misplacing things. Things, Roo implies, they shouldn't lose, like "their way," or "their shoe," or "their hair," which is "like literally attached to their head." Roo makes female characters like Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Rapunzel look particularly pathetic and unable to take care of themselves.

As if Roo's list of lacking female fairy tale characters isn't enough, Ben offers Ariel, the Little Mermaid ("Like she can't be a mermaid anymore."), and Roo says Sleeping Beauty, who just sleeps and is "Boooring." Claude is right, princesses can "do cool stuff," but Frankel implies that female characters in fairy tales are represented badly. They are boring, forgetful, and oppressed, as they lose "their freedom or their family or their name. Or their identity." Female characters in fairy tales are represented as society expects women to be, incompetent and dependent on men to save them.

Part I: Maybe Quotes

"You're a scientist, Rosie. Women aren't scientists. So that goes in the boy column. You're a doctor—an ER doctor, not a girly one like pediatrician or gynecology. So that goes in the boy column too. Your so-called husband is a writer, an artist, and not the kind who makes money. The other kind. He cooks dinner—" [...].

Related Characters: Penn (speaker), Claude/Poppy, Rosie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs after Penn and Rosie make lists categorizing Claude's various behaviors as either masculine or feminine, speaks to the idea that behavior and actions do not fit neatly into either male or female categories, and it also underscores the gender discrimination that is present throughout much of the novel. Rosie's job as a doctor—a scientist—defies stereotypical gender assumptions that difficult or academically advanced jobs, like a scientist or doctor, are beyond the capabilities of women, and this false assumption is present in Penn's claim that "Women aren't scientists."

Not only does Rosie defy this stereotype, her area of medicine is a particularly taxing one—one that includes a fast pace, high stress, and lots of trauma—which Penn also considers a masculine quality. Penn implies it would be more in keeping with Rosie's gender, stereotypically speaking, if she specialized in an area of medicine that is less acute, like pediatrics or gynecology. Likewise, Penn refers to himself as a "so-called husband" because he cooks and cleans and isn't the primary breadwinner, as if his identity as a man and a husband hinge on an ability to make money and the avoidance of domestic chores. Penn knows better than anyone how capable Rosie is and that such narrow gender stereotypes are offensive and false; however, these assumptions still inform Penn's own understanding of gender, which underscores the pervasiveness of these false assumptions.

Part I: Naming Rights Quotes

"Why are you using the boys' bathroom?"

"Because I'm a boy?"

She took another deep breath. "Then why are you wearing a dress?"

Claude was confused. They'd been through this. "I like to wear a dress."

"Little boys do not wear dresses." Miss Appleton tried to channel her usual patience. "Little girls wear dresses. If you are a little boy, you can't wear a dress. If you are a little girl, you have to use the nurse's bathroom."

"But little girls use the girls' bathroom," said Claude.

"But you're not a little girl," Miss Appleton said through her teeth.

Related Characters: Claude/Poppy, Miss Appleton (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange, which occurs after Claude begins using the boys' bathroom instead of the nurse's bathroom, highlights the type of discrimination and bullying transgender children face, even very young child like Claude. Claude is supposed to be using the nurse's bathroom, and Miss Appleton asks him why he is using the boys' bathroom like he has no right to be in it. Claude answers in the form of a question, which

suggests he doesn't really know which gender he is. At this point, Claude has only said that he *wants* to be a girl, not that he *is* a girl, and he still goes by Claude and uses male pronouns. Claude doesn't know, and the book emphasizes that it isn't Miss Appleton's place to tell him.

Miss Appleton is intent on forcing traditional gender roles onto Claude, regardless of how he feels. Claude wears dresses because he likes them, but Miss Appleton is only comfortable with Claude's dresses if he also changes his name and calls himself a girl. She is not comfortable with a boy in a dress in the boys' bathroom, which reflects the transphobia and homophobia that is present throughout most of the book. Miss Appleton won't let Claude use the boys' bathroom, but she also tells him that he isn't a girl. Claude isn't sure who he is, and people like Miss Appleton only serve to make him feel even more alienated and out of place.

"Meaning if he thinks he is a girl, he has gender dysphoria, and we will accommodate that. If he just wants to wear a dress, he is being disruptive and must wear normal clothes."

"I'm not sure either Claude or I even understand the distinction you're making up as you go along here," said Penn.

"It's confusing," the district representative acknowledged, "for Miss Appleton and for the children and clearly also for Claude. No one knows how to treat this child. Do we say he or she? Does Claude line up with the boys or the girls? Why is his hair still short? Why hasn't he change his name?"

Related Characters: Penn, Victoria Revels (speaker), Claude/Poppy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange occurs during Victoria Revels and Penn's conversation after Claude is caught using the boys' bathroom, and it underscores the problems with a binary understanding of gender and further highlights the discrimination LGBTQ kids must endure. Ms. Revels and the school district are only prepared to tolerate Claude's preference for dresses if he has gender dysphoria—the term used within the medical field to describe the stress one feels when their gender identity is at odds with the gender they were assigned at birth. Essentially, Claude's school is only willing to accept Claude if he also admits there is something wrong with him. There must be something wrong with Claude, Ms. Revels implies here, otherwise he wouldn't want to wear a dress.

For Claude, and for Penn, too, gender isn't merely a choice between two opposites, and this doesn't mean there is anything wrong with Claude. Furthermore, Claude's preference to wear dresses isn't necessarily rooted in a desire to be a girl. Claude thinks he *might* want to be a girl, but he isn't sure, and rules such as those enforced by Ms. Revels and the school district bully Claude into making a decision about his gender that he might not be ready to make. Ms. Revels says is its "confusing" for a child like Claude to be in class because he doesn't fit stereotypes of what a girl or a boy should be. If Claude is a girl, Ms. Revels wants him to be a girl in all of the stereotypical ways (have long hair, a feminine name, and stand with the other girls); if Claude is a boy, then he must stop his "disruptive behavior and wear normal clothes." From this passage, the book implies that Ms. Revels and the school district are more concerned with their own comfort than they are with doing what is best for Claude.

"He cannot be all of the above in kindergarten, and he cannot be none of the above in kindergarten. In kindergarten, a child can only be a he or a she, a boy or a girl. Kindergartens are not set up for ambiguity."

"Maybe they should be," said Penn. "The world is an ambiguous place."

"Not for a five-year-old. For a five-year-old, the world is very black and white. It's fair or it's unfair. It's fun or its torture. There are not disgusting cookies. There are not delicious vegetables."

Related Characters: Penn, Victoria Revels (speaker), Claude/Poppy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange, which occurs during Ms. Revels and Penn's conversation after Claude is caught using the boys' bathroom, further underscores the trouble with a binary understanding of gender and the discrimination LGBTQ children face in American society. Penn has explained to Ms. Revels that being either a boy or a girl isn't a simple choice for Claude. Claude isn't sure what gender he is—he might be

a boy, a girl, something in between—but Ms. Revels and the school district won't tolerate "ambiguity." Claude's school is only willing to accept him if Claude conforms his gender identity to meet society's narrow definitions of either a boy or a girl.

Penn points out the obvious, as the world is indeed "an ambiguous place," but Ms. Revels refuses to see it this way. For the school district, gender is a "black and white" issue, and Claude cannot exist in the gray area. The problem, of course, is that Claude *does* exist in between. Claude doesn't like all cookies, he loves broccoli, and he possesses both stereotypical male and stereotypical female gender traits. Ms. Revels's comments highlight Frankel's primary argument that gender is not always a simple choice between male and female, and Ms. Revels's treatment of Claude reflects the abuse he endures as part of the LGBTQ community. Because Claude is considered different, Ms. Revels forces Claude to modify who he is for the comfort of others.

"Poppy," he said. "I want my new name to be Poppy."

"Poppy?" Rosie whispered.

"Carmy says Jews name their babies after dead people they love. I never met Poppy, but I love her anyway."

"You do?" Rosie was full of wonder.

"Yeah. Because she liked dolls. And because she was your favorite. I like dolls. And I want to be your favorite."

"You are my favorite." She nuzzled into his neck.

"Do you think Poppy is a good name?"

"I think Poppy is a perfect name."

Related Characters: Camry, Rosie, Claude/Poppy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs when Claude changes his name to Poppy, officially marks the beginning of Poppy's gender transition, but it also reflects the importance of family and storytelling within the novel. Poppy chooses her name because of Rosie's sister, Poppy. Poppy died of cancer when she and Rosie were just kids, but the memory of Rosie's sister is nevertheless an important part of her life, which is why she thinks Poppy's choice is "perfect." Rosie's deep love for her sister, Carmy's claim that "Jews name their babies after dead people they love," and Poppy's desire to keep the name of Rosie's sister alive each reflect Frankel's argument as to the importance of family and the connection between family members.

Of course, Poppy's choice of name is ironic. Rosie has always wanted a daughter named Poppy, and with Poppy's transition, Rosie has what she has always wanted. What's even more ironic is that Poppy knows nothing about Rosie's desire for a daughter named Poppy—Poppy simply picks the name because it is important to her. Poppy only knows about Rosie's sister through stories and family histories, particularly those Carmy has told, and this, too, is reflected in this quote.

Part I: Push Quotes

Rosie hated that calendar. Penn adored it. To Penn, it represented a triumph, difficult things overcome and implemented. Maybe the transition from Claude had been daunting and fraught, but here was Poppy, loved, friended, present, no longer disappearing off the page. He considered the calendar a hard-won trophy. To Rosie, it bespoke people's cloying, pandering, PC bullshit and a strange Poppy cachet. Having status, she warned Penn, was not the same as having friends. Maybe parents just wanted their kids to invite Poppy over so they could gossip to their own friends or make a big show of being open-minded and tolerant. Maybe the kids wanted to play with Poppy because they were curious about him rather than because they liked him. And what would they do about invitations to sleepovers? What would they do when these kids stopped being sweet little kindergarteners and started being hormone-crazed, mean-spirited, cruel-intentioned, peer-pressuring, pill-popping, gun-toting teenagers?

Related Characters: Claude/Poppy, Penn, Rosie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs not long after Claude transitions to Poppy, and further represents the discrimination and abuse the LGBTQ community faces, especially young transgender girls. As Claude, Poppy was withdrawn and depressed, but as Poppy, she is outgoing and popular and has a full social calendar. Poppy's social life is a good thing to Penn, who sees it as evidence that Poppy is out being seen and visible and is not "disappearing off the page," but Rosie feels differently. Rosie worries that Poppy's new found "friends"

aren't such a good thing.

Rosie worries about the people who just want a transgender friend because of "PC bullshit and a strange Poppy cachet." To befriend Poppy is to appear to be "open-minded and tolerant," but Rosie really worries that such "friends" are only curious about Poppy like some kind of sideshow attraction. Such negative attention further alienates Poppy, who is still trying figure out where she fits in the world. Poppy has changed her name and dresses every day like a girl, yet Rosie still refers to Poppy as "he." This use of masculine pronouns in light of Poppy's name change and feminine clothing suggests Rosie is having a difficult time adjusting to Poppy's transition.

"Did you threaten him?" said Penn.

"Who?"

"Poppy."

"Ain't a him, friend."

"Did you threaten our child?" Rosie did not want to get diverted into semantics and pronoun battles. There was something more at stake here.

"I told him we don't play with faggots, we don't play with girls, we don't play with boys dressed as girls, and he was no longer welcome in our home or anywhere near my kid—not at the park, not at school, not on the playground, nowhere."

Related Characters: Rosie, Nick Calcutti, Penn (speaker), Nicky Calcutti , Claude/Poppy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101-102

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Poppy goes to Nicky Calcutti's to play, and Nicky's father calls Poppy derogatory names and threatens her with a gun, a situation that underscores the extreme hate and violence the LGBTQ community faces, especially the transgender community. Rosie is right: there is "something more at stake here." Nick has a gun, and he has threatened Poppy with it, all while calling her a "faggot" and telling her that his son can never again play with her. Poppy is five years old, yet her gender identity makes Nick so angry and uncomfortable that he threatens her with a gun and yells vile names at her. Such extreme situations are not uncommon for the transgender community, and Frankel draws attention to this. Extreme violence and trauma such as this can lead to lasting stress and depression, and, Frankel implies, it is a prime example of the kind of violence and discrimination that leads to the disproportionate rate of suicide in the transgender community.

This passage also draws attention to pronouns. Poppy's pronouns are out of sync with her gender identity—she dresses like a girl and has a girl's name—yet others still refer to her as "him," "he," and "son." Nick's comment that Poppy "ain't a him, friend," is meant to be offensive, and it is, but it is also true.

Part I: Shove Quotes

The instant after that Chad's hand recoiled and then all of him. He stumbled up and back and away. His look in that moment wasn't anger. It was pain. He was hurt. That she'd lied? That she'd tricked him? That he'd liked someone—something—as disgusting as she was? Maybe he was hurt that he'd lost her. Maybe he didn't have to. She reached out to explain. The words on her lips were, "I'm…" What? I'm sorry? I'm Jane? I'm not what you think?

But she didn't get them out. Whereas every moment leading up to this one this night stood crystalline and perfect, what happened next was a blur. He hit her across the mouth. He hit her face. He called out and lights went on in the house and guys came, guys arrived, one after another. They laughed. They yelled. They spit. They pushed her to the ground. They kicked her. She struggled. She fought back. She was strong. She had a single moment—just one—where she thought: I'm as strong as you are. One of them, maybe, but all of them together, no. Still, they must have been scared of her because feet turned to fists, and then someone pulled the knife out of the spent watermelon.

Related Characters: Claude/Poppy, Chad, Jane Doe, Rosie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Chad realizes that Jane is transgender, and it reflects the extreme hate and violence that the transgender community faces in American society. Chad has just placed his hand on Jane's leg and recoils because, presumably, he feels Jane's penis. For Chad, Jane's gender is something he considers "disgusting" because he isn't comfortable with those who live outside the established male and female gender norms. Frankel implies that Chad feels "pain" at this discovery and responds with

extreme hate and violence, as do his fraternity brothers, because Chad is worried what his attraction to Jane might say about his own sexuality and sense of masculinity.

Jane hesitates before apologizing because, as the book implies, her gender identity is *not* something to feel sorry about or apologize for. Chad places his hand on Jane's leg uninvited, and up until this point, their exchange is innocent and friendly. Jane and Chad simply have a conversation, which has no implications of romance or sex, yet Chad is so uncomfortable with Jane's gender that he immediately begins to beat her and even invites others to join in. Jane didn't lie to Chad, she just didn't explicitly state her gender, and Frankel's novel explores this perceived omission. If Jane is not considering Chad in a romantic or sexual way, her gender is irrelevant to their conversation. Chad's response to Jane's gender reflects an unfortunate reality in American society, as many in the transgender community, especially transgender women, experience such brutal violence.

❝ Later, when the whole story came out, or as much of it as could be pieced together, it turned out it was Chad who'd gotten the gun, that having kicked off what quickly got out of control, he couldn't get his fraternity brothers off Jane Doe. He screamed and pulled at the backs of their shirts and tried to push them off her and away, but they wouldn't listen anymore, couldn't listen anymore, and so he'd gone into the house and into the room of a brother he knew kept a handgun in his nightstand. He'd meant to fire it into the air or something to get everyone's attention, but he missed. It was his first time with a gun. An inch to the left, and it would have been over instantly. He'd very nearly killed Jane Doe. He'd very nearly killed her anyway. He'd also very nearly saved her life. But not quite.

Related Characters: Claude/Poppy, Chad, Jane Doe, Rosie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Jane Doe is beaten and shot by the fraternity boys, a situation that highlights the extreme hate and violence the LGBTQ community, especially transgender women, face in American society. Chad met Jane Doe at a frat party, and after discovering she was transgender, he turned his fraternity brothers loose on her to beat her. Jane did nothing to Chad. She didn't come on to him or try to kiss him—he is angry simply because she exists, and so are his fraternity brothers. They beat her until they are "out of control," and Chad can't get them to stop.

Chad doesn't grab the gun intending to kill Jane, but this passage illustrates how quickly such violence can go downhill. "An inch to the left" and Chad would have killed her "instantly," but instead he shoots her in the shoulder. Chad's encouragement and hate is what gets Jane assaulted in the first place, but, ironically, by shooting her, he manages to save her from the frat boys. However, Chad only "very nearly saved her life. But not quite." Presumably, Jane Doe dies from her injuries in Rosie's emergency room, which again underscores the disproportionate amount of violence and hate against the transgender community.

Part II: Everyone Who? Quotes

❝ "Well, it certainly doesn't sound like any else's business, does it? Don't think of Poppy as Claude under wraps. Think of Poppy as girl with a penis, a girl with an unusual medical history. Do you usually discuss what's in children's pants with the other moms on the playground?"

Related Characters: Mr. Tongo (speaker), Claude/Poppy, Rosie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in one of Rosie's conversations with Mr. Tongo, and this passage is important because it underscores Poppy's gender dysphoria and further reflects the transphobic nature of American society. At first, Poppy's gender is something Rosie thinks is best disclosed to everyone—Poppy's friends, her school, doctors, and anyone else who happens to come into their lives. Rosie approaches Poppy's gender as some sort of anomaly that must be explained from the outset to avoid confusion and ensure everyone's comfort. Rosie only wants what is best for Poppy, but she isn't exactly sure what that is. Mr. Tongo's response is obvious but nevertheless profound: if Rosie wouldn't talk about the gender of a cisgender child, she shouldn't be talking about Poppy's gender either.

Constantly drawing attention to Poppy's gender and approaching it as if it is something abnormal only serves to further alienate and marginalize Poppy. Of course, Mr. Tongo's description of Poppy as a girl with "an unusual medical history" also implies that there is something wrong with Poppy. Poppy's gender *isn't* a medical condition; however, the stress and depression Poppy feels because of narrow gender ideals and society's refusal to accept those who do not conform to them *is* a medical condition, and

Frankel's book draws attention to this important distinction. Like so many people in Poppy's life, Mr. Tongo only wants to help and do what is best for her, but he unknowingly perpetuates transphobic ideas, which underscores how deeply seated such discrimination is in American society.

Part II: Strategically Naked Quotes

They had four and a half boys, plus Penn, but in some ways, Aggie was maler than any of them. She was a girl who dug holes and ran hard and liked bugs and all that other tomboy shit, but it was more—or maybe less—than that. She'd dismantle toy trucks to build spaceships to fly dolls to day spas built inside killer volcanoes. You just couldn't nail the kid down.

Related Characters: Orion, Rigel, Ben, Roo/Roosevelt, Claude/Poppy, Penn, Rosie, Aggie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Poppy's best friend, Aggie, is introduced. Aggie is a seven year old girl, and as such, she is expected to be feminine and wear a dress and have tea parties; however, Aggie is nothing like society expects her to be. Rosie has "four and a half boys," the "half," of course, being Poppy, and Aggie is "maler than any of them." Like nearly everyone else in the novel, Aggie does not embody traditional gender norms.

Instead of "girl" things, Aggie digs in the dirt, and she isn't afraid of bugs—two things many little girls won't touch. Aggie is physical, she "runs hard" and does "all that other tomboy shit." According to traditional gender assumptions, Aggie should be more reserved and refined. She likes trucks, and she only plays with dolls to fly them in spaceships from "inside killer volcanoes." Aggie's play is rough—she "dismantles" the toys—and it is violent, which is also behavior that is not stereotypically associated with little girls. Aggie reflects Frankel's argument that gender is not a simple question of male or female. Instead, Frankel implies that gender is mix of both male and female qualities, just as Aggie is here.

Part II: Fifty-Fifty Quotes

"We couldn't be best friends." Aggie flung her arm across her eyes. "If your parents didn't beat the fifty-fifty and you were a boy, it would be the worst thing ever."

Poppy opened her mouth, and everyone waited. Roo looked at his feet. Ben looked at his feet. Rigel and Orion looked at each other's feet. Cayenne narrowed her eyes at all of them. But Poppy swallowed and agreed wholeheartedly: "It would be the worst thing ever."

Related Characters: Claude/Poppy, Aggie (speaker), Cayenne, Orion, Rigel, Ben, Roo/Roosevelt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which occurs as Poppy is living in Seattle and keeping her transgender identity a secret, underscores Frankel's argument that keeping one's gender identity a secret is never a good idea, but it also sheds light on *why* Poppy doesn't tell Aggie she is transgender. Aggie explicitly tells Poppy that they "couldn't be best friends" if Poppy was "a boy." Not only could they not be friends, "it would be the worst thing ever." Poppy has zero reason to tell Aggie the truth, which explains why she is so hesitant to do so.

Poppy opens her mouth, as if she wants to tell Aggie the truth, but she doesn't. Roo, Ben, Rigel, and Orion all look down because they already have a hard enough time keeping Poppy's secret, and later, they will each let slip in their own way the truth about Poppy's transgender identity. Cayenne, too, is keen on secrets, and she seems to sense something, as she "narrowed her eyes at all of them." Poppy "swallows" before she agrees "wholeheartedly" because she knows that Aggie finding out she is transgender and refusing to be her friend would be, and is, "the worst thing ever." This also underscores the constant stress transgender kids like Poppy are under. Having her transgender identity outed is a constant threat, and it takes a toll on Poppy.

Part II: Transformation Quotes

"You know, it used to be there were no transgender kids. Your son would come to you in a dress, and you'd say, 'No son of mine!' or 'Boys don't wear dresses!' and that would be the end of it. That kid would grow up, and if he made it through childhood and if he made it through puberty and if he made it through young adulthood, maybe, if he were lucky, he'd eventually find his way to a community of people who understood what no one ever had, and he would slowly change his clothes and hair, and he would slowly change his name and pronouns, and he would slowly test the waters of being female, and over years and decades, he might become a she. Or he might kill himself long before he got there. The rate of suicide for these kids is over forty percent, you know."

Related Characters: Mr. Tongo (speaker), Claude/Poppy, Penn, Rosie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

After Poppy moves to Seattle, Rosie and Penn call Mr. Tongo to check in. This passage highlights the stress of gender dysphoria and further illustrates the challenges and discrimination the transgender community faces. Mr. Tongo says there didn't used to be transgender kids, but what he means to say is that there didn't used to be transgender kids who actually lived as their true gender identity. Instead, they remained "sons" and "boys" and were told they couldn't wear dresses.

This denial of one's gender identity creates stress, which, for some, can be too much to handle. Mr. Tongo says "if [a trans individual] made it through childhood and if he made it through puberty and if he made it through young adulthood, maybe," he will find somewhere he fits; however, Mr. Tongo's repeated use of the word "if" says that this isn't guaranteed. The key to a happy and healthy transgender individual is living their true gender identity, and when that identity is curbed, it all too often results in suicide. The disproportionate suicide rate in the transgender community reflects the mental anguish and unique challenges of living with gender dysphoria.

Part II: Red Roo Rising Quotes

"The rest of us manage to balance work and family." He wasn't yelling; he was scolding, which was worse. "It's not fair that we should suffer because you are incapable of doing so."

Rosie rolled her eyes. "How are you suffering, Howie?"

"I have to recap Monday Morning Meeting before I've even gotten through it. And I have to take shit if you're asked to do one thing outside seeing patients."

"I'm pretty sure I'm the one taking shit, but I'll be in charge of breakfast again."

"Attagirl."

"I'm not a girl."

Related Characters: Rosie, Howie (speaker), Claude/Poppy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Rosie is 15 minutes late for work, and it is important because it further underscores the discrimination Rosie faces as a woman in America's sexist society. Howie doesn't yell at Rosie for being late, he "scolds" her, which, to Rosie, is much worse. Howie talks to Rosie like a child, not a grown woman and a doctor, and he assumes a position of authority over her. He implies that Rosie is "incapable" of doing her job—she is late, after all—and he further implies that she can't take care of her family either, since she can't "manage to balance work and family" like the rest of them.

Howie is insulting and demeaning, but he makes himself into the victim. He has to "suffer," he says, because Rosie is so inept, and he has "take shit" from her, as if dealing with Rosie in any capacity is too much for him. Rosie is independent and won't stand for Howie's abuse, but she needs her job, so she has little choice but to give in and offer to do extra work to appease him. Howie's "Attagirl" is the last straw for Rosie, which again reduces her to a child and places Howie in a position of authority over her. This sexist and misogynistic treatment places Rosie at a professional disadvantage, and she has to work even harder than her male counterparts because of it.

Part II: Fire Quotes

❝ Ben was a smart guy, yes, with an off-the-charts IQ and a double-stacked bookcase, but he was still sixteen. And he'd been patient for a very long time. That and he saw something his parents did not, which was that when something was this significant, this consequential, you didn't keep it from someone you loved, even if that someone was Cayenne Granderson.

Related Characters: Penn, Rosie, Claude/Poppy, Cayenne, Ben

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ben tells Cayenne that Poppy is transgender, a moment that reflects Frankel's primary argument that one's gender identity should never be kept a secret. Cayenne wants Ben to tell her a secret to prove that he loves her, and while it isn't explicitly stated, it is implied that Ben tells her about Poppy. It is also implied that Ben tells Cayenne the secret so she will have sex with him. Ben is 16 and "he'd been patient for a very long time." Telling Cayenne a secret will make her happy and secure in his love for her, making her more likely to agree to sex.

Of course, sex isn't Ben's only reason for telling Cayenne Poppy's secret. He really does love Cayenne, and he doesn't think Poppy's gender should be a secret in the first place. Rosie and Penn don't agree and prefer instead to keep the fact that Poppy is transgender a secret, but Ben says Poppy's gender is "significant" and "consequential." In hiding Poppy's gender, they are lying to everyone they know, and they are also sending Poppy a message that they are ashamed of her. Ben thinks his teenage love for Cayenne, the girl next door, is terribly cliché, but he still loves her and doesn't want to keep secrets from her.

Part II: Hedge Enemies Quotes

❝ "I don't want anything. I want . . . I only want to do whatever's best for her."

"Me too. Of course mc too. If we knew what that was. But unfortunately that exceeds my skill set. That's not prognosis. That's prognostication. We need a seer, not a doctor."

"Then that's *my* skill set," said Penn.

"You can see the future?"

"It's the stuff of fairy tales, not hospitals."

"That's a nice place to be," Rosie admitted, "but it's not real."

"Sure it is," said Penn. But Rosic rolled over and went to sleep.

Related Characters: Rosie, Penn (speaker), Claude/Poppy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears after Poppy is outed as transgender and Penn and Rosie are trying to decide how to help her, and it underscores Penn's intention to save Poppy with storytelling. Penn and Rosie don't know what's best for Poppy. They don't know if hormone blockers or surgery will be what she wants, and they know that even then, there will still be those who won't accept Poppy for who she is. Rosie has been approaching Poppy's gender as a medical issue, but knowing that Poppy will be okay does not depend on a "prognosis," but on society and how people treat her, and to know that, Rosie needs a crystal ball to see into the future.

Changing the world is Penn's "skill set." Penn is a writer, and he believes there is profound power in storytelling. Storytelling, or "fairy tales," offers others a vicarious experience, and it allows them to learn about people who are different. Poppy doesn't need a "hospital" or a doctor, Penn argues, she needs to tell her story, so others can understand. Rosie has little faith in Penn's oversimplified plan to solve such a complex issue, but Penn responds as if it is easy. Frankel does not mean to imply that transphobic hate can be cured with a simple story, but she does imply that it is a start and that the power of storytelling should not be underestimated.

Part III: Vagina Shopping Quotes

"Listen Rosie, I know you've got some shit going on at home. I don't want to bust your balls. But you're just not pulling your weight around here."

"Howie, how am I not pulling my weight around here? I keep thirty-five appointment hours every week, same as you. I maintain emergency appointment slots and on-call hours, same as you. My patient load is full, same as yours."

"How can you say you're keeping thirty-five patient hours every week? You've cancelled all your appointments since Monday."

"Once. One week. This week I've had to cancel appointments—all of which have been rescheduled, and for each of which will I carve out time. In the four years I've been working here, this is the first time I've had to reschedule more than a day's worth of appointments. People get sick, Howie, people's families get sick, even doctors'. That's why we have sick leave and personal leave and family leave."

"Is that what's happened this week? Sick kid?"

Rosie nodded but failed to elaborate.

"Penn can't take care of this? He doesn't even work."

Related Characters: Rosie, Howie (speaker), Claude/Poppy, Penn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which appears after Rosie misses work to stay home with Poppy after she is outed as transgender, further underscores the discrimination Rosie faces because she is a woman. From the minute Howie opens his mouth, he is condescending. "Listen Rosie," he says, telling her what to do. He calls her personal issues "shit," which only serves to minimize them and make them appear unimportant compared to his medical practice. He crudely says he doesn't want to "bust [her] balls," only Rosie doesn't have any, and if she did, it is unlikely Howie would be talking to her in such a demeaning way.

Just because Rosie has missed one week of work in four years, Howie implies that she isn't doing her job, and that she must choose between her career and her family. Howie pries into why Rosie has been absent, yet it is none of his business, just as it is none of his business if Penn works or if he takes care of the kids. Rosie does the same amount of work at the practice as everyone else, but it still isn't enough, and the way in which Howie talks to her suggests he doesn't respect her as a woman or as a doctor. Frankel implies that because of rampant sexism and discrimination, Rosie must work twice as hard with little respect.

Part III: Novice Quotes

"I thought maybe it would be like when you do an experiment in science and you make it so the results are fair."

Penn's eyebrows reached for each other. "Blind?"

"I thought since they were little kids and they never met me before if they could tell I was a boy I must be a boy, but if they thought I was a girl, then maybe..."

Related Characters: Penn, Claude/Poppy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when Poppy is in Thailand, and the local kids think she is a monk because her head is shaved bald, which further underscores Poppy's ambiguous gender. After being outed as transgender in Seattle, shaving her head, and reverting back to Claude, Poppy is hoping the Thai children with be a sort of "blind" test for her gender. If the children think Poppy is a girl, then she will be a girl; but if they think she is a boy, then she will be a boy. The only thing Poppy knows from her "experiment" with the Thai children is that they think she is a monk.

Poppy never technically gets an answer from her experiment because she doesn't know if monks are girls or boys. There is no official rule regarding monks and gender, except in Thailand, where female monks must be brought into the order by another female monk. Generally speaking, monks are both male and female, which further reflects Poppy's hybrid gender. Poppy doesn't identify as strictly male or strictly female, and she embodies characteristics of both genders. Like Poppy's own gender, her "blind" test is ambiguous and cannot determine definitively if she is a girl or a boy, which underscores Frankel's argument that gender is complicated and is not always a clear choice between male and female.

Part III: Oral Tradition Quotes

❝ But Claude felt better. He realized this was what his father had been up to all these years, not entertaining his children but perfecting his world. If you wrote your own characters, they didn't disappoint you like real people did. If you told your own story you got to pick your ending. Just being yourself never worked, but if you made yourself up, you got to be exactly who you knew yourself to be.

Related Characters: Rosie, Grumwald/Princess Stephanie, Penn, Claude/Poppy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which appears after Claude tells the Thai children Grumwald stories to teach them English, emphasizes the power of storytelling. After telling the children stories, Claude begins to feel better, and he begins to understand what Penn has been talking about all this time. Storytelling isn't just about telling stories and passing time—it is about "perfecting [the] world" and making it into a better place. Claude's characters don't "disappoint [him] like real people," who reject him because of his gender identity.

By telling his own story, Claude can control things about his life, like when and how he tells people about his gender. By keeping his gender and secret and allowing other people to write his story, Claude had little control when he was outed against his will. Telling his story gives this control back to Claude, and it allows him to be who he is, not who society tells him he should be. This is precisely the "fairy tale" Penn tells Rosie that Claude needs to heal and come to terms with his gender identity, which is certainly the case. Storytelling gives Claude the courage to be who he really is and stop denying his true gender identity.

Part III: Under Pants Quotes

❝ "Very shelter life in palace so ignorant of poverty, sickness, old age, death. Then he go out into world and learn. Then he help. That is important part. Once he learn, he listen and tell, he help. He leave family, leave palace, leave being a prince." Rosie nodded along. This part sounded familiar. "He learn about the world and the people. He meditate to learn to be. He give up all food and water and house, but then his body too loud to achieve peace so he learn again: too little as bad as too much. He teach, tell his story, help people see truth. He say be kind and forgive, honest and share. He say everything change so okay. He say middle way. He enlighten. That is the story. Learn mistake and fix and tell. Not-knowing to knowing. Even the Buddha You see?"

Related Characters: K (speaker), Claude/Poppy, Rosie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 290-291

Explanation and Analysis

Here, K tells Rosie about Buddha. In the book, Buddhism and the "middle way" serves as a metaphor for what Poppy needs to find peace and happiness. Poppy feels a certain connection to Buddha, and like Buddha, Poppy had a sheltered life "ignorant of poverty, sickness, old age, [and] death," but more importantly, Poppy was sheltered from a world that all too often rejects and abuses her. For Poppy to figure out how to live, she, too, must "learn," "listen and tell."

Like Buddha, Poppy has to "tell [her] story" and "help people see truth." Poppy's truth is that gender is not a narrowly defined choice between male and female, and Frankel implies this is the case for many others as well. By telling her story, Poppy will help others to see this "truth," and in doing so, others will see that she really isn't so different. Poppy is the "middle way" between male and female, and with her story she will "enlighten" others. K implies that it was a "mistake" to keep Poppy's gender a secret, but now Poppy and her family can "fix and tell" by being more open about Poppy's story.

Part III: The Color of Monday Quotes

❝ What was clear, however, was that the Buddha was born male, then cut off all his hair one day and got enlightened, then ended up looking like a girl. And as if that weren't enough, the Buddha also seemed to feel that even things as unalterable as bodies were temporary, and what mattered was if you were good and honest, and forgiveness solved everything. That was how, whatever else they were, Claude and Poppy became Buddhists for life.

Related Characters: Claude/Poppy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Poppy is in Thailand and discovers the Buddha statues, and it is significant because it underscores Poppy's connection to the statues and sheds light on her complex view of gender. Like Buddha, Poppy "was born male, then cut off all his hair one day and got enlightened, then ended up looking like a girl." Poppy shaves her head after she is outed as transgender, but through storytelling and the Buddhist belief of the "middle way," Poppy is now enlightened, too.

Poppy's body causes her a considerable amount of stress, since her inward gender identity is at odds with her outward gender appearance, and Poppy finds great comfort in the Buddhist idea that bodies are "temporary." In this way, Poppy's body, and therefore her physical gender, makes little difference to who Poppy really is. This belief makes Poppy a "Buddhist for life," and it is just as crucial to her ability to heal as storytelling.

Part IV: Ever Quotes

"Betwixt?" Grumwald was skeptical. "Isn't betwixt just a witchy way of saying in between?"

"Betwixt is more complex, more twisted threads, more layers than in between." She smiled at him through rheumy eyes. "Betwixt a Prince and a night fairy is neither-nor as much as both-and. You see? Something new. Something more. Something better."

Related Characters: The Witch, Grumwald/Princess Stephanie (speaker), Claude/Poppy, Penn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 311

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of the novel, during Penn's fairy tale, and it is significant because it sheds further light on Poppy's unique gender identity. Grumwald and Princess Stephanie represent Poppy in Penn's fairy tale, and like Poppy, Grumwald identifies as both male and female. Grumwald is "betwixt" male and female, just like Poppy is, which isn't to say that Grumwald and Poppy are merely "in between" male and female. Both Grumwald and Poppy are "skeptical" that there is another way to be, but they are slowly learning.

Poppy "is more complex" and has more "layers than in between." For Poppy, gender is complicated and isn't a question of "neither-nor," as the witch says here. Poppy and Grumwald, who by night is Princess Stephanie, are "both-and," as they each embody traditionally male and traditionally female gender traits. Poppy is "something new. Something more. Something better," and the story of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie helps her, and others, to realize this. When asked at the end of the novel what gender she is, Poppy says she is "all of the above" and "also more to come," because she is "betwixt" and understands she does not need to conform to traditional gender norms.

"You have to tell. It can't be a secret. Secrets make everyone alone. Secrets lead to panic like that night at the restaurant. When you keep it a secret, you get hysterical. You get to thinking you're the only one there is who's like you, who's both and neither and betwixt, who forges a path every day between selves, but that's not so. When you're alone keeping secrets, you get fear. When you tell, you get magic. Twice."

"Twice?"

"You find out you're not alone. And so does everyone else. That's how everything gets better. You share your secret, and I'll do the rest. You share your secret, and you change the world."

Related Characters: Grumwald/Princess Stephanie, The Witch (speaker), Claude/Poppy, Penn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of *This is How it Always is*, during Penn's fairy tale of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie. It underscores the power of storytelling and also highlights Frankel's argument that one's gender identity should never be kept a secret. The witch promises to lift Grumwald's curse and allow him to live "betwixt" a man and a woman, but he has "to tell. It can't be a secret." The witch claims secrets, especially secrets about gender, lead to loneliness and "panic," which is certainly the case when Poppy tries to conceal her gender identity. The witch, and

by extension Frankel, implies that keeping one's gender a secret only fuels anti-trans hate and fear.

By openly living his true gender identity, the witch reminds Grumwald that he won't be alone, because he will find others who are "betwixt," too, and this is also Penn's wish for Poppy. Penn is hoping to "change the world" by sharing Poppy's secret and telling her story. Transphobic fear and hate often revolves around ignorance, and sharing Poppy's secret with the world gives others a chance to better understand her and hopefully foster acceptance and open-mindedness. Of course, Frankel doesn't mean to imply that something as simple as a story can rid the world of hate and intolerance; however, she does imply that it is a start and that the profound power of truth and stories should never be underestimated.

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 I: ONCE UPON A TIME, CLAUDE WAS BORN

Roo is born first. Rosie and Penn hyphenate his name, Roosevelt Walsh-Adams, so his grandfather's name, Roosevelt, doesn't sound "too presidential" next to their last name, Adams. Next is Ben, and then the twins, Rigel and Orion, because Rosie and Penn thought they would try for "one more." Now, despite being a doctor and a woman of science, Rosie is moving her bed to go east-west instead of north-south. According to the Talmud, Rosie's mother swears, sons are born to men who sleep facing north. Rosie has been feeding Penn salmon and cookies in response to old German folklore, which claims men desirous of male heirs should eat red meat and salty snacks. Those desirous of daughters, the same stories say, should have sex in the middle of the afternoon.

From Roosevelt's name, the reader can infer that family is important to Rosie and Penn since they name their son after his grandfather. Three U.S. presidents have been named either Adams or Roosevelt, hence the hyphenated name to break up this association. This hyphenated name also suggests that Rosie is a strong and independent woman, as she wants her children to bear her own name (Walsh), as well as her husband's. The Talmud is the body of Jewish laws and legends, and Rosie is clearly hoping to conceive a girl, since she is observing only those laws and legends that promise a daughter.

It is also recommended, according to numerous sources, that missionary style is best, which is fine with Rosie. Sex with Penn has always been good without imaginative positions or toys. Besides, Rosie prefers to face him and look into his eyes. Penn sits on the side of the bed, a highlighter and an article about food shortages during World War II in his hands. He doesn't want to discourage Rosie, he says, but sex in the middle of the afternoon is how they got where they are, and he doesn't think the house can get much messier. That afternoon, Claude is conceived, and he quietly begins growing and "dividing and dividing and dividing."

Rosie's preference to look at Penn while they are intimate suggests that they have a close relationship and a strong marriage. Penn's humorous statement points out the obvious: they already have four kids and their house is chaos, but Rosie clearly wants another child (a girl) and in his agreement, Penn also shares this desire. Claude keeps "dividing and dividing and dividing," which implies he will be a complicated and multilayered child.

Other people are constantly asking Rosie if she is Catholic, or if she understands how babies are made. There are things to prevent pregnancy, they say jokingly. "I don't know how you do it," a woman from the PTA says to Rosie at the kids' bus stop, adding, "Or why." The bus is late again, which, in Madison, Wisconsin—a particularly snowy place—happens a lot. Of course, the woman says, it helps that Penn doesn't work. Rosie corrects her. Penn is a writer, she says. Writing is not a "real job," the woman implies, at least not in the same way Rosie's job as a doctor is. The woman giggles and walks off.

The comments Rosie faces about her multiple pregnancies are invasive and demeaning. People imply she is Catholic (Catholicism bans birth control), when she is clearly Jewish (her mother refers to the Talmud), and as a doctor, she obviously knows all about the ways to prevent pregnancy. These comments are likely meant as jokes, but they are nevertheless evidence of Rosie's sexist society. Rosie's pregnancies and Penn's job aren't anyone's business, but the woman at the bus stop still jokes about Rosie's life and choices.

Back at the farmhouse that Rosie shares with Penn and the boys, she takes over cooking dinner for Penn, who has gone to pick up Rigel and Orion from preschool. The farmhouse is huge and sits on 15 acres of land. Rosie and Penn don't farm anything, but they are usually up before dawn. The house has plenty of bedrooms—including a small nursery, painted yellow, just in case Rosie ever does have a girl. The house is old and full of dings and dents, but Rosie loves it. Plus, when the boys break something or color on the walls, she doesn't have to worry about it like she would a new house in the suburbs.

It is clear that Penn does much of the cooking and childrearing (he starts dinner and picks up the kids from school), which is a reversal of stereotypical gender roles that assume domestic chores and childrearing are a woman's job. Penn's domestic life challenges such narrow and traditional gender roles and assumptions. Rosie and Penn's kids are obviously very important to them, since they give up living in a nice, new house so the boys can be young and play without worrying about damages.

Nine months pass as Claude continues to grow, and Rosie knows she will soon go into labor. She has been feeling it come on for days, and her feet itch terribly before her contractions begin. On the way to the hospital, all Rosie can think about is a name: Poppy. She has had the name picked out since before Roo was born. Rosie's sister, who died of cancer when they were just kids, was named Poppy, and Rosie has always known she would name her daughter after her sister. In the delivery room, with the doctor telling her to push and Penn telling her to breathe, Rosie hears the words again. "It's a boy!" the doctor cries.

Rosie's desire to name her daughter after her sister, Poppy, again underscores how important family is to Rosie and Penn. By naming her child Poppy, a part of Rosie's sister lives on, which speaks to how much Rosie loved her. Plus, Rosie has been thinking about the name for years now, which further suggests it is very important to her. However, Rosie doesn't get to use the name, again, because she gives birth to her fifth son.

PART I: ONE DATE

Penn is an only child, and when he tells this to Rosie on their first date, she is sad for him, like he is dying of a terminal illness. Penn doesn't know how to respond, but he has been self-conscious and awkward since they sat down, so at least he is consistent. Rosie is a friend of someone Penn knows from school. Penn is in graduate school, getting an MFA, and a girl in his program asked if he wanted to date a doctor. She knows one, the girl said, and she's into poets. Penn told her that he isn't a poet, but he agreed to the date anyway. It seemed ridiculous, him dating a doctor who's into poets, but he is always looking for new writing material, and it seemed like the sort of situation that might yield something.

Rosie equates being an only child to sadness because she came to be one herself through death and tragedy when her sister Poppy died. Penn is self-conscious during his first date with Rosie, which suggests that he really likes her. Obviously, Penn and Rosie are very different—she is a scientist, and he is an artist—and he isn't thinking that anything will come of their date except material for a funny story. Penn's thoughts are ironic, since readers already know that they will get married and have five kids.

Getting ready for the date, Penn felt strange, almost like he was coming down with the flu. He considered cancelling, but he figured since Rosie is a doctor in a hospital, she can handle a few germs. When he arrived at her house, and she answered the door, Penn was immediately struck by her. Rosie is beautiful, no doubt, but it is more than just her beauty. Penn is a fiction writer, not a poet, and he doesn't believe in love at first sight, but there is something about her—and it is making him nervous.

Clearly, Penn is immediately falling in love with Rosie. Penn's identity as a fiction writer means that he is a creative guy, but he is still somewhat of a realist, as he makes a distinction between himself and poets, who believe in romantic ideas like love at first sight. Penn might not believe in love at first sight, but it is still happening to him.

Staring across the table from Rosie, Penn asks her if she has many brothers and sisters. Rosie looks down. She had a sister, but she died of cancer when she was 10 and Rosie was 12. Her name was Poppy, Rosie says. Their parents had a thing for flowers, and Poppy was nearly Gladiola. Maybe that is why she thinks being an only child is so sad, Penn says, and Rosie agrees. She likes him already, she says, probably because they are both only children. That night, as Penn lay in bed alone, he comes to a "realization." He knows he will have a daughter named Poppy, even though he has no idea that Rosie herself came to this same realization years ago.

Penn's realization that he is meant to have a daughter named Poppy isn't a decision he makes or a desire he hopes will come true in the future; rather, it is like acknowledging a fact or stating the obvious. Penn will have a daughter named Poppy, and now he is aware of it. This again speaks to the importance of family in Penn and Rosie's lives. Penn knows about his family—in a way, he can feel it—before it even takes form.

PART I: RESIDENCY

Rosie is in the first year of her residency in emergency medicine and doesn't have time for a boyfriend, she says. Penn asks her why she wanted to date a poet if she doesn't have the time, and Rosie says that she only meant she "*should* date a poet. A theoretical one. A theoretical poet." Most new doctors date other doctors, but Rosie doesn't want that. She wants someone who "thinks slowly and deeply," not a doctor who only says long, scientific words from memory. She was only kidding and didn't really intend to say yes, but Penn was so nice when he called, she decided to take a chance.

Rosie's desire for a "theoretical poet" implies she is looking for someone who thinks abstract thoughts (someone who "thinks slowly and deeply") with little application to the real world. Rosie's life is full of concrete medical facts that must be committed to memory, and she wants to balance that part of herself out with someone who is creative and not reliant on facts and clinical practice.

Penn is studying creative writing, but that doesn't really involve a whole lot of creative writing. Mostly, he studies literary theory, which seems like a lot of nonsensical jargon with no practical application. Studying literary theory takes a lot of time, and Penn spends it in the waiting room of the emergency department. There is lots of "pathos" to be found in hospitals, Penn notes. Lots of crying and tragedy. Watching the people, Penn reads and writes for hours, and Rosie occasionally drops in on breaks and reminds him that she doesn't have time for a boyfriend. Plus, she says, it is weird to read literary theory in a hospital waiting room.

Pathos refers to a method of playing on the innate emotions of the audience in order to persuade them, and images of people crying in hospitals surely elicit such emotions in most people. Again, Penn is a creative guy, a storyteller, and he doesn't like the more technical and theoretical side of art. He doesn't believe theory amounts to much other than fancy language, and he doesn't use what he reads to write. Ironically, Penn's reference to pathos is literary theory and was written about by Aristotle in Ancient Greece.

One night, Rosie comes into the waiting room just after two in the morning. She wants food, and then she wants sleep. Rosie and Penn go to an all-night diner, where they eat eggs, and Rosie talks about the differences between medical school and medical practice. He has been doing the same the last few hours, Penn says, "Thinking about the difference between school and practice, books and life." Back at Rosie's apartment, she asks Penn to tell her a bedtime story. "Once upon a time," he begins, telling her about a prince he created named Grumwald. Near the end, Penn tells Rosie to go to sleep. He will finish the story in the morning. "Like Scheherazade?" Rosie asks.

As a resident physician, Rosie has likely been on shift for at least 24 hours, with little, if any, breaks. The theoretical basis of Rosie's education did little to prepare her for what being a doctor is really like. Clinical cases are complicated, and they don't play out like they do in textbooks. Penn feels the same way about literary theory, so they have more in common than they think. Scheherazade is the female character of One Thousand and One Nights, *a Middle Eastern fairytale, who wins a stay of execution every day by telling a story each night.*

In the following months, Penn sticks close to the hospital waiting room. He keeps the same long hours Rosie does, reading and writing and thinking about literary theory. It is good practice for their first child, Roo, who will later keep them up all night. Penn is always good about getting up with babies, even if he was up late with babies, but this isn't why Rosie loves him. She loves Penn's stories, and now, years after her residency, there is no one in the waiting room to tell her stories. She never intended to stay in Wisconsin (Rosie is from Arizona and hates the cold), but the hospital has been good to her. They know that she is talented and worth keeping, even if her family and kids mean that she occasionally misses work or must leave early for various reasons. Other hospitals, Rosie fears, won't be so understanding.

Again, Penn clearly does much of the childrearing, since he is the one staying up late and getting up in the middle of the night with babies, which further subverts stereotypical gender roles that assume Rosie, as a woman, should take care of babies. Rosie's fear that other hospitals won't be so tolerant of her family responsibilities reflect the discrimination women face in a sexist society. Later in the story, Rosie is effectively punished career-wise for having a family and is made to feel like she has to make concessions or choose her career over her family.

Rosie thinks back to the first day Claude was conceived. The emergency room was busy that day. She treated a pulmonary embolism and ruled out irritable bowel syndrome in a pregnant teenager. She also treated a young girl with a broken ankle that day, and Rosie comforted her during her X-ray. Rosie knows the X-ray isn't why, but she always wonders.

The reader can infer that something happens with Rosie's baby that makes her wonder if she is to blame because she exposed him to X-rays, which can be harmful to an unborn child. Rosie is clearly a competent doctor, and this part of her identity also defies stereotypical gender assumptions that believe important and difficult work like Rosie's is best left to men, who are assumed to be more capable. Rosie is obviously capable and incredibly caring.

PART I: BEDTIME STORY

On the night Claude is forming, while Rosie and Claude are at the hospital getting X-rayed, Penn is at home doing the bedtime routine, which, he always says, is "a study in chaos theory." Penn closes his eyes, takes a cleansing breath, and turns back to the tub to lift out the next child. After their bath, he lines up the children to dress them, going down the line with a pile of pajamas. When he is done, he realizes that he has mixed up all the pajama tops and bottoms, but he decides it is good enough.

Penn's language here reflects his education in literary theory. Getting four children bathed and to bed is a lot of work, and it is further evidence of Penn's resistance to stereotypical gender roles. Childrearing such as this is generally assumed to be a woman's job, but Penn does it every day while Rosie goes out to earn a living.

All four of the children pile into Roo's room for storytime. Storytime is just as chaotic as bath time, and after four boys each grab the book to look at the pictures, it can take half the night. To cut down on the chaos, Penn began to tell stories instead of read them, and he has a "magic book"—a spiral notebook full of blank pages—that only he can see. He tells them the same story he told Rosie about Grumwald the prince, which has no beginning and no end. The children excitedly ask Penn what happens next, and he says they will have to wait until tomorrow to find out. Now, says Penn, it is bedtime.

Storytime with the children mirrors Rosie and Penn's time in the hospital waiting room, where, like Scheherazade, Penn keeps the children interested by continuing the story and stringing it along day after day. This connection underscores the power of storytelling, as stories bring Penn and Rosie together, as well as Penn and the children. Penn's "magic book" reflects his identity and talent as a writer—he is able to make up stories on the spot without reading them.

Bedtime is always one of the most difficult parts of Penn's day. Sure, he admits, it isn't diagnosing a pulmonary embolism, but it must be done all the same, and the pulmonary embolism can't be diagnosed without it. There is always plenty to do after bedtime—dishes, school lunches to pack, cleaning—but the only thing Penn has energy for after bedtime is drinking or watching television. On the night Claude is forming, Penn thinks both sound good, but he is asleep before he finishes his first drink.

Penn downplays the importance of his work at home raising his family and compares it to Rosie's work at the hospital, but he also recognizes his work as necessary and an important part of the teamwork that allows Rosie's work to be done in the first place. In Penn's opinion, these are not gendered roles, they are simply things that need to be done.

PART I: THINGS THEY TOLD DOCTORS

Claude speaks his first full word, "bologna," when he is just nine months old, and when Rosie tells the doctor this at his well-child checkup, he gently laughs at her. Babies don't talk at nine months, the doctor says, calling Rosie "Mom." This always irritates her. The kids' doctor doesn't call Penn "Dad," but everyone calls her "Mom." They must teach that in pediatrics, Rosie thinks, because she was never taught such a thing. If she had been, Rosie would have told them it is completely offensive. Calling the mothers of patients "Mom" has an unspoken message, which says that doctors know kids better than their mothers, who, as women, are "slightly hysterical."

Rosie's experience with the pediatrician reflects the sexism present in American society. The word "bologna" is distinct—Rosie clearly isn't confusing babble with mama or dada. Plus, as a doctor herself, which surely her pediatrician knows she is, Rosie is well versed in how and when babies develop and talk; however, the pediatrician still treats her like she doesn't know what she is talking about and is prone to craziness or "hysteria."

Claude does everything fast. He is crawling at six months, walking at nine, and at age three, he writes and illustrates a series of books about a puppy and panda detective team. For Rigel and Orion's birthday, Claude makes them a three-tiered cake, and when he grows up, he wants to be a farmer, a dinosaur, a scientist, and a girl. "Sounds great," Penn and Rosie say to Claude, telling him he can be anything he wants to be when he grows up. One day, Clause asks Rosie if girls can be farmers and scientists. "Of course," Rosie says, "I'm a girl scientist."

Claude assumes that girls can't be farmers or scientists because those jobs are traditionally associated with men, hinging on the sexist idea that such professions are too strenuous, physically and intellectually, for a woman. Obviously, such assumptions are nonsense, and Rosie points this out by reminding Claude that as a doctor, she is *a scientist. Claude's desire to be a girl and his interest in traditionally feminine activities, such as baking, begins to suggest that his gender identity is at odds with the gender he was assigned at birth.*

One day, Penn asks Claude why he wants to be a girl scientist and not just a scientist, and Claude says because he wants to wear a dress under his lab coat. For Ben's birthday, the boys put on a play, and Claude is the princess. He refuses to take his princess dress off for the entire weekend, and on Monday morning, he tries to wear it to school. When Rosie tells Claude to put on his school clothes, he throws himself on the floor and starts to cry. He *is* dressed for school, Claude says, and he is wearing his princess dress.

Again, Claude's desire to wear a dress when he grows up, his role as a princess in the play, and his refusal to take off the dress each suggest that Claude's gender identity—the gender he feels on the inside, at his core—is different than the one he was assigned at birth. The tantrum Claude throws when made to take off the dress implies that Claude's feelings, often called gender dysphoria, are very distressing. Claude identifies as a girl, it seems, and he wants his clothes to reflect this.

Rosie quickly invents an excuse. The princess dress is too formal, she says. Claude is happy with this explanation. He didn't know it was too formal; he will find a more appropriate dress after school. Rosie says they will talk about it later, and on the way out the door, Claude asks her if she will teach him to do the laundry and ironing. "That's Daddy's job," Rosie says to Claude. Now, Claude says, it is his job. "Real ladies wear clean, pressed dresses," he says.

Claude's belief that "real ladies wear clean, pressed dresses" again reflects society's sexist assumptions. Such assumptions dictate that women be impeccably dressed and tend to domestic chores, like ironing and laundry. Obviously, this narrow ideal is not realistic, and Rosie, again, is evidence of this.

PART I: LOSERS

As Penn manages another bedtime, he herds the children into Roo's room for storytime. As they climb into bed, Ben tells Claude that his hair smells like bananas. It is the tear-free stuff, Claude says, and Ben tells him that he should just learn to close his eyes, then he can use "big-boy" soap. "I don't want to be a big boy," Claude says. The boys begin to fight and bicker, and Penn stops them. It is storytime, he says, and then bedtime. Grumwald is about to meet the night fairies, Penn says, but Claude interrupts. He is tired of always hearing about a prince, and he wants to instead hear about a princess.

Claude wants to hear about princesses because he seems to identify as a girl, and he wants to see himself reflected in the story. Similarly, Claude does not want to be a "big-boy" because he doesn't feel like a boy, which is why he gets upset when his brothers refer to him as a boy. This passage also reflects stereotypical assumptions of masculinity. Claude is just a child, but he is still encouraged to be a "big-boy" who is strong and doesn't need tear-free shampoo.

Girls in stories, Roo says, are "losers." Not because they aren't any good, he explains, but because they are always losing their shoe, or their way in the woods, or their family, or their freedom. It never ends, Roo says. Claude begins to whine how unfair it is to never have a princess in their stories, so Penn decides to modify the story. He will tell them about Princess Grumwaldia, the leader of the fairies.

Roo's comment that girls are always losing something in stories also reflects sexism, as it makes women and girls appear helpless and dependent on men or others to care for them. This, of course, is not the reality, which is perhaps why it irritates Roo. The fact that Penn must modify his story in the first place also reflects this sexism, as women are not initially represented at all.

Every day after school, Claude comes home and immediately changes into his princess dress. That summer, Rosie's mother comes to stay like she always does. The kids call her Camry, a combination of her name, Carmelo, and Grammy. Camry is anything but a traditional grandmother, and she spends a lot of time smoking on the porch and swearing. She does, however, teach Rigel to knit. Ben uses the tassels Rigel knits as bookmarks, and Orion uses them as sweatbands while exercising, but Claude clips them to his head and pretends to have long hair. Camry lets Claude try on her dresses and jewelry, and when she takes him shopping for a new bathing suit, she buys him a pink bikini with yellow and white daisies.

Like Penn and Rosie, Camry does not conform to traditional gender stereotypes either. As a grandmother, Camry is expected to be reserved and do other grandmotherly things, like bake and sit in a rocking chair. Other than knitting, Camry is the exact opposite of this stereotype and instead smokes cigarettes and swears. Rigel's interest in knitting also defies popular gender assumptions. Knitting is traditionally associated with women—old women like Camry—not a young boy like Rigel. Again, Claude's use of the tassels to mimic long hair and his pink bikini again imply that his gender identity is at odds with his outward gender appearance.

As Rosie and Camry watch Claude run around the yard in his bikini, Camry asks if she is worried. "No?" Rosie answers, unsure of herself. Camry tells Rosie not to worry. Claude is happy and healthy, Camry says. Rosie agrees, but she is worried that other kids will make fun of him. Camry isn't so sure, noting that kids aren't like they used to be. Claude really isn't the one Rosie is worried about, she admits, but Ben. Ben is skipping the sixth grade and going right into seventh, and she is afraid that Roo will feel invaded. Roo, however, seems excited to have his brother in his class and is already scheming ideas to cheat off him during tests.

Rosie phrases her answer like a question, which implies that she is worried about Claude's behavior. He clearly does not identify as a boy, which will only become more of an issue the older he gets, as society expects him to identify with the gender he was assigned at birth. Still, Rosie isn't overly concerned at the moment, and with four other children, she has plenty of other things to worry about.

One Sunday afternoon, Penn and Rosie get the boys ready for a pool party, the neighborhood's last summer hurrah before school starts. Orion wears flippers and a snorkel, and Ben wears khakis and a button up shirt, so no one will think he's interested in swimming. And Claude insists on wearing his pink bikini. Penn and Rosie consider trying to talk him out of it, but they don't want to give him the impression that they are proud of him at home but embarrassed of him in public, so the let him wear it. One of the boys asks Orion and Rigel why their brother is wearing a bikini. "I dunno," Rigel says, and they all jump into the pool and begin playing.

Despite Rosie and Penn's concerns over the pink bikini, it doesn't seem to be as big of a deal as they fear. The other children don't make fun of Claude or call him names, and only one child asks why he is wearing it. This mirror's Camry's opinion that kids aren't like they use to be. The world is evolving, albeit slowly, and a boy in a bikini isn't always considered such an odd thing. Rigel's "I dunno," however, still suggests that Rigel isn't comfortable discussing his brother's gender identity.

One of the women at the picnic asks Rosie where on earth she got Claude's bathing suit since she has only boys. Rosie tells the woman that her mother bought it, and she's a girl. Several fathers stop and comment to Penn about his son's outfit. "Wow, that's quite the getup your son has there," the lifeguard says. Yes, Penn agrees: he tried to tell Orion that fins are only for the ocean, but he just wouldn't listen. Watching the kids play, Penn notices Ben alone, reading a book.

Obviously, the lifeguard is talking about Claude, not Orion, and Penn knows this. Penn's reaction is clearly meant to be funny, but it also downplays Claude's bikini and points out that Orion is going against the grain, too, and there is not unusual about a child expressing who they are. Ben is quiet and withdrawn, unlike his brothers, and he clearly doesn't fit traditional assumptions of how a young boy behaves or dresses either.

Concerned, Penn approaches Ben and asks him why he isn't swimming. Ben shrugs, and Penn asks if he is worried about something. Ben doesn't answer, so Penn gently pushes. Is he worried about school, Penn asks, about skipping a grade and going into Roo's class? Ben admits he is, and he is also worried that the other kids won't like him, and that Roo will be self-conscious because Ben is so much smarter. And, Ben says, he is worried about Claude. The other kids are going to make fun of him, and no one seems to care.

Ben's stress over starting a new school and skipping a grade is appropriate, and his worry for his brothers speaks to the connection he has with them. Ben worries about his brothers, too, because he loves them and cares about their wellbeing, and he knows that the upcoming schoolyear will likely be stressful on everyone in their family.

Penn tells Ben that he should pick one thing on his list and only worry about that one thing, and then he won't feel so overwhelmed. In that case, Ben says, he is going to worry about Claude. Penn is worried, too, but he has decided to keep his worry to himself. Kids can be cruel and parents gossip, but he is still hoping that Claude's obsession with being a girl blows over. The next morning, when Claude comes down for school, he is wearing a perfectly pressed princess dress, which, Rosie must admit, is not too formal for school.

Ben's deep concern for Claude reflects Ben's love for his brother and their connection as family. Ben has his own worries, which to him are significant, but he puts Claude before himself. Claude's obsession with dressing as a girl, the book implies, is not a phase he is going to outgrow. Claude is determined to be who he is, even if that doesn't align with accepted gender roles, which despite being five, Claude understands.

PART I: AIR CURRENTS AND OTHER WINDS

As Rosie quickly thinks of how to talk Claude out of wearing the dress, Penn "accidentally, in his grief," spills dead fish down the front of Claude's dress. Upset, Claude goes upstairs to change and settles instead for one of Camry's patent leather purses. Rosie shoves Claude's lunch into the purse and hopes that it passes for some kind of lunch box. She doesn't have much time to think about it. It is Ben and Roo's first day of middle school, and when Orion comes downstairs for breakfast, he has a sticker of an eyeball stuck to the middle of his forehead. He winks at Rosie with one of his own eyes, and they all head out the door.

Presumably, Penn doesn't "accidentally" spill anything—he spills on Claude's dress on purpose so he will have to change. Penn spills the dead fish "in his grief," which reflects how upset he is by Claude's choice of clothing and suggests that he prefers for his son to embody traditional male traits. Of course, Penn seems ready to accept Claude either way, but in this moment, it is obvious that he isn't exactly comfortable with Claude's gender identity.

Later, when Rosie pulls up to the elementary school to pick up the younger boys, Orion and Rigel come out without Claude. Claude got into trouble, they tell Rosie. She looks to the school and can see Claude standing with his teacher, Miss Appleton, who has a rather firm hand on him. "Mrs. Adams?" Miss Appleton says to Rosie. "It's Walsh, actually," Rosie says. She doesn't bother to tell Miss Appleton that it should be Ms., not Mrs., and in Rosie's case, it is Dr. Miss Appleton says that Claude had a great first day of kindergarten until lunch time. Claude had a peanut butter sandwich, Miss Appleton says, so he had to eat it in the classroom instead of the cafeteria.

Penn's last name is Adams, and presumably so is Claude's, but Rosie goes by her maiden name, Walsh, which again reflects her independence as a woman. Rosie doesn't like Miss Appleton calling her "Mrs." because it reduces Rosie to her role as Penn's wife. Rosie is a smart, independent woman, who is also a doctor, and she prefers to be addressed as such, not defaulted as "Mrs.," which, to Rosie, is patronizing and demeaning.

Rosie is confused. Claude is the fifth child she has had at the school. She has packed 900 peanut butter sandwiches over the years, and she can't understand why it is a problem now. Miss Appleton explains that with the increase in peanut allergies, no peanut butter "is implied" at the school. They don't usually check the students' lunches, the teacher explains, and they only discovered Claude's "forbidden sandwich" because he was telling the other students how ladies eat peanut butter finger sandwiches.

This passage hints that it wasn't Claude's sandwich that caught Miss Appleton's attention—it was the red patent leather purse the sandwich was in and Claude's reference to ladies and finger sandwiches. As she thinks Claude is a boy, Miss Appleton likely thinks it is unusual that he has a purse, and the sandwich gives her an excuse to talk to Rosie about it.

Rosie asks if anyone in Claude's class is allergic to peanuts, and Miss Appleton says it is more of a precaution. She then explains to Rosie that they also don't allow "accessories" at school, like sparkly shirts or purses. If students are playing with "accessories," Miss Appleton says, it is difficult for them to learn. Rosie asks if Claude was playing with his purse, and Miss Appleton admits that he wasn't, but the other children were "distracted" by it. Boys don't really need purses for school, Miss Appleton says. "It's not purse," Claude says, "It's a lunch tote."

Rosie clearly thinks that the ban on peanut butter is ridiculous, especially since there aren't any kids in the class who are allergic to peanut butter, just as Miss Appleton's concerns about the purse are ridiculous. Likely, if a little girl brought the purse to school, it would go unnoticed, but because Miss Appleton believes Claude is a boy, it makes her uncomfortable.

The next day, Rosie makes cheese sandwiches for everyone, and when Claude comes downstairs for breakfast, he is wearing a dress fashioned out of one his own t-shirts layered over one of Penn's. Rigel immediately tells him to change. The other kids will beat him up, Rigel says. Ben interrupts. It isn't that Claude's outfit isn't nice, he says, it just isn't "manly." Claude isn't a man, Penn says, he is a boy, but Roo points out that Claude might not even be that. "Roo!" Rosie yells. Penn stops their yelling and arguing. No one is beating up Claude, he says.

Rigel and Ben's concern over Claude again shows how much they love him, even if they aren't the best at showing it. Ben doesn't want Claude to feel bad, but he still implies that Claude must fulfill some "manly" ideal and not be quite so feminine. Rigel's concern that Claude will get beat up reflects the abuse and bullying transgender and other LGBTQ kids go through.

Penn knows that Claude should just be allowed to be who he wants to be—who he really is—but he knows Claude would be happier if who he was didn't draw so much attention. Penn thinks of Orion. He has always gone to school in strange outfits (the third eye he has on today is just one example), and the worst Orion has been accused of is being "imaginative." Claude goes upstairs to change and comes back down wearing only his own t-shirt and a pair of shorts. At the end of the day, when Claude comes home, he changes back into the dress, and he even adds some color barrettes in his hair and a pair of Camry's earrings.

Orion is only accused of being "imaginative" because his outfits don't violate accepted gender norms and acting out and pulling pranks is stereotypically considered to be something boys do. Claude changes back into the dress after he gets home from school, which implies he is most comfortable in the dress. Claude's school clothes are like a uniform, but his dresses are a reflection of who he really is.

After days of watching Claude change his clothes every day after school, Rosie asks if he is getting tired of so much changing. Claude tells her it's fine, but he is quite unconvincing. Penn hesitates, and then he tells Claude that if he wants to wear dresses to school, he should just go ahead and do it. "It's okay," Penn says. No, Claude says, it isn't—he know the other kids will make fun of him. Rosie offers to talk to Miss Appleton, but Claude asks her not to. Miss Appleton thinks he is "weird," Claude says, and she doesn't like him very much.

Miss Appleton doesn't like Claude because he doesn't conform to established gender norms, which reflects the abuse and discrimination members of the LGBTQ community face, as does Claude's fear that the other kids will make fun of him. Claude is just a kid, yet Miss Appleton passes judgement on him and makes him feel "weird."

It is fine, Claude says. He will just wear school clothes to school and "real clothes" when he gets home. Penn is saddened by Claude's use of the word "real" and reminds him that everyone loves him just for who he is. That isn't true, Claude says. Only his family loves him for who he really is.

Claude's reference to his dresses as his "real clothes" again implies that he is most comfortable in dresses, and that they are a better reflection of who he is; whereas Claude's school clothes, which identify him as a boy, are more like a costume he is forced to wear.

PART I: HALLOWEEN

Days and weeks pass, and Claude continues to change his clothes every day after school. Soon it is Halloween, and all the boys choose a costume. Roo wants to be a pirate, and Ben wants to be Roo. Rigel and Orion want to be conjoined twins, but Claude can't decide what he wants to be. Rosie suggests a pumpkin, and Orion suggests a policeman, fireman, or fisherman. "Police officer," Rosie corrects. "Firefighter. Fisher…person?" she says, unsure of herself. There aren't any girl fishermen, Roo says, and Claude is a man, he adds, so he would naturally be a policeman. "Claude is a boy," Penn says again, "not a man." Roo suggests that Claude just dress like a girl for Halloween, since that he is what he wants to be anyway.

The boys' Halloween costumes reflect how connected to each other they are. Ben wants to be Roo because he looks up to his older brother, and Rigel and Orion want to be conjoined twins because they are already twins and very close. Rosie's corrections make Orion's suggestions gender inclusive, as referring only to policemen, firemen, or fisherman excludes women, as does believing women can't fish for a living simply because they are women. Penn is again quick to point out that Claude is just a boy, that way Penn can more easily convince himself that Claude's preference for dresses is just a phase.

Rosie hesitates for just minute, then she asks Claude if he wants to be a girl for Halloween. A girl isn't really a costume, Claude says, but he has been thinking about being Grumwald. Really, Penn asks? But Grumwald, isn't real, he says, and only exists in the story. Claude asks Penn what Grumwald looks like, and Penn says he looks just like Claude. On Halloween, Claude comes downstairs dressed in his normal clothes, carrying a large paper cutout of what is obviously a human. On the cutout, Claude has pasted various words and phrases from magazines and catalogs. Penn instantly knows what Claude is aiming at. The cutout is Grumwald, and he is made up of infinite words and stories. It is the best Halloween costume, Penn thinks.

Claude doesn't think being a girl is a costume because for him it isn't. Being a girl is Claude's identity and who he is, not some costume to wear one day and then take off. Claude's Grumwald costume reflects how important storytelling is to him, just as it is to Penn and Rosie. Grumwald looks just like Claude, so in this case, it is Claude's "normal" clothes—his boy clothes—that are really the costume.

Roo stares at Claude's cutout. "That's gay," Roo says. "Roo!" Penn and Rosie yell again. That day, there is a Halloween party and parade at the elementary school, and since Halloween is a busy day for the emergency room, Penn has to go to the parade alone. Dwight Harmon, the elementary school principle, finds Penn at the parade and strikes up a conversion. Penn knows Dwight well, having sent five boys to his school, and he gets along well with him.

Roo's comment that Claude's costume is "gay" reflects the homophobia present in American society. In this case, Roo thinks Claude's costume is bad, so he calls it "gay," which is offensive and demeaning to the gay community.

Dwight asks Penn how Ben and Roo are, and then he asks how Rosie is. Lastly, Dwight points at Claude's costume and asks what he is supposed to be. Penn doesn't explain. The costume is really nothing, he says. Dwight asks Penn if he thinks Claude is happy, and Penn says he thinks so, but it comes out sounding more like a question. Claude is pretty quiet, Dwight says, and the pictures he draws are a bit concerning. There are some "warning signs," Dwight says.

Obviously, Dwight is fishing here. He has concerns about Claude and the expression of his gender identity, but he only refers to the "warning signs" in Claude's pictures. Unlike Miss Appleton, Dwight is a little more tactful in relaying his concerns to Penn. Penn clearly has concerns over Claude's happiness, too, which is why he forms his answer as a question.

That night, Penn takes a pile of Claude's drawings to Rosie. Look at these, he says. Rosie leafs through the brightly colored drawings. She loves Claude's drawings. They are so imaginative, she says, and she loves how he sees the world. Penn tells her to look closer. "How about how he sees himself?" Penn asks. Rosie looks again and notices that Claude is wearing a dress in every picture, and as she gets lower in the stack, she notices Claude's drawings of himself grow smaller and smaller, and then disappear altogether.

Claude draws himself in a dress because he identifies as a girl and sees himself as a girl; however, denying his true gender identity and living as a boy is making Claude unhappy and withdrawn. He has been denying who he really is for so long, Claude no longer sees himself at all. Clearly, denying Claude's true gender identity and forcing him to live as a boy is damaging to his mental health.

PART I: MAYBE

"So, gender dysphoria," Mr. Tongo says excitedly. "Congratulations to you both! Mazel tov! How exciting!" Penn looks across the room at Mr. Tongo, who is some sort of "multi-degreed social-working therapist-magician" Rosie knows from the hospital. "Uh…thanks," Penn says, not sure how to respond to such a strange and enthusiastic man. They should be proud, Mr. Tongo says, that Claude feels comfortable expressing his true feelings to them. It is proof, Mr. Tongo says, they are doing a good job as parents. Rosie is glad, but she wants to make sure Claude is happy, too.

Through his enthusiasm, Mr. Tongo is clearly trying to convince Penn and Rosie that Claude will be okay and that they have nothing to worry about. As a social worker specializing in gender dysphoria, Mr. Tongo clearly has a different way of looking at the world. Plus, at least they now know why Claude wears a dress and why he is so unhappy, and that, to Mr. Tongo at least, is worth celebrating.

Gender dysphoria, Mr. Tongo explains, is when one's assigned sex, or anatomy, is at odds with one's internal gender identity. Claude might grow out of it, Mr. Tongo says, or he might be transgender, or something else. Labels aren't important, he says. What is important, is not making a big deal out of it. Penn says they never make a big deal out of what Claude wears, and Mr. Tongo is happy to hear it, but home is only half the problem. Claude spends most of the day at school. But Claude doesn't dress like a girl at school, Penn says. Maybe not, Mr. Tongo replies, but he may do other things, like play with dolls instead of dinosaurs and sit with the girls in the cafeteria.

Regardless of what Claude wears, Mr. Tongo implies, Claude likely displays other behavior that doesn't align with traditional notions of the male gender. As a boy, Claude is expected to do what little boys do, such as play with trucks and dinosaurs, and when he doesn't do those things and instead plays with dolls, the message is still the same. Claude knows he doesn't quite fit in, and so do the other children, and it makes Claude feel alienated.

Mr. Tongo continues. Children learn all sorts of things in kindergarten, and one of the things they learn is socially accepted gender roles. Rosie says they should homeschool, but Mr. Tongo says that isn't necessary. Claude needs to learn and struggle a bit; it is good for him. Penn asks how they are supposed to teach Claude that, but Mr. Tongo says it isn't a matter of learning as much as it is "unlearning." They must help Claude to see that disappearing from the world is too high a price to pay for not fitting in. "Exciting!" Mr. Tongo says again. The best part about gender dysphoria, he says, is that there is nothing wrong with Claude. "Claude's not sick!" he cries. "Isn't that wonderful?"

Mr. Tongo's explanation of gender implies that gender is something that is socially constructed, and that construction begins at a very early age. Claude has to "unlearn" who society is telling him to be and learn to be whoever he thinks he is—whatever that may be. Claude's gender dysphoria isn't some kind of illness ("Claude's not sick!"), it is an understandable response to society's expectation that he embody a gender he is fundamentally at odds with.

Mr. Tongo sends Rosie and Penn home and tells them to write all of Claude's behavior into a journal and label it either male behavior or female behavior. As a writer, Penn thinks it will be a relatively easy exercise, but he is wrong. Many things don't fit neatly into categories. Some things, like Claude's dresses, are easy, but Penn isn't sure where to put LEGOs, since they don't seem either traditionally male or traditionally female. Penn makes a third column, but he can't decide what to call it. "Other," "Both," and "Unclear" seem wrong, so he settles on "Maybe." After the first day of journaling, Rosie and Penn split a bottle of wine and compare lists.

Claude's behavior isn't exclusively female, and it isn't exclusively male, which suggests that gender is complicated and can't be defined in a simple either/or way. The ambiguous LEGOs, which are a very popular toy, further suggests that lots of kids don't fit into such a narrow gender binary. Penn's hybrid "Maybe" column reflects Claude: maybe he is a boy, and maybe he is a girl, or maybe he is some combination of the two.

Rosie's list is much different than Penn's, and at first glance, neither one understands the other. Rosie's list only has two columns, and almost everything falls in the girl category—even LEGOs, which Rosie noted Claude builds homes and mamas and babies with, while his brothers smash Batman into police stations. No, Penn says, she is looking at it the wrong way. Penn explains, using Rosie as an example. She is a scientist, and since women aren't scientists, it goes into the boy column. And since her specialty is emergency medicine, which is masculine compared to pediatrics or gynecology, it goes into the boy column, too. Penn, on the other hand, is an artist, and he spends all his time cooking and cleaning, so that goes in the girl column.

Penn and Rosie look at their lists in different ways, but they both say the same thing: some things are traditionally considered male (like violent play and science) and other things are traditionally considered female (like cooking, cleaning, and childrearing). Both Penn and Rosie defy these narrow and sexist gender ideals, which exposes how ridiculous they are, but much of society is based on such assumptions, and they are the same expectations that Claude feels so at odds with.

Penn thinks the whole exercise is nonsense. It is impossible to decide what traditional gender roles are when even they don't embody them. Penn says they probably aren't the best people for such an exercise, but Rosie disagrees. They are perfect for the exercise, she says. The next day, Claude comes home and tells Penn and Rosie that he doesn't have any friends. They can't believe such a thing is possible, but Claude promises them it is true. Kids at school think he is "weird," Claude says. Rosie looks at Claude and asks him very seriously if he wants to be a girl, and Penn asks if Claude thinks he *is* a girl. "I don't know," Claude says, crying.

The exercise is *nonsense, Frankel implies, and forcing people into such narrow and confined gender roles is demeaning and oppressive. For many, gender identity is too complex to be a binary choice of either/or, and Claude, Penn, and Rosie are proof of this. None of them adhere to their prescribed gender roles—Claude just happens to wear a dress, too. The treatment Claude endures is more evidence of the abuse and hate the LGBTQ community faces in American society, even for a child as young as Claude.*

PART I: INVENTION

Penn and Rosie schedule a meeting at the school near the end of the fall term. They plan exactly what to tell the school about Claude, and it basically boils down to his happiness. They support whatever makes Claude happy, including dresses. The night before the meeting as Penn and Rosie go over their plans again, Roo and Ben come downstairs. They are "staging an invention," Roo says. "Intervention, you idiot," Ben corrects. Whatever, Roo says, they just don't want Claude wearing a dress to school. Kids are mean, Ben adds, and Claude is going to get beat up.

Again, Ben and Roo's "intervention" is evidence of their love for Claude, even though Claude's gender isn't something they can intervene in and therefore stop. Claude is who he is, which might not be a boy, and Ben and Roo can't expect him to be someone he isn't—no matter where Claude is. Statistically speaking, transgender girls and women are assaulted more than any other member of the LGBTQ community, which again reflects the hate that is common in American society.

The dresses are "weird," Roo says, and "gay." Penn asks what's wrong with being gay, and Ben says nothing, but they should teach Claude some kung fu or something before they turn him loose in the world as gay. Penn points out that they are all weird. Roo plays football and the flute, and Ben skips grades because he makes up extra homework for himself in his spare time. We're all weird, Penn says again, and Rosie reminds them that they can't tell their brother who to be, all they can do is support who he is.

Roo's comment that Claude's dresses are "weird" and "gay" again reflect the homophobia that is rampant in American society. Furthermore, Claude's likely transgender identity does not mean that he is also gay. Gender and sexuality are two different things, and many transgender people see them independent of one another.

The next day, Rosie and Penn arrive at the school for their meeting. They are prepared to meet only with Dwight Harmon, but Miss Appleton is there along with Victoria Revels, a representative from the school district. Victoria Revels immediately asks if Claude will be changing his name, and Penn says no, somewhat confused. They don't need to worry about pronouns then, she says, moving right along. Dwight can tell Penn and Rosie are nervous, so he tells them to relax. They handle kids with special needs all the time, and Claude isn't their first transgender student. Claude just wants to wear a dress, Rosie says, they haven't put any labels on him. That's fine, Dwight says, but as far as the school is concerned, any boy who wears a dress is considered transgender for paperwork purposes.

Claude hasn't even decided yet that he is transgender, but the school is intent on labeling him as such—or at least for the sake of their paperwork. Gender identity is a deeply personal issue, and the school treats it as if it is some box to be checked on a form. This, too, reflects the discrimination the LGBTQ community faces. The school clearly isn't comfortable with Claude's gender, but they would be more comfortable if they can just label him a girl and then act accordingly.

Victoria Revels continues. Claude will have to use the bathroom in the nurse's office, she says. They can't allow him to use the girls' bathroom, and the boys' bathroom might make him uncomfortable, so the nurse's office is his only choice. Miss Appleton says Rosie and Penn should prepare Claude for lots of questions. Children are naturally curious and will want to know why he is wearing a dress, and he should always tell them the truth. Penn interrupts. Claude doesn't know why he wants to wear a dress, so the truth might be difficult. Dwight says the right answers will come in time, and Victoria Revels agrees. The important thing is that Claude must use the bathroom in the nurse's office, she says. Sure, Rosie says sarcastically, and no peanut butter. "Or jelly you've dipped your peanut butter knife into," Miss Appleton says seriously.

What bathroom Claude uses isn't important, Rosie implies, just like the peanut butter ban when no one in the class is actually allergic to it; however, Miss Appleton doesn't seem to get it. Miss Appleton's fear of peanut butter is misguided and ill-informed, just as her fear of Claude is. Claude has rights and can use any bathroom he pleases, and the treatment by Victoria Revels amounts to little more than discrimination. The school is clearly more worried about Claude making other students uncomfortable than they are worried about accommodating what Claude needs. Of course, Claude isn't asking for anything, he only wants to wear a dress.

On the first day of school after Christmas break, Claude comes downstairs wearing a nice casual denim skirt and a pink sweater. Rosie wants to go to school with him, but Claude has decided that he wants Penn to go and sit in the back, so that's exactly what Penn does. As the kids arrive, Miss Appleton sits them in a circle and says that many exciting things happened during break. Susan lost a tooth, Miss Appleton says of one of the students, and Carrie has a new haircut. Claude, Miss Appleton says, has decided to be a "fairy girl." She asks if anyone has questions, and the students begin to ask questions. Do Claude's tights itch, they ask, and does he plan on growing out his hair? Claude says no, his tights don't itch, but he hasn't really thought much about his hair.

Miss Appleton's comment that Claude has decided to become a "fairy girl" is offensive and demeaning. He isn't a "fairy," he is just a girl, and he didn't decide to, he just is. Referring to him as a "fairy girl" reduces Claude's dress to something like a costume and not what it is: a reflection of who he truly is. The other students ask if Claude plans to grow his hair out because, as a girl, he will be expected to have long hair. This expectation again underscores how narrowly society defines and recognizes gender.


At lunch time, Penn asks Claude if he is okay, and Claude says he is. The next morning, Claude comes downstairs and asks how long it will take to grow his hair down to his butt. He is wearing a purple jumper with rainbow stripped tights, and Rosie knows he is doing just fine with his new wardrobe.

Claude associates long hair with being a girl because the kids at school implied that girls have long hair, which again underscores how gender is socially constructed. Claude didn't even think about his hair until the other kids drew attention to it.

PART I: NAMING RIGHTS

The kindergarten kids don't pay much attention to Claude, but the older kids do, and they aren't always nice about it. "Your gay little brother is so gay," an older boy says to Orion and Rigel. Recess grows increasingly difficult for Claude, and since it is cold outside anyway, he starts spending recess alone in the library. He doesn't mind eating lunch alone in the bathroom, but the nurse catches him and makes him stop, so he starts using the boys' bathroom again.

The older kids' comments again underscore the abuse the LGBTQ community faces. Claude is different, so they pick on him. Like Claude's brothers, the kids on the playground assume that just because Claude is likely transgender he is also "gay." Sexuality never comes into Claude's feelings about his gender, which again suggests that gender and sexuality are distinct and separate.


One day, Miss Appleton stops Claude and asks him if he has been using the boys' bathroom. Claude says that he has, and Miss Appleton asks him why. "Because I'm a boy?" he answers. Miss Appleton draws in a deep breath. If he is boy, she asks, why is he wearing a dress? He likes to wear dresses, Claude says, but Miss Appleton says little boys don't wear dresses. If Claude is a little boy, she says, he can't wear dresses; and if he is a little girl, he must use the nurse's bathroom. Claude asks why he wouldn't use the girls' bathroom, and Miss Appleton, clearly irritated, says he isn't a girl.

Like Penn and Rosie do earlier, Claude answers Miss Appleton's question with a question because he isn't exactly sure what gender he is, and Miss Appleton badgering him and embarrassing him over the bathroom doesn't help. This treatment, too, reflects the abuse of the LGBTQ community. Claude's gender isn't for Miss Appleton to define, and she can't force him to use a separate bathroom, which only serves to further alienate him.


Victoria Revels calls Penn at home that night. The school is happy to accommodate Claude's needs if he has gender dysphoria, but if he just wants to wear a dress, then he is "being disruptive and must wear normal clothes." It is confusing for Miss Appleton and the other children, Ms. Revels says. They aren't sure if Claude is a girl or a boy, and they don't know what to do with him. For instance, does he line up with the boys or the girls? Why does he keep his hair short, and why hasn't he changed his name? Penn doesn't understand. Girls have short hair and wear pants all the time. Yes, she says, but Claude will have to pick a gender and stick to it.

Again, Victoria Revels and the school are forcing Claude to embody gender ideals they are comfortable with because it is easier for them if Claude conforms to the accepted gender norms. Ms. Revels says that Claude must wear "normal clothes," which is to say that Claude isn't normal in the first place. Claude is not being "disruptive," he is expressing his gender identity. What line Claude stands in and how long his hair is doesn't matter.

The problem, Penn tells Victoria Revels, is that they aren't sure what gender Claude is. He might be "gender variant" or "genderqueer," Penn explains, but Ms. Revels cuts him off. Claude can't be any of those things in kindergarten, she says. Kindergarten is no place for "ambiguity." For now, Ms. Revels says, Claude "needs to…pardon me, but he needs to move his bowels or get off the pot." Sure, Penn says, as long as he does it in the nurse's office. "In the nurse's office," Ms. Revels confirms.

Gender variant refers to someone who doesn't conform to dominate gender norms, and genderqueer refers to someone who might not conform to traditional gender norms at all and might not identify as either male or female. Penn clearly believes that gender is not a binary choice between male and female, but Ms. Revels so crudely implies that Claude must choose one. Ms. Revels is still concerned with the bathroom, which prove she understands nothing about what Claude is going through.

Penn wants to call Dwight Harmon and give him hell, but he doesn't. Rosie is convinced it is only a big deal if they make one, so they don't. At dinner, Claude tells them all he is changing his name to "the cocoa channel." Penn looks at Rosie, confused. It is a television station, Claude explains, with nothing but chocolate. Penn decides he must mean Coco Chanel, but he tells him that he can just be Claude. Claude knows that, but he wants to change his name. The boys immediately pipe up. If Claude is changing his name, Orion says, he is, too. Rosie stops the. No one is changing any name she gave them, she says. If Claude wants a new name, he can be Claudia. Otherwise, everyone is keeping their name.

Frankel implies that the school's response to Claude is *a big deal. The school has no right to insist Claude make crucial decisions about his gender identity that he might not be ready to make or comfortable doing. Claude never considered changing his name until the school insisted he do so, and his choice of name "the cocoa channel" has to do with chocolate, not gender. The school's treatment of Claude is further evidence of the discrimination the LGBTQ community faces.*

That night, Claude goes to Penn and Rosie's room. He has decided on his new name, he says, and he wants it to be Poppy. Claude says that Camry told him that Jewish people name their kids after dead people they love, so he is going with Poppy. He asks Rosie if she thinks it is a good name, and she says it is perfect.

Although Claude is bullied into changing his name, his choice seems meant to be. Rosie always wanted a daughter named Poppy, and Penn knew that he would have one, and now they do—just not quite in the way they thought they would.

PART I: PUSH

By April, Claude's hair has grown down to his ears, and he transitions into Poppy. Poppy comes down each morning for breakfast, dressed in brightly colored dresses, yoga pants, and tiaras, and she is perfectly happy. In fact, Rosie admits, all her kids seem happy, and even Miss Appleton has come around with a switch to sunflower-butter sandwiches. Poppy's change, however, is more difficult for Rosie and Penn. Penn constantly mixes up names, and he doesn't just call Poppy Claude. He calls Rigel Orion, and he calls Ben Rufus, although no one knows who Rufus is. He calls Poppy both "he" and "she," and he introduces Rosie at a party as his husband. Through all of this, Poppy is unbothered, and she is growing increasingly popular.

Living as a girl, Poppy is a happy and bright child. She is no longer withdrawn and depressed, but vibrant and active, which suggests living as her true gender identity is much healthier for her. Everyone is happier, which shows just how stressful it is living outside one's true gender. Still, Poppy's transition is difficult, and Frankel underscores this, too. Such change is bound to be difficult, especially a change to something as deeply rooted as gender norms. Poppy's change isn't just a change of clothes and name, it is a change of language, too.

Poppy has a calendar that she keeps all her playdates in, and Rosie hates it. To Penn, the calendar is proof that Poppy has adjusted, and that she is out living life and being seen; however, Rosie sees the packed calendar as "PC bullshit and a strange Poppy cachet." These people aren't their friends, she warns, they are parents encouraging their kids to play with Poppy so they can appear "open-minded and tolerant." With Poppy's new social calendar, they begin a "no-fly" list of people Poppy definitely can't play with again. For example, one little girl's father made an off-color joke about drag queens, and one girl's mother asked Rosie way too many questions about Poppy's genitals, and another couple tried to explain to Penn when he went to pick up Poppy that God doesn't make mistakes.

Rosie's concerns that people are only nice to Poppy to appear "tolerant" and the need for a "no-fly" list further illustrate the hate and ill treatment the LGBTQ community faces. Either they are demeaned and insulted, as in the comment about God, or they are reduced to drag queens and looked at with curiosity like some sort of sideshow attraction. Likely, Rosie would never be asked about the genitals of her cisgender children, yet people think it is okay to ask about Poppy's. They also imply that Poppy's gender identity is some kind of sin or affront to God's plan.

One day, Rosie drops Poppy off to play with Nicky Calcutti, a boy Poppy has known since before her transition. Nicky's mom, Cindy, sent Rosie a message and asked how she was after Claude's transition to Poppy. She said Poppy was still welcome to play with Nicky, and she invited him over for ice cream. Soon after Rosie drops Poppy off, she calls her in tears to come get her. Penn is closer, so she calls him and turns the car in the direction of Nicky's house. When she pulls up, Penn is just getting out of the van with the boys, and Poppy runs out of the house, straight into the arms of her brothers.

Presumably, Cindy is one of the people Rosie is worried about who only encourages her son to be friends with Poppy because of "PC bullshit and a strange Poppy cachet." Something terrible has obviously happened, and quickly, for Poppy to immediately call Rosie and run out of the house in tears. The reader can infer that someone has said something awful to Poppy about her gender. Poppy runs straight to her brothers because she feels safe there, which further reflects their connection as family.

Nicky's father, Nick, steps out onto the porch, and Rosie asks what happened. "Your kid's a faggot, that's what happened," he says. Rosie turns and orders everyone into the car, and Penn asks Nick why Poppy thinks he has a gun. "'Cause I do," Nick says. Men shouldn't have to hide two things. "This," he says, grabbing his crotch, "and this," he says, lifting his shirt and revealing a gun on his hip. Suddenly, Cindy pulls up, clearly aware of what is happening. She glances at Rosie with embarrassment and pushes her son and husband into the house. As Cindy closes the door, Rosie can hear Nick ask Cindy why she lets their son play with "faggots and assholes." Cindy texts later to apologize, but Rosie doesn't bother to read it and puts Nicky on the "no-fly" list.

Nick's crass and offensive language is clearly meant to insult Poppy, and it is further evidence of the hate Poppy faces as a member of the LGBTQ community. Nick's language is bad enough for an adult, but Poppy is just a child, which makes it even worse. Nick is so angered by Poppy's gender, it makes him draw a gun on a child and a family. Nick's anger seems more than excessive, but since one out of every two transgender individuals is assaulted in their lifetime, Nick's violent response isn't uncommon.

PART I: SHOVE

One night at the hospital, Rosie sits down with a peanut butter sandwich. She figures the sandwich is safe at a hospital, where there is plenty of medication to treat allergies. A nurse pops her head in and says a gunshot wound is coming from the college campus. Rosie sighs and finishes her sandwich. It was a nice four minutes, she thinks. When the ambulance brings in the victim, Jane Doe, she is swollen and covered in blood. She doesn't look shot; she looks like she was beaten. Rosie strips her down, quickly assessing her, and finds a small bullet wound in her shoulder, as well as a penis. "Jane Doe's a John Doe," someone yells into the hall.

Rosie's thoughts about the peanut butter are obviously a dig at Miss Appleton. If it was necessary to ban peanut butter for the safety of others, it would likely be done by hospitals. Clearly, Jane Doe is a transgender woman, and she, too, is a victim of violence and further reflects the extreme hate members of the LGBTQ community face.

Rosie finds out later that Jane Doe is a new student at the university, and she met a boy named Chad at a fraternity party. Chad sat with her and flirted. He offered her a beer, and he put his and on her leg. Before she could object, his hand moved up and instantly recoiled. Jane opened her mouth to explain, but Chad hit her, and then he called his friends over, and they all took turns hitting her. They also kicked her and spit on her, and when they wouldn't stop beating her, Chad got nervous. He grabbed a gun, meaning to shoot it into the air and scare his friends off, but he accidentally shot Jane instead. Chad almost killed Jane, and at the same time, he almost saved her life.

Again, Jane Doe is evidence of the violence and assault the LGBTQ community, especially transgender women, face. In 2018, 26 transgender individuals were murdered in the United States, and most of them were transgender women of color. Chad is clearly transphobic, and he beats Jane because he views hitting on a transgender woman as some sort of threat to his manhood and sexuality that he tries to recover with physical violence. Like Nick, Jane's gender makes Chad so angry he responds with violence, as do his fraternity brothers, who likely would have killed her if given the chance.

PART I: MAPPING

Rosie has a headache looking at the map on the table. It is late, and she knows she should go to bed, but she hasn't been sleeping well lately. Staring down at the map of the United States, she thinks about Penn. He says that Madison, Wisconsin, is perfect. Bad stuff can happen anywhere, he argues. But Rosie knows they can't stay in Madison. She wants to get as far away as possible from people like Chad. Camry suggested Phoenix, and she even sent local newspaper clippings about the city's gay pride festival and a trans boy who was nominated homecoming king at the high school, but Rosie is not sold on that idea, either.

Rosie's late nights with the map are more evidence of how far she is willing to go to support Poppy and make sure her family is safe. Rosie and her family live in Madison, Wisconsin, and Rosie is willing to go wherever Poppy will be safest. Of course, Frankel implies that there will be people who won't accept Poppy wherever they go. Thus, getting far away from people like Chad is likely impossible.

Rosie considers the coasts, where differences are celebrated instead of scorned, but she knows her boys need more space and less concrete. She decides that Seattle is the perfect place for their needs. Seattle is so tolerant, Rosie thinks, that heterosexual people feel strange holding hands. There is plenty of open space for the boys, and there are lots of hospitals. There is also a house that is big enough for them, if she manages to get the job she wants and if the farmhouse sells for a decent price.

Again, Rosie's family is obviously very important to her, and even though her primary concern is Poppy, Rosie is still thinking about all her children. Rosie knows that her boys won't be happy living in a city apartment, even if such cities are best for Poppy.

The house in Seattle has a turret with a pink bedroom and the school has a skateboarding club, so Poppy is excited to go. Rigel and Orion are looking forward to learning about the Puget Sound, and Ben knows that Seattle is a good city for a kid who knows computers and skipped the sixth grade. Penn, too, agrees to go. He sees leaving not as giving up, but as moving on, something that is brave and perhaps even necessary. Roo, however, isn't happy. He is first-chair flute and quarterback on the pee-wee football team. He has friends and a life, and he doesn't want to leave.

Most of the family is willing to do whatever they must to ensure that Poppy is safe and happy, which reflects their support of her. Roo supports Poppy, too, but, Frankel implies, this type of support isn't always easy and sometimes it can cost the happiness of another. Roo is expected to give up much of his own life for Poppy, which is never easy.

Roo tells Rosie that it isn't fair he has to give up his life and move away just because of Poppy. Rosie agrees. It isn't fair, she says, but he has to do it. That is what being a family means. "I hate family," he says. Family means that, too, she says. Rosie's new job pays to ship all their things to Seattle, including their cars and dog, so they get to fly. Rosie is almost disappointed. The car ride would have been "cathartic," and Rosie thinks that an important move like this should have a grand sendoff. As they fly into Seattle, they fly low over Mount Rainer, and Rosie can see the snow-covered peaks perfectly.

Again, Frankel implies that supporting one's family unconditionally isn't always an easy thing to do, and it can cause serious unhappiness. Obviously, Roo doesn't really hate his family, but Rosie suggests that is completely normal to feel, at times, as if he does. Rosie thinks the car ride would have been "cathartic," meaning she expected a huge outpouring of emotion, but she doesn't get that.

PART II: ONE THING

School starts on a Tuesday, so Poppy is allowed to have Aggie, Natalie, and Kim over on Sunday night for a sleep over. They try on all their clothes and fix their hair, because that is what girls do before the first day of the fifth grade, and now they are trying to summon Aggie's dead grandfather on an Ouija board. After a while, they give up on Aggie's grandpa and start asking the board questions about boys at school.

Frankel jumps into the future here, and the reader can infer that Poppy is, at least for the time being, a happy girl living in Seattle. Poppy has friends and has sleepovers, and she does all the cliché things girls do, like talk about boys.

Aggie is lucky, Poppy thinks, because no one else has a crush on the boy she likes. Natalie and Kim both like the same boy, but at least they have someone to talk about. Poppy doesn't like anyone. Kim asks the Ouija board if Poppy will ever grow boobs, and they all laugh. Aggie tells Poppy that she is lucky and should hope she never gets them, and then Aggie says she will probably be the first one to get her period, too. The girls return to the Ouija board and ask it who will be the first to get their period, and when it doesn't answer, they put it away.

From Kim's comment about Poppy's chest and Aggie's question as to who will be the first to get their period, the reader can infer that Poppy's friends do not know that she is transgender. Unlike her friends, Poppy doesn't seem to be interested in any boys yet, which further suggests that Poppy's sexuality and gender are separate and distinct.

Fourth grade sexual education isn't about sex, it is more about boobs and periods, but the older kids say the real sex talk starts in fifth grade. Poppy, Aggie, Natalie, and Kim also know that the fifth grade is the last year they aren't expected to shower after gym. Staring in the sixth grade, they have to shower in front of each other—naked—and the thought makes each one of them want to die of embarrassment. The four of them have been friends since Poppy was the new kid in the first grade, and they quickly became "the PANK club." They are always together, and they tell each other everything, except, in Poppy's case, for "one thing."

Presumably, the "one thing" that Poppy has not told her friends is that she is transgender, but Poppy's secret is only going to get harder to keep. Obviously, Poppy can't shower in front of her classmates after gym class without giving away her secret. "The PANK club" is an acronym for the first letter of each of the girls' names, which reflects how close they are and suggest that keeping secrets from one another is quite difficult.


PART II: RIVAL NEIGHBOR PRINCESS

Rosie and Penn didn't intend to keep Claude a secret, it just worked out that way. They arrived four years earlier, and Seattle couldn't be more different than Madison. Their new house was built in 1906, the same year as their farmhouse, but that is the only similarity. The farmhouse was in the middle of nowhere, but city skyscrapers can be seen from the new house. The house has several additions and the result is a bit strange. Orion's room is on the second floor under an eave, and Rigel's room has a trapdoor that leads to the linen closet. The stairs to Poppy's turret are in Rosie and Penn's room, and Ben and Roo share the basement, which Ben has divided into several smaller rooms and hideouts. From the outside it looks like a normal house, but on the inside it is a little strange. "Like me," Poppy says.

Just as Poppy points out, the house is like her—normal looking on the outside, strange on the inside—but Frankel implies that the house is like all of them. Several of the characters point out that Poppy is not the only "weird" one. Everyone in Poppy's family is a bit odd, and the house, with its trapdoors and secret passageways, reflects their eccentricities. Poppy's friends, too, are weird, which implies that everybody is a bit weird in some way or another.


On Rosie's first day alone in the house, there is a knock on the door, and she is a bit irritated at the interruption. It is the neighbors, Marginny and Frank Granderson, and they have come to introduce themselves. Marginny and Frank are warm and friendly, and they ask Rosie if she moved to the area alone. Goodness no, Rosie says, explaining that she has a husband and five kids. "Wow," Marginny says, "I bet you're from the Midwest." Marginny and Frank have two girls: Cayenne is in the eighth grade, and Aggie is going into first. Rosie says she has five boys but stops herself. "It's a long story," Rosie says, and before she knows it, she is telling Marginny and Frank the whole story about Poppy.

People in the novel are constantly making assumptions about Rosie based on how many kids she has. Here, Marginny assumes Rosie is Midwestern because she has five kids, and earlier in the novel, Rosie is asked if she is Catholic because she has five kids. How many kids Rosie has is no one's business but her own. Clearly, Marginny does not mean to offend Rosie with her comment, but it is still evidence of how women are treated in a sexist society. No one says anything to Penn about how many kids he has.

Frank says he saw a drag show once and asks Rosie if that is what raising Poppy is like. No, Rosie says, it is nothing like that. Suddenly, the back door opens, and Penn and the children pour in. Marginny quickly introduces herself to Penn, and then she invites them to a barbeque the next day. Rosie thinks about how exhausting that sounds, but before she can say anything, Penn accepts.

Transgender girls and women are often compared to drag queens in the novel, which again reflects the widespread misunderstanding and ignorance about the transgender community. Transgender women and girls cannot be reduced to drag queens and to do so is offensive, even if Frank doesn't mean it that way.

The next day at the barbeque, Marginny approaches Penn and Rosie. Marginny doesn't mean to apologize for Frank and the drag queen comment, but she does want them to know that he didn't mean to offend them. He was simply caught off guard, Marginny says, but Rosie tells her not to worry about it. Rosie clearly has to work on talking to people about Poppy, she says. Marginny tells Rosie and Penn that she and Frank have decided not to tell their kids about Poppy. If the point is for Poppy to live as a girl, Marginny doesn't see the point in telling her kids that Poppy isn't a girl. Anyway, Marginny says, she just wanted to let Rosie know.

Marginny makes a point to say that she is not *apologizing for Frank, through which Frankel seems to be implying that she shouldn't have to apologize. Initial conversations regarding gender are bound to be awkward. Such subjects are touchy, and they make people nervous and worried about offending others. These conversations will never be perfect, Frankel implies, and that is okay.*

Penn is surprised that Rosie told Marginny and Frank about Poppy. Rosie apologizes, but she didn't know what to say. Penn agrees that it is difficult to know exactly what to do. He asks how they are supposed to tell the difference between the Cindy Calcuttis of the world and the Nick Calcuttis, but Rosie says there is no way they can know. Maybe keeping Claude a secret is the right thing to do. Then, Poppy can just be Poppy for a change. Poppy approaches and stands shyly at Penn's side. Frank comes over and asks if Poppy would like to meet his daughter, Aggie. Poppy and Aggie hit it off immediately and run up to Aggie's room to play. As Rosie is on her second glass of wine, a woman says Rosie must have been very happy to finally have a girl. "We were thrilled," Rosie says dryly, "Just thrilled."

Rosie's sarcastic response that she is "thrilled" to finally have a daughter underscores how often people make assumptions about the gender of others. The woman likely thinks her comment is harmless and it isn't meant to be offensive, but it only serves to further alienate Poppy and her family. Gendered comments such as this are common and frequent, and for someone like Rosie, who must live with them every day, it is likely tiring to always have someone pointing out, even inadvertently, that she is different.

That night, as Rosie and Penn tuck Poppy into bed, she talks excitedly about her new friends. No one knows about Claude here, Poppy says, and it is nice not to have to pretend. Penn agrees. No one here knows who Poppy really is, he says, but Poppy disagrees. They know exactly who she is, Poppy says. Suddenly, there is a sound outside Poppy's window. From the window, Poppy can see Aggie in her own window. "Hi," Aggie says. Their rooms are close, and they can be "rival princesses in neighboring castles." They can pass notes, Poppy says eagerly. Yes, Aggie says, and they will be the best of friends and tell each other all their secrets.

Obviously, Poppy and Aggie won't be telling each other all *their secrets, especially since Aggie's parents have decided to keep Poppy's gender from Aggie. Claude was a mask, or a costume, and now that Poppy's friends only know her as Poppy, they finally know who Poppy really is and how she sees herself. Aggie's language reflects how pervasive gender is in everyday language. They will be "rival princesses," Aggie says, which again draws attention to gender.*

PART II: EVERYONE WHO?

Rosie keeps in contact with Mr. Tongo back in Wisconsin, and he doesn't think that Poppy's gender is really anyone's business: Rosie doesn't talk about her other kids' penises, so she shouldn't talk about Poppy's. Friends can be close without ever talking about their genitals, Mr. Tongo says. Rosie agrees, but Poppy is different, she says. She has to tell Poppy's teacher and the school nurse. And she has to tell Poppy's friends' parents. "Why?" Mr. Tongo asks. Poppy's penis doesn't make any difference to the teacher, and the nurse won't be doing anything in which she will need to know. Rosie doesn't asks for Poppy's friends' medical history, so she shouldn't be giving out Poppy's.

Mr. Tongo's opinion underscores the many different ways in which transgender people can be alienated. People don't ask or tell other cisgender people about their genitals, yet this courtesy is not extended to transgender people. Constantly referring to or asking about gender only draws attention to others' differences and compounds feelings alienation.

Soon after, Rosie comes home from work and finds Penn has taken all the pictures from the walls. She misses Claude, Rosie says. She's upstairs with Aggie, Penn says, although he knows what Rosie means. Roo walks in and looks around. He thought the whole point of coming to Seattle was because everyone is so "gay," Roo says. Rosie is confused. "Tolerant," he says, "Open-minded. Rainbow flaggy. Whatever." She "ruined their lives" to come here, Roo says, and they can't even hang their pictures.

Obviously, Rosie and Penn can't hang their family pictures if they are trying to keep Poppy's identity as a transgender girl a secret. Roo's comment draws attention to how miserable he is, especially living in secrecy. Seattle is supposed to "open-minded" and supportive of the LGBTQ community, so, Roo rightly implies, they shouldn't have to hide.

PART II: STRATEGICALLY NAKED

Rosie and Penn are extremely happy that Poppy has Aggie, but Aggie drives them all nuts. She is loud, and even though Rosie gave birth to five boys, Aggie is more boyish than any of them. She is constantly digging holes and catching bugs, and she plays with toy trucks and spaceships. Poppy and Aggie spend every weekend together, and when Poppy turns seven, she asks to have a sleep over with Aggie and her new friends, Natalie and Kim. Rosie isn't sure a sleepover is a good idea. Girls sometime change clothes in front of each other, she says, but Poppy says she is worrying for nothing. They sleepover will be great, Poppy says.

Like nearly everyone else in the novel, Aggie doesn't conform to traditional gender roles either. She is more boyish than any of Rosie's boys, and she does things that are not typically associated with girls, like playing with bugs and trucks. In drawing attention to the ways people frequently challenge gender roles, Frankel implies that there isn't really anything that different about Poppy. Everyone pushes against these roles, she suggests, just in different ways.

Penn thinks Rosie is worrying for nothing, too, but Rosie disagrees. It is like Poppy has forgotten she has a penis, Rosie says, but Penn highly doubts that. Rosie is in agony all evening during the sleepover waiting for Poppy to put her pajamas on. The girls spend the whole night laughing and running around, and then Poppy comes into Penn and Rosie's room looking for pajamas. Penn says they are in the dryer, and Poppy goes to the laundry room and returns wearing a flamingo nightgown. Rosie is relieved and finally starts to relax.

Rosie is clearly more worried about Poppy's gender differences than Poppy is, and she seems to be more invested in keeping Poppy's secret as well. Poppy isn't phased in the slightest, and she doesn't appear too worried about her secret. Poppy transitioned when she was young enough that she likely doesn't have many memories of Claude, therefore she doesn't think about gender as much as Rosie.

The following Friday, Poppy wants to go to Aggie's for a sleepover. Rosie asks Penn if it is too late to tell the kids they are going to shul, but Penn says it is, so they decide to let Poppy go to Aggie's for the night. Before she leaves, Rosie sits Poppy down and tells her she must change her clothes in the bathroom. Unless, Rosie says, Poppy wants to tell Aggie. No, Poppy says, she doesn't want to tell Aggie anything. She still remembers what happened with Nicky, and Poppy doesn't want anything like that to happen again. Poppy doesn't want Aggie to think she is weird. "Why?" Rosie asks. Aggie is pretty weird. "Exactly," Poppy says. Aggie is the weird one, and Poppy wants it to stay that way.

Poppy likely has some form of lasting trauma stemming from Nicky's father's threats with the gun, which underscores the trauma many people within the LGBTQ community face. As one out of every two transgender people will be assaulted, trauma, unfortunately, is commonplace in their lives. Frankel again draws attention to the fact that Poppy is not the only weird one. Aggie is weird, too, just as everyone in Poppy's family is. Everyone has differences, Frankel implies, and they should be celebrated.

PART II: STALLS

Accommodating Poppy's needs really only boils down to the small part of her life when she is required to take off her underwear. In truth, even Claude sat down to pee, but bathrooms are only half the problem. Penn joins online support groups and visits Facebook pages, where he learns about penis-masking underwear. He learns that he can tell Poppy's principal (if they want), but they can insist that Poppy use the girls' bathroom, which really works best because of the stalls. Poppy is entitled to join any of the girls' sports teams, and she is entitled to use of the girls' locker room. Poppy is even entitled to join the Girl Scouts, who will allow her to join if even they know her gender identity.

Poppy absolutely has rights as a transgender person, and what Penn learns here highlights just how terribly Poppy was treated by her school back in Madison. Bathrooms are often a way in which transgender people are alienated and marginalized. By making it impossible for transgender people to exist in society (i.e., use public bathrooms), then they will cease going into public spaces, with is the goal of anti-trans issues such as bathrooms. Bathroom controversy is almost never about bathrooms; it is about discrimination.

Penn's research on bathrooms and penis-masking underwear seriously cuts into his writing time. He only has a few hours to himself while everyone is at school and Rosie is at work, but he always has laundry, cooking, and cleaning to do. Of course, his research gives him lots of writing material, and when he does find the time, Penn's writing is dark and beautiful, like Seattle's weather.

Penn sacrifices his writing for the sake of his family, and for Poppy especially, which again underscores how much Penn's family means to him. This also pushes against stereotypical gender norms. Usually, women are depicted as giving up themselves or their careers for the children and families, but here it is Penn, which again underscores the complicated nature of gender.

Rosie's new job is in family practice, and it hardly seems like real medicine after so many years in the emergency room. Rosie is one of four equal partners. Elizabeth is quiet and guarded, and she doesn't tell her coworkers much about herself. James is pleasant, too, and he and his husband spend every evening at happy hour and fine dining restaurants. Howie started the practice, and while he isn't their boss, he hired each one of them. Howie insists on Rosie calling patients' parents "Mom," and he wants her to go to Thailand and set up a clinic so he can brag about it on the practice's website. Rosie doesn't have the flexibility she had in Wisconsin. Here, she is new and must prove herself all over again. She doesn't think she can get fired for refusing Howie's ridiculous requests, but she doesn't want to find out.

Going to Thailand for Rosie would be very difficult. She would likely have to go for a long period of time, and being away from her kids and family for that long would be hard on everyone. It is unfair that Rosie feels like she has to do extra work beyond what she is contracted to do just to keep her job, and this situation also underscores the discrimination women can face in the workplace. For Rosie, going to Thailand is impossible because of her family, and she is clearly worried that she will be put in a position in which she will have to choose either her family or her job.

PART II: FIFTY-FIFTY

Since Penn and Rosie's house is so close to Marginny and Frank's house, they start having dinner together once a month. They call it "Dueling Dinners," and the adults gather in one house, while the children gather in the other. That way, the adults can sit and visit without constant interruption. At one such dinner, Frank asks what they plan to do when Poppy hits puberty. Rosie explains they will likely put Poppy on "hormone blockers" when she is around 11 or 12 years old, which will stop her body from producing hormones during puberty.

"Hormone blockers" will keep Poppy's voice from changing and growing deeper, and they will also keep her from growing facial hair and other characteristics typically associated with men. Frank's question is invasive and inappropriate. Of course, he is curious, but Poppy isn't a project for him to look in on. Frank probably wouldn't like others asking about Aggie's puberty, so he shouldn't be asking about Poppy's.

Frank says it is like they are giving Poppy, a child, a sex change, but Rosie explains it isn't at all like that. The "hormone blockers" are completely reversible, but the effects of puberty are permanent. If Poppy's changes her mind later, she can always go off the drugs; but if she waits and wants to take them later, it will be too late. Marginny points out that Poppy will remain a little girl after Aggie and all her friends become women, but, Penn points out, staying a little girl beats the alternative.

Frank's comments amount to little more than veiled judgement. Furthermore, Rosie is a doctor—everyone knows this—and she doesn't need Frank telling her that "hormone blockers" amount to a sex change operation. Still, the hormone blockers will do nothing about the fact that Poppy's body will not grow and mature the same way her friends' bodies will.

Over at the other house with the kids, Cayenne asks Roo about a fight he got into a school. Fighting is "sexy," Cayenne says, and she heard that Roo beat up Derek McGuiness because he called Roo "gay." She asks if Roo really is gay, and when he says it is none of her business, she says she only asks because it opens up possibilities for them both.

Here, Cayenne implies that she has a crush on Roo. Her comment that fighting is "sexy" reflects gender stereotypes of men as strong and tough. Roo isn't gay, but Derek thinks he is and starts a fight with him, which again underscores the widespread abuse and hate the LBGTQ community faces.

Cayenne says they should all play spin the bottle, but the boys aren't really interested. As they bicker about playing, Aggie comments how lucky Poppy is to be a girl in a family full of boys. What if Poppy had been born a boy? That would be terrible, Aggie says. And, she adds, Poppy really dodged a bullet since her parents are so good at having boys. Ben points out that gender development is a fifty-fifty chance, and Aggie says that if Poppy's parents hadn't beat the fifty-fifty chance, then Aggie and Poppy couldn't be best friends. "It would be the worst thing ever," Aggie says, and Poppy agrees. It would definitely be bad, Poppy says.

Clearly, being born a boy is not "the worst thing ever," and it obviously does not mean that Aggie and Poppy can't be best friends, and Aggie's comment underscores how ridiculous this assumption is. Of course, this likely feeds into why Poppy continues to keep her secret. Poppy fears that Aggie won't be her friend if she knows she is transgender, and Aggie's comment implies Poppy is right.

PART II: ANNUS MIRABILIS

Penn has been thinking a lot about John Dryden lately. Dryden is the kind of poet students are forced to read in graduate school but never bother reading in real life. Dryden wrote a poem, "Annus Mirabilis," all about England's worst year, 1666, in which war, plague, and fire threatened to destroy it. Penn is convinced that Roo is having an "Annus Mirabilis." Roo failed a history project, refused to redo it, and forged Rosie's name on the failure notice.

In saying that Roo is having an "Annus Mirabilis," Penn means to say that Roo is having a terrible year. Annus Mirabilis is Latin for "remarkable year," and while it was originally meant to describe the year 1666, it has since come to describe any year in which things of great significance happen.

When Rosie and Penn meet with Roo's history teacher, they are shocked to finally see the project in question. Roo was assigned a project in which he was to make a video about a current event, and Roo made a video about LGBT people serving in the military. "[G]ays do not belong," is Roo's central message in the video, and it is full of naked Barbie dolls and action figures engaged in violence, rape, and despicable language, which Roo, at least, bleeped out of the video.

Prior to 1993, LGBTQ people were not permitted in the military. After 1993 came the era of "Don't ask, don't tell," in which LGBTQ people were allowed to serve in the military as long as they didn't openly admit to their gender and/or sexuality. It was until "Don't ask, don't tell" was repealed in 2011 that people from the LGBTQ community could openly serve in the military.

On the way home, Penn and Rosie can't believe that Roo is homophobic and transphobic living in their house. At home, they ask Roo about the project and if he really believes the things he said. Yes, Roo says. Rosie tells Roo that he lied to everyone about the project and forged her signature, and for that, he is grounded. Roo calls Penn and Rosie hypocrites—they lie all the time about Poppy, but he is punished for doing the exact same thing.

Roo's project is a reflection of the discrimination the LGBTQ community faces in American society. Roughly 20% of LGBTQ people have served in the military, which proportionately is twice the average of the general population. The LGBTQ community serves the country only to be hated and feared by many.

Later, Rosie calls Camry to vent about Roo, explaining that he's so mad about moving to Seattle that he's turned into a bigot. Camry says that Roo is likely feeling like Rosie and Penn chose Poppy over him, and Rosie insists she didn't. Camry knows that, she says, but it's like when Rosie's sister was sick. At the time, Rosie didn't get much attention, but her time came after, when Rosie needed it more. It is the same with Poppy and Roo. Poppy needed them before, and now, it's Roo's turn.

Camry's comment is a bit of foreshadowing that big changes are upcoming for Roo and that he is going to have a difficult navigating these changes. Camry's comment again illustrates that being part of a family is not always easy. There comes a time when some may have to take a backseat for others, but, as Camry points out, their time will come, too.

PART II: PREVENTATIVE MADNESS

Ben is secretly in love with Cayenne, but he doesn't tell anyone because loving the girl next door is terribly cliché. Plus, Ben is expected to keep secrets all the time. Roo figures it out anyway, and he can't figure out the attraction. Ben isn't surprised Roo doesn't understand, since Roo doesn't like anyone. Weeks later, Ben finds the courage to ask Cayenne to homecoming, and by their families' barbeque the summer before 11th grade, they have been together for a year.

Ben's secret love for Cayenne suggests that many people have secrets; however, Ben's secret feelings for Cayenne are not quite the same caliber as Poppy's secret. Frankel doesn't mean to imply that all secrets are a bad idea, just those of great significance. A teenage crush doesn't hold the same significance and Poppy's gender.

All through junior year, Ben folds a paper heart and paper butterfly each day. By senior year, Ben has 365 butterflies and 365 hearts, and on the day of the annual barbeque, he fills Cayenne's room with them. Cayenne is delighted to find her room covered in paper hearts and butterflies, and as they try to find the bed, the barbeque goes on outside.

While it isn't explicitly stated, Frankel implies that Ben and Cayenne's relationship is sexual, which is another secret Ben keeps. In this way, Frankel argues that families keep secrets from each other all the time, as in the case of a teenager having sex.

Outside, the party is in full swing. There is a keg of beer, and everyone is feeling pretty good. The younger kids run around playing, and Orion accidentally lets slip that Poppy "used to be a boy." Everyone stops and stares at each other, including Frank, Marginny, Rosie, Penn, and Poppy. Then, some more laughing kids run through, and Orion and his friends run off. Disaster is diverted, and everyone goes back to the party.

This is a very stressful moment for everyone involved, which underscores how easily transgender people are made to feel different and alienated. This also implies that Orion is incapable of keeping Poppy's secret and suggests that her gender probably shouldn't be a secret at all.

Later, Rosie is irritated about Orion's comment, but Penn tells her doesn't do any good to be mad now. Rosie isn't mad now, she's mad for the next time, she says. It is "preemptive madness," she explains. Orion apologizes and claims it just slipped out. Everyone looks to Ben, who is usually the voice of reason. "Secrets are heavy things," he says. Rosie tells Orion firmly that Poppy's gender is Poppy's business.

Rosie's "preemptive madness" underscores how unhealthy keeping Poppy's secret really is, since Rosie is spending time being angry over things that haven't even happened yet. Ben's comment suggests that Poppy's secret is too "heavy" to carry forever, which again suggests Poppy's gender perhaps shouldn't be a secret in the first place.

PART II: TRANSFORMATION

Rosie and Penn still keep in contact with Mr. Tongo, and they always use video chat instead of the phone so they can see each other as they talk. On one call, Mr. Tongo asks Rosie and Penn if they have started talking to Poppy about puberty and hormone blockers. Poppy is only nine, Rosie says, and they haven't even thought about hormone blockers since the talk with Frank and Marginny at Dueling Dinners. It is too early, Rosie says, for Poppy to take hormone blockers. Mr. Tongo agrees. It is too early to take hormone blockers, but it isn't too early to talk about hormone blockers. Puberty is difficult for kids like Poppy, he says, and the rate of suicide for such kids is over 40%.

The staggering rate of suicide for transgender teens that Mr. Tongo reports again underscores the extreme amount of stress, rejection, and discrimination the transgender community faces in American society. According to recent studies, up to one-third of transgender teens report having attempted suicide at least once. Mr. Tongo clearly thinks it is never too early to begin preparing Poppy for what lies ahead as her body continues to grow and mature.

PART II: RED ROO RISING

When Rosie arrives at work, she is nearly 15 minutes late for the Monday morning meeting. Howie is irritated when she walks. He welcomes her and tells her they are all "honored" to have her there. Howie tells Rosie that they all have lives and families, but she can't keep making them suffer because she is "incapable" of handling her own. Instead of fighting with him, Rose agrees to take the extra work Howie hands her way. "Attagirl," Howie says. "I'm not a girl," Rosie answers.

Howie is completely insulting and sexist. He is sarcastic, telling Rosie they are "honored" that she showed up, and he implies that she is "incapable" of handling her family without knowing anything about her family. His final comment, "Attagirl," is demeaning and strips Rosie of her womanhood, which she has no problem taking back. Rosie is a woman, not a girl, and she tells Howie as much.

Later in the breakroom, James admits to Rosie that he was apprehensive about hiring her. Five is a lot of kids, he says. Rosie is shocked. You can't hire people based on how many children they have, she points out. As they are talking, Howie comes in and says he must talk with Rosie. Just as he opens his mouth to speak, Rosie's phone rings. It is Roo's school, and he has been suspended for fighting. Rosie tells the receptionist to reschedule her patients and runs out the door.

Obviously, the reader can infer that running out of work on Howie will not be good for Rosie's job, which already appears to be on the line. James implies that Rosie can't be a good doctor because she needs to take of her kids. Penn takes care of their kids, but James automatically assumes that it is Rosie's responsibility because she is a woman.

When Rosie picks up Roo, he is bleeding from a cut on his head, and Rosie knows he will need stitches. She takes him to her office, where she learns that Roo has been fighting with a kid named Derek McGuiness for over a year. Derek called Roo—and several other kids—"gay and faggot and fucking fairy," and Roo lost his temper. Roo knows Rosie and Penn will think he beat up Derek because he is homophobic, but he actually did it because Derek is homophobic. Rosie is confused and brings up the LGBTQ video in history class. Yes, Roo says, he intended to show the problems in the military and the discrimination against LGBT people, not to perpetuate it.

Roo's fights with Derek McGuiness underscore Roo's love for Poppy. Roo won't allow anyone to say anything bad about Poppy, even indirectly. Again, Derek's incredibly offensive language underscores the abuse LGBTQ people frequently endure in American society. Through Roo's video, Frankel underscores how difficult it can be to advocate for others. Like all conversations about important subjects, they aren't easy, and they will never be perfect. Misunderstanding will happen, but the conversation must continue.

Roo claims it is really Rosie and Penn who are homophobic and transphobic because they keep Poppy's identity a secret. No one else cares that Poppy is transgender, except for Rosie and Penn. Rosie tells Roo he must stop the fighting if he ever hopes to go to college, and, she says, Roo is definitely going to college. After stitching up Roo and letting him go, Rosie and Penn don't see that they have missed the entire point of Roo's warning.

Here, Roo suggests that keeping Poppy's gender a secret implies it is something she should be ashamed of and that it isn't okay to be transgender. Keeping Poppy's secret doesn't keep her safe, it perpetuates hate and misunderstanding.

PART II: FIRE

Ben and Cayenne are at the beach celebrating the beginning of their senior year. It is cold, but that is okay, since Ben can build a romantic fire. In front of the fire and under a blanket, Cayenne asks Ben how much he loves her. Lots, he answers, but Cayenne wants him to prove it by telling her a secret. Ben doesn't see what telling secrets will prove, but Cayenne says it will prove that he loves her and trusts her with his secrets. For instance, Cayenne's dad, Frank, wears "tighty-whities," and Aggie wet the bed until just last year.

Again, Frankel implies that everyone keeps secrets to some extent, as is the case with Frank's underwear and Aggie's bedwetting; however, such inconsequential secrets are hardly on par with the secret of Poppy's gender, which has implications that reach far beyond Poppy, her friends, and her family. Poppy's secret affects all transgender people, since Frankel implies keeping such secrets perpetuates hate.

Ben tells Cayenne that he doesn't have any secrets, but she doesn't believe him. Ben promises that he loves her, but he can't tell her his secrets. Cayenne says that this shows that he *does* have secrets, and she wants to know them. Ben again says that he can't tell her, and then they kiss under the blanket. Ben is just a teenager, but he is smart enough to know that secrets—big ones with consequences—shouldn't be kept from loved ones.

Again, Ben seems to be the voice of reason. He knows that keeping Poppy's gender a secret is not a good idea and that it has consequences in the form of increased hate and discrimination against the transgender community. Furthermore, Ben suggests that loved ones deserve more respect than secrecy implies; they should instead be trusted with such important secrets.

PART II: HEDGE ENEMIES

One day, Poppy comes home and asks Penn what "the hedge enemy" is. Penn is confused, so Poppy explains. She said at school that she wanted to be a baseball announcer, and one of the boys said she couldn't do that because she is a girl. Then Poppy's teacher said she couldn't be a baseball announcer because of "the hedge enemy." Penn immediately understands. "Hegemony," he says. Hegemony is when one group of people has power over another. Like men, Penn says, who have historically had power over women.

Poppy's question about the "hedge enemy" underscores the power discrepancies held in check because of hegemony. Hegemony, which is like the status quo, keeps heterosexual men superior to women and LGBTQ people in American. It establishes the dominant or default setting for American society and everyone else falls in line behind it. Women are capable of being baseball announcers, but whether or not they will ever be hired is another story.

That night, Poppy talks with Penn and Rosie. She doesn't know what she should be when she grows up—if she should be a girl or a boy. Rosie tells Poppy she can be whatever she wants, but Poppy says being a girl is hard because of hegemony. Rosie points out that she makes more money than Penn, but Poppy says that is only because Rosie works a "boy job." Rosie tells Poppy that she can't chose her gender identity based on money, and she shouldn't remain a girl if she wants to be, Rosie hesitates, "or could be a boy," she finishes.

Poppy's belief that Rosie's job as a doctor is a "boy job" is a direct reflection of the hegemony that Poppy speaks of here. Women aren't considered as capable as men; thus, important jobs like being a physician are automatically "boy jobs." Rosie hesitates because she implies that Poppy will be better off if she just lives as a boy. Poppy's concerns over hegemony are legitimate, and Rosie recognizes this.

Penn tells Poppy that if she wants to be a baseball announcer, she can be, but Poppy says she doesn't want to be a baseball announcer. She wants to be an ichthyologist and study fish, but the other kids made fun of the word because it sounds like "icky," so Poppy just said she wanted to be an announcer. Fish are amazing, she says, and some of them are even transgender. There are even Hamlet fish, Poppy says, that are hermaphrodites. "Everyone's both," Poppy says, "Isn't that amazing?"

Poppy's partiality for the Hamlet fish that are both male and female again suggests that gender cannot be narrowly defined as an either/or choice. The fish are both, and Poppy, to some extent, identifies as both, too. For Poppy it is not a case of male or *female; it is a case of male* and *female.*

Later, when Penn and Rosie are alone, Penn points out that Rosie said Poppy shouldn't be a girl if she "could be a boy." Rosie knows what she said, and she can't help but think it would be easier for Poppy if she had just stayed Claude—or if she went back to Claude. Penn can't believe it. Rosie explains (first pointing out that Poppy would make more money as Claude) that hormone blockers and other medications are technically safe, in that they don't have many undesirable side effects, but long-term studies just aren't available yet. At the end of the day, hormone blockers mean stopping the body's natural progressions and inclinations, and no one knows what that means in the long run.

Rosie's point is certainly valid. Hormone blockers are safe and have been used for years, but not in quite the same way that they are used for transgender people. Usually, hormone blockers are used to block one or two excessive hormones, but in Poppy's case, the medication will block all her secondary sex hormones. As a doctor, Rosie is concerned about the long-term implications of permanently shutting down one of the body's natural processes.

Penn says he understands, but he still doesn't want Poppy to grow up hating her body. Poppy will have to get used to hating her body, Rosie says, if she plans on becoming a woman. "All women," Rosie says, hate how they look, which is another reason it is easier to be a boy. Even going back now will be difficult for Poppy, Rosie says. Poppy doesn't even remember Claude, and what is normal to her is Poppy—with a penis. Poppy's penis doesn't imply manliness to Poppy, Rosie says, and often it is testosterone that makes a boy feel manly. If Poppy truly is a boy, she might not know until puberty, and she might never know if they block her hormones.

Rosie's comment that "all women" hate how they look again underscores America's sexist society. Women are expected to fulfill impossible beauty ideals, and when they can't, they end up hating their bodies. Furthermore, Rosie's concerns illustrate how difficult it can be making decisions for a minor transgender child. There are many considerations, and any number of them can end in disaster. Poppy is dependent on her parents to make the right decision for her, and there is a lot of information to be had.

Deciding what is best for Poppy doesn't involve "prognosis," Rosie says, it involves "prognostication," in which case, Rosie is out. "Then that's *my* skill set," Penn says. It is about "fairy tales," he says, "not hospitals." Rosie tells Penn that living in a fairy tale would certainly be nice, but that isn't reality. Penn thinks it is.

Penn is a writer, and if anyone can change society, Penn implies, it is a writer. Penn's comment underscores the power of storytelling, which has the ability to influence others and get them to see the world in a different way through vicarious experiences.

PART II: WHO KNOWS?

Rosie is in with a patient when Poppy calls. Rosie steps out to take the call, but Poppy is silent on the other end. Rosie is instantly scared something is majorly wrong, and then Poppy speaks. "Mom. They know," she says, "Everyone knows." Rosie hangs up and runs home.

This chapter is short and comes out of the blue, which is how carefully kept secrets such as Poppy's gender identity usually come out, Frankel implies.

PART II: PARENTING IN THE DARK

At school, Marnie Alison and Jake Irving approach Poppy and ask her if she is a boy. "We heard," Jake says to Poppy, "you have a giant dick." Poppy is shocked and doesn't know what to say. She runs off, but Aggie brings it up at lunch. Everyone is talking about Poppy being a boy, and someone even asked Aggie if it was true. Kim asks if she told them it wasn't, but Aggie said only that it is "none of [their] business." Natalie can't believe it. She should have just told them the truth, that Poppy is a girl, and then everyone will leave them alone.

Aggie's response that Poppy's gender is no one's business suggests that perhaps Aggie knows, or at least suspects, Poppy's secret. The vile language Jake Irving uses again illustrates the extreme hate and abuse the LGBTQ community faces. Poppy is only 10 years old, but that doesn't save her from having to endure such hateful and offensive language.

A boy slides under Poppy's seat in the cafeteria and starts screaming: "I see it! I see her thingy!" Poppy kicks him, but she is fairly certain he hasn't seen anything—her tights are too thick and she had her legs crossed. Later in gym, one of the girls says Poppy should line up with the boys, and another girl in sex education says she isn't comfortable with Poppy in class. In math class, when Poppy's teacher starts talking about "long division," another student pipes up and makes a joke about Poppy in front of the whole class. Poppy runs out of class and immediately calls Rosie.

Poppy is sexually harassed, insulted, and alienated by her peers simply because she is different. It is precisely this type of cruel bullying, Frankel thus implies, that leads to the high rate of transgender teen suicide that Mr. Tongo mentions earlier. Frankel also implies that had Poppy herself been able to control the way in which her gender was revealed, it likely would have been less traumatic. Frankel doesn't imply that Poppy wouldn't be harassed that way, but at least the abuse wouldn't be condensed into one traumatic day and come out of the blue like it is here.

Later that night, as Penn and Rosie try to figure out how Poppy's secret got out, Ben walks into their room. He was the one who told Poppy's secret, Ben says. He told Cayenne over the summer, he confesses, but he doesn't confess that he told her to make her love him or that they had sex after. Just as Penn is about to say that perhaps Poppy's secret can't be kept, Roo comes in and says he was the one to tell Poppy's secret. He told Derek McGuinness once while he was beating him up. Derek said something awful about transgender people, and Roo said: "That's. My. Sister. You're. Talking. About. Asshole," as he beat him up.

No one seems to be able to keep Poppy's secret, which again suggests that Poppy's gender shouldn't be a secret in the first place. Again, Frankel doesn't mean to imply all secrets are damaging, as Ben keeps some of his secrets to himself, but the big secrets, Ben believes, must be shared. Roo's slip of Poppy's secret again underscores how much Roo loves her. Roo won't let anyone say anything bad about Poppy, even indirectly.

Then, Rigel and Orion come in. They told Poppy's secret, they say, after Orion let it slip at Frank and Marginny's barbeque. A kid overheard Orion, and he told Orion and Rigel that he was "just like Poppy," so they told him in case he needed someone understanding to talk to. After hearing each of the boys' stories, Penn and Rosie are no longer surprised that Poppy's secret is out. The only one who doesn't come into Penn and Rosie's room that night is Poppy.

Rigel and Orion's betrayal of Poppy's secret, the book suggests, is another prime reason why Poppy's gender shouldn't be a secret. If more people know about Poppy, she would likely learn that there are a lot of people like her. Rigel and Orion are clearly advocates of the transgender community. They are committed to supporting Poppy in large part because she is their sister, but it is clear they want to be supportive in a broader sense as well.

PART II: I'M NOBODY! WHO ARE YOU?

The next day, Penn and Rosie go into Poppy's room and are shocked to find her there as Claude. She is dressed in a pair sweatpants and Orion's jersey, and she has shaved her head bald. Poppy begins to cry and refuses to ever go to school again.

Poppy is clearly traumatized by her experience at school. Shaving her head is extreme, as is reverting back to Claude. Poppy is giving up and resigning herself to look the way society says she should.

Poppy stays locked in her room for three days, and then there is a knock on the door. "Dude. It's me," Ben says. "Let me in." Poppy asks why Ben called her "Dude," and Ben says because that is what guys say to each other. "How's it hangin?" Ben asks. How is what hanging, Poppy asks. Ben explains it is a saying that guys use with each other, and Poppy asks why they don't ask "How are you?" Ben laughs. Talking like that will get a guy beat up, as will being too smart, too stupid, too cool, or too rich. "If you're a guy," Ben says, "someone's going to beat you up."

Ben's talk with Poppy is awkward, especially the "Dude" part, because that is not who Poppy is, and referring to her in such a masculine way feels fundamentally wrong to her, and to Ben. Ben's comment that all guys get beat up suggests it is difficult for everyone *to find where they fit in the world, not just transgender people, which implies people have more in common than it may appear.*

Poppy asks why Ben is telling her all this, and Ben says he is just trying to help her "be a boy," but Poppy doesn't believe him. Okay, Ben says, he has two points to make. His first point is that fitting in and being normal doesn't happen for anyone. Ben has "matching genitalia," he says, and he still doesn't fit in. Ben's second point, he says, is that Poppy is not a boy. Poppy says she is, but Ben stops her. He says she looks like someone who is going to seriously regret their hair choices, but she doesn't look like a boy. Poppy says that she can't be Poppy, and she can't be Claude either. She isn't anyone, Poppy says. Ben reminds her that everyone is somebody, but Poppy disagrees. "I'm nobody," Poppy says. "I'm nobody too," Ben says.

Again, Ben points out to Poppy that lots of people don't fit in. As the smart kid that skipped the sixth grade, Ben is likely very used to not fitting in. Even Roo, who plays the flute and football doesn't fit in in quite the way he is expected to. Ben's talk with Poppy reflects his support of her as his sister, but his words also let her know that she is not the only one who is suffering. They are all suffering to some extent, and even Ben admits that he is "nobody, too." For Poppy, however, since she isn't accepted for who she is, she has no one else to be.

When Aggie comes to Poppy's window, she doesn't bother getting up, and she doesn't get up when Aggie makes a crack about her hair. Aggie says Poppy lied to her, but Poppy doesn't really see it that way. "Well," Aggie says, starting to leave, "have a nice life I guess." Poppy says Aggie hates her because she has a penis, but Aggie says she hates her because she didn't tell her that she has a penis. Poppy says she was afraid Aggie wouldn't like her if she knew, and Aggie says that is exactly why she hates her.

Aggie implies that Poppy didn't trust her enough and that is why she hates her; however, Aggie said earlier on in their friendship that if Poppy had been born a boy, then they wouldn't be able to be best friends and princesses. Aggie told Poppy long ago what would happen if she was a boy, and Poppy had no reason to believe it would be otherwise. In this case, at least, Poppy's secret seems a bit more justified.

PART III: VAGINA SHOPPING

Even though Poppy is 10 and is self-sufficient, Rosie stays home from work during the three days Poppy is locked in her room. On the third day, James calls and says Rosie has to come in tomorrow. The next day, Rosie goes into the office, and Howie meets her at the door. Howie says that he realizes Rosie has something going on at home, and he doesn't want to "bust her balls," but she isn't keeping up her obligations at the office. Rosie reminds him that she keeps 35 appointment hours weekly and takes emergency and on-call hours the same as everyone else. She has missed one week in four years, and suddenly she is a problem.

Rosie knows that staying home with Poppy may get her fired, but she does it anyway, which again highlights how important family is to Rosie. The fact that Rosie feels like she has to choose between her family and job is more evidence of America's sexist society, as is Howie's comment that he doesn't mean to "bust [Rosie's] balls."

Howie asks why Penn can't deal with whatever is going on at home. "He doesn't even work," Howie adds. Rosie again says that she does the same work as everyone else, but Howie reminds her that she refuses to do any work to market the practice, and she won't go to Thailand. The extra things are what it takes to be a doctor in his practice, Howie says, and if Rosie isn't up to that, she will have to be a doctor somewhere else.

Howie is completely insulting and inappropriate. How Penn and Rosie deal with their family is none of Howie's business, nor is Penn's career. Again, Howie holds Rosie to an impossible standard so she must work harder than everyone else, and he basically gives her an ultimatum: go to Thailand or be fired.

Rosie calls Mr. Tongo at lunch and tells him that everyone knows about Poppy. He asks how Poppy is taking it, and Rosie tells him it isn't good. Poppy has shaved her head, and she refuses to leave her room, and, Rosie adds, she has turned back into Claude. "Perfecto," Mr. Tongo says. Rosie isn't so sure she understands. He explains that "coming out" is a "queer right [sic] of passage," but, Rosie says, Poppy isn't queer. Yes, Mr. Tongo says, she is. The problem is that Penn and Rosie have been so understanding and accepting, they deprived Poppy of her queerness. But she *is* queer, Mr. Tongo says, and queer *is* different, that is why they call it queer.

Rosie doesn't seem to want to admit that Poppy is queer, and up to this point Rosie has never spoken the word "transgender." Rosie tells herself that she is okay with Poppy's gender, and deep down she probably is; however; Frankel implies that such a change will always be a difficult adjustment, even for those who are open-minded. Frankel also implies that the transition itself will always be difficult. No matter how much Rosie tries to shelter Poppy, she can't take away the pain involved with coming out.

There is nothing Penn and Rosie can do for Poppy, Mr. Tongo says, except let her suffer. Step one, he says, is coming out, and step two is being rejected by a lot of people, and it is never fun. Step three is the best, Mr. Tongo says, because step three is for "moving on." For some people, moving on can take their entire life, so Poppy is lucky to have a jump start.

Again, many LGBTQ people must deal with being rejected by society, but many are also rejected by their own families. Mr. Tongo, however, implies that Poppy has the worst of it behind her—the initial coming out—and now she can work on "moving on."

That night when Rosie gets home, Penn is in the bedroom looking at pictures of vaginas on his laptop. He has been doing research on sex reassignment surgery, and the advancements are incredible. Poppy can be given a functional vagina—one that works just like Rosie's, he says—but Rosie stops him. Poppy is 10n, and has recently turned back into Claude, and she is clearly too young to start talking sex reassignment surgery. Penn knows that Poppy is still too young, but, according to his research, the earlier the surgery is performed, the better.

Penn talks to Rosie like she doesn't know all about sex reassignment surgery. Rosie is a doctor, yet people are constantly telling her how the human body works, which again gestures to the sexist nature of American society. Still, Penn isn't wrong, and Rosie knows this—surgical outcomes are better in younger people, as are mental health outcomes. The earlier sex reassignment surgery is performed the less gender dysphoria and discrimination one faces.

Rosie used to be grateful that Poppy has gender dysphoria and not cancer, or heart failure, or any number of fatal childhood illnesses, but she knows now that Poppy's gender dysphoria is more than a medical issue. It is a "cultural issue," Rosie says, "It's a social issue and an emotional issue and a family dynamic issue and a community issue." They might need to intervene medically so Poppy doesn't grow facial hair, but the world also needs to learn to accept a "guy in a dress." But, Penn points out, that won't happen. Then, Rosie says, they all have to learn how to live in a world that doesn't accept Poppy or Claude. That night, Rosie can't sleep. She sends a text message to Howie and tells him she will go to Thailand, if Poppy can go with her.

Rosie's comment underscores that Poppy's gender dysphoria won't magic disappear until society changes and accepts people who are different. Even with hormones and surgery, Poppy will likely still feel out of place in some way. Poppy's well-being depends on everyone, which, Frankel points out, is difficult because the world is unlikely to radically change anytime soon. Rosie is right in thinking that Poppy isn't sick, but Poppy's life will still be difficult. Rosie's decision to go to Thailand (and take Poppy) comes right after Penn brings up sex reassignment surgery, which suggest that Rosie, to some extent, is trying to avoid facing this possibility.

PART III: EXIT ROWS

Rosie packs a new wardrobe for Poppy, which she would have had to do anyway, since dresses aren't allowed at the clinic. She asks Poppy if there is anything special she wants to bring to Thailand, but she says there isn't. Rosie asks if she should call her Claude or Poppy. Rosie will accept her as either a son or a daughter, but Poppy has to tell her what that is. He says he is Claude. He has to be Claude, he says, it is his "punishment" for lying and trying to be something he isn't.

Presumably, Poppy implies that Claude is her punishment for keeping her gender a secret, but this can be interpreted in a different way. Living as Claude is *a lie, so being miserable is Poppy's punishment. As most things Poppy does are, her words here are ambiguous.*

Claude is more than willing to go to Thailand if it means he doesn't have to go back to school, but Penn thinks Rosie is just trying to avoid him and their recent fight about vaginas. Rosie says she has to go to appease Howie, but Penn doubts she would ever lose her job. Rosie isn't so sure. Plus, she says, the Thai clinic serves Burmese refugees, and it *is* important work. Sure, Penn says, but he still thinks Rosie needs "a break" from him. Yes, she agrees, she needs a break from him.

Penn may not want to believe it, but Rosie will very likely be fired if she doesn't go to Thailand, which again points to the thinly veiled discrimination she faces as a woman in a male-dominated field. The Burmese refugees Rosie talks about refers to the 25,000 Myanmar (Burmese) nationals of Rohingya ethnicity who were forcibly removed from Myanmar (Burma) in 2015 and sent by boat to surrounding countries, like Thailand and Indonesia.

Rosie calls Camry at the airport and tells her that she and Claude are going to Thailand. After Camry expresses concern over diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, she asks what Penn will do without them. Rosie is sure he will be fine. After all, he is just writing instead of living their life. "Maybe," Camry says, "he's doing both." Impossible, Rose says. The two things are "irreconcilable," and Penn is just hoping for a "fairytale ending." Rosie knows that Penn isn't a realist, but that doesn't mean reality doesn't exist for everyone else.

Camry seems to believe that Penn can *address their problems though writing, which again underscores the power of storytelling to persuade others and change the world. Rosie is a scientific woman, and she is failing to see the world the way Penn does. Stories and reality are not "irreconcilable," Penn and Camry imply, which again illustrates that many things are not either/or but a bit of both.*

PART III: AWAY

When Rosie and Claude arrive in Bangkok, they are shocked at the city around them. There are stray animals everywhere, and chickens in cages line the streets. But the thing that is most surprising to Claude is that there are women just like him—like Poppy—all over the place. They walk the streets and work as vendors, and they are beautiful in their in their dresses, long hair, and meticulous makeup. It is not difficult to see that the women are different, Claude notices, but no one pays them any attention.

Bangkok is the first time Claude sees himself reflected in society. Seeing himself represented in society lets Clade know that he is not alone, and that in some places, transgender women (and men) are completely accepted. This gives Claude hope, which is something he badly needs at this point.

PART III: AID AMBIGUOUS

Rosie and Claude ride bikes from their guesthouse to the clinic, where a mechanic named K meets them to show them around. Rosie is surprised that K is a woman and what passes for the welcoming committee. K introduces them to Ralph, the clinic's truck and ambulance. It is how Rosie will get back and forth to the clinic and move supplies—if Ralph starts, that is. As K shows Rosie around, she can't believe her eyes. The buildings are ramshackle and falling down, and there are patients waiting everywhere. There is little medical equipment, and the floors and walls are covered in dirt, but the floor is surprisingly clean.

Rosie is surprised that K is a mechanic and a woman because mechanics are stereotypically men. Sexist assumptions are that cars are too complicated for women and should be left for men. Thailand is obviously a poor country, and there is likely even less money for Burmese refugees. People in Thailand have very, very little, which puts Rosie's own problems and worries into perspective.

In what is considered the emergency room, there are no beds or gurneys. The patients are on wooden pallets and on the floor, and K leads Rosie to a pregnant woman. This is Rosie's first patient, K says, who also turns out to be the midwife. K says the woman has a C-section scheduled for next month, but she won't make it. She had scarlet fever as a child, and she is going into labor now, at 32 weeks. Rosie searches her brain for what she knows about heart failure caused by rheumatic fever, and it is clear that the woman's pregnancy has been too much for her weakened heart.

K obviously fills many roles at the clinic, which mirrors the hybridity that is present for most of the book. If left untreated, scarlet fever in childhood can turn into rheumatic fever, a strep infection that can settle into the heart valves and cause heart failure. Pregnancy has clearly been hard on Rosie's patient's heart, and she is going into premature labor because of it.

Rosie delivers the baby, but the woman's heart rate is dangerously high. Rosie asks K for some cardiac drugs or even some morphine, but they don't have any. Rosie asks what she is supposed to do then, and K says they just move on. They "witness" and next time, they try to do better. "The next patient?" Rosie asks. No, K says, the "next life."

Buddhists believe in rebirth and cyclical living. K knows that there is nothing to be done in this lifetime to fix the Burmese refugee crisis, but she is thinking about the next life and the one after that. Improvement is a process, just as it is for Poppy. All of society won't magically accept people who different in this lifetime, but with enough people collectively trying to do better, there is hope for acceptance.

PART III: NOVICE

As Rosie is led away to the clinic, Claude is led away to the school, or what is supposed to be the school. A woman sits Claude down and tells him to teach, and then she sends in children. The children immediately think Claude is a monk because his head is shaved, but he tells them he is definitely not a monk. He just shaved his head. One of the children asks him if he did it to hide, and Claude says he did it because he was angry. As a way of breaking the ice, Claude asks the children what they want to be when they grow up, but the children automatically assume that Claude is asking them what they want to be in their "next life."

Again, the children are Buddhists and believe in rebirth. They think of the future in terms of generations and lifetimes, not something that is reached when they grow up. This also reflects how dire the children's situation is. They know they likely won't have many chances in this life and are already thinking about the next one. Monks are traditionally bald, which is why the children think Claude is a monk.

Claude stays at the school all day, and then he stays behind to sweep and clean. Afterward, Claude goes back to the guesthouse and calls Penn. He tells Penn that he was forced to be a teacher and that the children think he is a monk. He asks Penn if monks can be girls, but Penn isn't sure. Claude thinks the children are a good "blind" test. If they think he is a girl, then he is a girl; but if they think he is a boy, then he is a boy. Penn tells Claude not to think too much about it. The children have probably never seen a white person before, whether Claude is a boy or girl probably never crossed their minds. Penn asks Claude what he sees when he looks at himself. Does he see a boy or a girl? "I see nothing," Claude says.

Again, Claude is clearly suffering because of his struggles with gender dysphoria, since he sees "nothing" when he looks in the mirror. Monks can be either men or women; although in Thailand, female monks must be brought in by another female monk to be accepted. Still, the children thinking Claude is a monk does not imply definitively either boy or girl. As most things about Poppy and Claude, the monk statement, too, is ambiguous and is neither male nor female but a combination of both.


PART III: BONESETTERS

Plenty of "unforeseen things" are bothering Rosie, too. She is told that Claude is doing great at the school, but she can't see this, so she worries about it. She asks Claude if he hates it in Thailand, and he says he hates it everywhere. She asks if he wants to go home, but he, surprisingly, says no. They can't go home, Claude says, and this, to Rosie, is also "unforeseen." Luckily, dealing with the unforeseen is one of Rosie's specialties. She can make amazing dinners with few ingredients, and she can doctor with hardly any supplies.

Rosie is bothered by "unforeseen things" just as Claude is, since Claude can't see himself when he looks in the mirror. Claude doesn't want to go home, which suggests he is learning something about himself in Thailand and doesn't want to leave until he sees it through. Rosie's ability to be so effective with little resources again underscores her strengths and capabilities.

Rosie makes an inhaler out of a plastic bottle, and she prescribes drugs in ways that she never even considered before. It is two weeks before Rosie's first broken bone, which is surprising, since broken bones are common everywhere. The patient is pregnant, and she fell off a water buffalo, breaking her ankle. Rosie looks to K, who is also her nurse, as well as her social worker, physical therapist, and the clinic's security officer. Rosie asks if they have access to X-ray, but K says no. Before long, K moves on to the next patient, leaving Rosie alone with the woman and her husband, neither of whom speak English.

Again, K speaks to the hybridity that is present throughout most of the novel. K is not merely one thing, or two; K is a jack of all trades of sorts at the clinic and must fill multiple roles to keep the place running. K moves on, it seems, because there is little they will be able to do for the woman without an X-ray, other than stabilize the break.

Broken bones have been dealt with for centuries, Rosie knows, but she also knows that blacksmiths and barbers often set broken bones throughout history because there is little anyone can do without technology. Since doctors couldn't do much, they considered broken bones beneath them, passing the work to other services. Rosie also knows that the people in Thailand are great at substituting what they don't even know they are missing. They use honey like antibiotic ointment, and they kill intestinal worms with dried papaya seeds. Rosie is good at making something from nothing and dealing with the unforeseen, so she is up for the challenge.

Like Claude and Rosie's troubles, the woman's broken bone is an "unforeseen" problem. Rosie doesn't have any medical technology, and she might as well just be a blacksmith or a barber. The broken ankle is a metaphor for the troubles Rosie faces with Poppy. Rosie can't see the problem, but she still has to figure out a way for Claude to be happy again.


Rosie also knows that helping Claude is way beyond honey or papaya seeds. But there must be some choice other than surgery and side effects or a life full of misery and alienation. Rosie must find way to help Claude and Poppy find their place in the world, and while she doesn't yet know what that is, she is getting a lot of practice dealing with the unforeseen.

Rosie doesn't know what the future holds, but she seems certain that Poppy, not just Claude, is part of that future. Rosie knows that Poppy's gender identity is an important part of who Claude—or Poppy—is.

PART III: ORAL TRADITION

One day, the woman at the school tells Claude to teach the children to speak English. Claude doesn't know how to do that, but the woman says that since Claude speaks English, it shouldn't be hard. "You learn from listen, talk, read," the woman says. "They same." Claude stands staring at the children, and one boy demands that Claude tell them a story. Claude knows one story, he says, but it is very long. At a loss for what to do, Claude tells the students the stories of Grumwald. From then on, Claude and the students trade stories—he tells them about Grumwald, and they tell him Thai and Burmese fairytales.

Claude's use of the Grumwald stories to teach the kids to speak English again reflects the importance of storytelling in Claude's life. Claude grew up listening to Grumwald stories, and Grumwald is, in many ways, a reflection of Claude himself. This passage also reflects the power of storytelling to bring people together. Claude and the kids bond over their stories, and Claude is able to share a piece of himself by telling the stories.

Penn always calls in the morning, and the next day, Claude tells him about the school and the stories. There is even Cinderella in Thailand, Claude says, only the story is different. "Of course," Penn says. "That's how fairytales work." They are "retold and reimagined," that is the "oral tradition," and it is what gives stories their magic. Stories are endless, Penn says, and they change over time. "Like me," Claude says. Yes, Penn confirms. Things change, he continues, but not the love Penn and Rosie have for Claude. Penn apologizes for keeping Claude a secret. Someone so wonderful should never be kept a secret, he says.

Penn implies that people are brought together to share their stories within the oral tradition, which is the magic, as it allows people to realize that they really aren't so different from others. Thailand, for example seems very different, but they still have the same fairytales. The stories change over time, just as Claude changed to Poppy and back again. Penn is finally realizing what a mistake it was to keep Claude's gender a secret, which is one of Frankel's primary arguments.

Penn has been thinking about fairytales a lot lately, too, he says. He likes fairytales because the magic is quick and painless. Cinderella is turned into a princess with the wave of a wand, which makes for an amazing story, but it doesn't work that way in real life. Even if Penn could wave a magic wand over Claude and make him Poppy, he doesn't want to, because he doesn't want to erase Claude's early life—his story. The next day, Claude knows that Penn is right. He hasn't been telling stories all these years, he has been "perfecting his world." If you write your own story, Claude know knows, then you can control the ending, and you can be anyone you want to be.

Claude is finally taking control of his own story. Just as Penn wants him to see, if Claude writes his own story, he can be who he wants to be and who he is (Poppy) not who society assumes he is (Claude). This control of Claude's story is what is lacking in keeping Claude's gender a secret. If Claude's gender is a secret, he has no control over how and when it comes out. If Claude is open about being transgender, he has a better chance of avoiding disasters like the one at school.

PART III: UNDER PANTS

Every night after the clinic closes, Rosie and K sit in the cafeteria together in plastic chairs. Rosie is always anxious to get back to the guesthouse and check on Claude and talk to Penn, but still, she stays. Rosie knows that K has her own kids and husband to get home to, too, but K sits as well. Sometimes they talk, and sometimes they don't. At first, it is just normal stuff—Rosie tells K about Penn and the kids and her job in family medicine and the emergency room before that, and K tells Rosie that she is a border medic with four kids (2 girls, 2 boys) and a husband who is also a Burmese soldier—but their talks soon turn more personal.

Rosie and K aren't that different. Both women have husbands and rather large families, and they are both in the medical field. They also both leave their families to help take care of the Burmese people, who are likely minority Muslims escaping genocide. The Myanmar (Burmese) government does not recognize Rohingya (ethnic Muslims) as citizens. As such Burmese Muslims are often considered "stateless" and end up in refugee clinics like the one in Thailand.

One night, Rosie asks K about her kids. K asks if Rosie means to ask how K got her children, since K is "like Claude." Yes, Rosie says, but how does she K know about Claude? K says she just knows. She asks who Claude is at home, and Rosie says he is Poppy. K says Poppy is a pretty name, and she tells Rosie that she isn't officially married to her husband, but it is official to them. They always accepted that they would be childless, but the war created many children without parents. Now, there are more children than anyone can take.

K is clearly a transgender woman; however, this is the first time Rosie is mentioning it. K's gender hasn't been important, other than Rosie's surprise that K is both a woman and a mechanic. K senses that Claude is transgender, too, which seems like a better "blind test" than the one Claude set up with the school children and his resemblance to a monk.

Rosie tells K that she is amazing. She leaves her home and her family to work in this clinic and try to save the people, all while dealing with "the stigma of being…" Rosie isn't sure what to call it. "*Kathoey*," K says, it is *Kathoey* in Thailand, and it is one of the reasons she is known as "K." But there is no stigma associated with *Kathoey* in Thailand, K says. There are lots of *Kathoey* in Thailand, and no one cares. "We all Buddhist," K says, "Is karma. Is life. Is just another way to be."

Kathoey *is Hindi for "ladyboy," and it is what transgender women are called in Thailand. The term "ladyboy," a hybrid word meaning both man and woman, also suggests that gender, for some, is not an either/or choice, but one that is a combination of both. The Thai acceptance of* Kathoey *proves acceptance, in time, is possible. This acceptance, K implies, is rooted in Buddhism, which recognizes many different ways of living and being.*

Rosie is surprised there isn't any stigma associated with being transgender in Thailand, and then she cautiously asks K what is "under [her] pants." K smiles. Like Ralph, she has all her "original parts." K grew up with a *Kathoey* cousin, and there were *Kathoey* students at school, so no one ever cared what was in her pants. "Everyone cares what's under Claude's pants," Rosie says, and Poppy's. K asks her why she tried to keep it a secret. Rosie admits she didn't know any better. She didn't learn until it was too late. Yes, K says, but she knows now and can fix it.

Through K, Frankel more directly implies that keeping Claude's secret was the wrong thing to do. Here, K says she has her "original parts," which means that, like Poppy, she is a woman with a penis. For K and others in Thailand, seeing gender in such a way is not odd or strange, so no one pays K any attention. This again proves that with enough time and understanding, acceptance is possible.

Rosie doesn't know how to fix it, and K tells her to take the "middle way." That doesn't exist in America, she says. Claude has to be male or female. No, K says, they have to find the "middle way" of living with what is difficult and with people who don't accept Claude. It all comes down to change, K says. All life changes; it is never over. People "learn over lifetimes," and they must find the "middle way" in this life and the next. "That is the story," K says, "Learn mistake and fix and tell. Not-knowing to knowing. Even the Buddha. You see?"

The "middle way," according to K, is learning to accept the struggles that come alone with being transgender, and, perhaps more importantly, Frankel argues that Claude will have to learn to live in a world that likely won't be changing to accept him anytime soon. All Claude can do in the meantime is keep educating people and keep trying to fix what is wrong with society. The irony of this, of course, is that it falls on Claude to "learn mistake and fix and tell," even though the problem isn't Claude's fault, which again reflects the anti-transgender sentiments of society.

PART III: THE COLOR OF MONDAY

There are **Buddha statues** everywhere in Thailand. There are seven just on Claude's bike ride from the guesthouse to the clinic, and in town there are even more. One day, Rosie and Claude have to go into the city of Chiang Mai for supplies, but Chiang Mai is nothing like Bangkok. There are gardens and bike paths in Chiang Mai, and there are lots of temples, which means there are tons of Buddha statues. Claude notices that all the statues have long, shapely fingernails, and Buddha's face and lips are always vaguely feminine. Buddha looks like a girl, Claude decides, even though he knows that Buddha is a boy.

Claude is clearly drawn to the Buddha statues because they are feminine looking and remind Claude of himself. The Buddha statues also suggest gender is not always a simple choice between male and female. Like Claude, the Buddha statues are neither fully male nor fully female and instead are a little bit of both.

Claude and Rosie's guide, Nok, explains that **Buddha statues** are depicted as feminine because femininity is "peaceful, gentle, [and] nonaggressive." He further explains that Buddha had many bodies before enlightenment. In Buddhism, nothing belongs to you, not even your own body. Claude instantly likes this idea. Buddha is a guy who was born male, shaved his head, "got enlightened, and then ended up looking like a girl." Buddha understands that bodies don't matter, and from that moment on, Claude is a Buddhist.

The Buddha statues help Claude to begin embracing his gender identity again, and they help him to see that there is more than one to live and view gender and bodies. Claude doesn't have to adhere to strict ideals of gender and bodies because the Buddha statues prove that bodies aren't even that important in the grand scheme of things.

Claude also notices that everyone seems to be wearing yellow, and Nok explains that yellow is the "color of Monday." Okay, Claude says, but it is Wednesday. Yes, Nok says, but the king was born on Monday, and yellow is his color. The guide asks Claude what day of the week he was born on, but Claude doesn't know. He looks to Rosie, but she can't remember either. Nok asks how Claude knows his color if he doesn't know what day he was born. "Find out," Nok says, "Is important."

In Thailand, Hindu myth says certain colors are associated with certain days of the week based on the god who protects that day. Monday is protected by Chandra, a lunar deity, whose color is yellow. King Bhumibol of Thailand (who died in 2016) and his son were both born on a Monday; thus, many people in Thailand wear yellow in honor of the king.

Later that night, Rosie tells Claude it makes sense that his color is yellow. Yellow is the color they painted the nursey in Madison when they didn't know if Claude would be a boy or a girl. Yellow is the "middle way," Rosie says, but Claude says there isn't a middle way, and if there is, he doesn't get it. For Claude, there are only two choices. Rosie says that seems true, but the middle way is hard to find for the same reasons that it is right. The middle way is "invisible," she says. "Like in a fairy tale?" Claude asks. Rosie initially says no, but she changes her mind. Yes, she says. The trick is coming to a fork in the road and making your own path.

As Rosie alludes to here, yellow is an ambiguous color that is neither overtly feminine nor overtly masculine, which again suggests that gender, for many people, is not a case of either/or. For many like Poppy, gender is the "middle way" between man and woman and is equally feminine and masculine.

Rosie tells Claude that she misses Poppy. Not because Poppy is a girl, and Claude is a boy, she says, but because Poppy is happy, and Claude is sad and lost. Poppy and Claude are both a boy and a girl, Rosie says, but Poppy is the way to the "middle way," which is why being Poppy is so hard. Claude says being Poppy isn't hard, it is being Claude that is hard, but Rosie asks to rephrase. It is hard to stay Poppy, she says, but lucky for Claude, Poppy "is strong as seas."

Claude doesn't have the strength to stay living as Poppy, Rosie implies, but Poppy does. Ironically, it is the feminine side of Claude who is the strong one, not the masculine side, which further subverts established gender norms. Poppy is the "middle way," which means she is the way to Claude's happiness and acceptance.

PART III: AN ENDING

Rosie and Poppy's first day back at the clinic is long. Rosie stays late to deliver a set of twins, and when she gets to her phone after her shift, there are 15 missed calls from Penn and a text message that says: "COME HOME." Rosie is frantic, but she has no cell service, so she runs back to the guesthouse and the Wi-Fi. When she gets there, the internet is down, and Poppy is sleeping. Rosie can't decide if that is good or bad. Poppy wouldn't be able to sleep if it is bad news, but if it is *really* bad news, Penn probably wouldn't tell Poppy first.

Obviously, Claude has transitioned back to Poppy, which is her true gender identity. A combination of the Buddha statues, the "middle way," and telling the children stories has given Poppy the courage to live as she truly wants, which suggests Poppy is coming to terms with her gender dysphoria.

Rosie's first thought is Camry, and she isn't ready to lose her mother yet. Then, Rosie thinks about her boys at home, and of drugs, drinking, gambling, and guns. Her boys don't do those things, but she also knows teenage boys are "morons." Her thoughts turn to Penn. Losing Penn is absolutely out of the question. It is going to be a long night, Rosie thinks.

Rosie's agony is evidence of the connection she shares with her family and the importance of family in the novel. For Rosie, losing a member of her family would be devastating, and being away in Thailand and not knowing what is going on is torture for her.

The next afternoon in Seattle, Penn's phone rings. He is just doing a little writing before everyone gets home and the chaos ensues. He answers and it is Rosie. "Penn!" she yells. She immediately asks if he is alright and what is going on, and Penn is a bit confused. Yes, he says, he has some good news, in fact. He sent 15 texts, she says, and he says he sent one text. A text is sometimes sent multiple times with poor cell phone service. The good news is, Penn says, that he sold a book. Rosie can't believe it. She didn't think Penn's novel was anywhere near done. It's not a novel, Penn says. It is a fairytale: *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie.*

Penn has been working on a novel for years, but he has apparently abandoned his novel to write a book of Grumwald stories. Here, Penn has written in a princess named Stephanie, whereas when he told the story to Poppy it was Grumwald and Princess Grumwaldia. Penn must have decided that Stephanie was a better name—a moment that harkens back to the earlier moment in the novel when Rosie said Claude could be Claudia, but he eventually chose the name Poppy.

Rosie points out that Grumwald doesn't have an ending, but Penn says it does now. Well, at least it has "*an* ending." There is less than one percent of Grumwald's story in the book. Most of Grumwald's story belongs to Rosie, Penn says. Rosie asks how it ends in the book, and Penn promises to tell her when she gets home.

Penn's promise to tell Rosie the story when she gets home is reminiscent of the days in the hospital waiting room when he kept Rosie interested by holding back some of the story, just as Penn did with the kids, like Scheherazade.

Rosie goes to clinic to find K and tell her that she has to go home. K asks if everything is okay, and Rosie says yes. It is actually good new that takes her home, but she will be back. K asks Rosie if she is considering a move to the jungle, and Rosie admits that she is. She knows that a move to Thailand will make her family's move from Madison to Seattle seem easy, but she can't ignore their problems or keep running from them. Thailand has been good for Poppy, and Poppy has been good for Thailand, and Rosie knows it will be the same with her other children.

Rosie sees moving the family to Thailand as a way to meet their struggles head on and deal with them as a family. Rosie sees a move to Thailand similarly to how Penn viewed their move to Seattle—such a move is not running away; it is moving on and accepting the inevitable changes in life.

Rosie knows that Penn can write in the jungle, but she also knows they can't live here year-round. There are patients back home who need her, too, but what Rosie really needs is her family. They will live together and celebrate what is good and be considerate of what is difficult. They will find the "middle way." They will "tell their stories, dispel fear, let be. Amend as necessary," Rosie says.

Rosie's desire to live the "middle way" and to "tell their stories, dispel fear, let be. Amend as necessary" are basically the tenets of Buddhism. This, too, reflects the hybridity that is present in much of the book as the "middle way" resists either/or thinking.

PART IV: EVER

Grumwald stands in front of the mirror dressed like Princess Stephanie and wonders what will happen when people find out. He has been keeping his secret for years. A witch cursed him long ago, making him Grumwald by day, and by night, Princess Stephanie. At first, the curse seemed terrible; however, Grumwald found a way. He made his own path, and he knew what it was like to be a princess because he knew how to be a prince. The two are not terribly different, he has learned. Only for Grumwald, the path got harder and harder to build, so he decides to go to the witch. It is better to face his fears than hide in misery.

This chapter constitutes Penn's story, which is clearly a metaphor for Poppy's experiences. Like Poppy, Grumwald lives as both genders, but he finds a way to be happy, which suggests Grumwald finds the "middle way." Like Poppy, Grumwald learns that the "middle way" is difficult and staying on the path is hard. The "middle way" is the best way to live, but it is also the most difficult, which is why Poppy reverted back to Claude for a bit.

Grumwald goes to the witch and gives her a lock of Princess Stephanie's hair for her arthritis, and she is glad to have it. She apologizes for not lifting the curse years ago. She is old, the witch says, and is getting feeble minded. In fact, she can't remember if Grumwald is really a prince or a princess. It has been so long, she can't remember him as anything but both. She asks him what it will be, Grumwald or Princess Stephanie, and Grumwald says he wants to be both. Alright, the witch says, she'll just leave the curse as it. No, Grumwald says. He wants to be both—all the time.

Grumwald doesn't want to remain as either Grumwald or Princess Stephanie, he wants to be both, which again suggests that gender is not a simple choice between male and female. Grumwald, like Poppy, embodies both male and female qualities, and he doesn't want to choose in the name of maintaining and reflecting traditional gender roles. Penn believes the world is constantly changing, and gender norms, he hopes, are changing, too.

The witch immediately understands. Grumwald wants to be "betwixt." It happens at times, she says. Grumwald asks if "betwixt" is just "a witchy way of saying in between," and the witch says it is more complicated than that. "Betwixt" is more complicated and has more layers; it really isn't a case of "neither-nor" as much as it is "both-and." However, "betwixt" is a difficult path, the witch says, and it is no place for secrets. Secrets make people lonely, the witch says, and secrets lead to fear and hysteria.

Like the "middle way," being "betwixt" is a difficult road because it is a more complex way of viewing gender. "Betwixt" again implies that gender is not "neither-nor"—male or *female—but is instead "both-and"—male* and *female. Like Grumwald, Poppy is "betwixt" and is a combination of both male and female.*

The witch tells Grumwald that with honesty, he will "get magic. Twice." First, by being honest and not keeping secrets, Grumwald will find that he is not alone, and then everything gets better. "You share your secret," the witch says, "and you change the world." It can't be that simple, Grumwald says, but the witch assures him it is. Life is complicated, but the story is simple. Grumwald must tell his story. "That's not magic," Grumwald says. The witch disagrees. "Story is the best magic there is," she says.

The ending of Penn's story aligns with Frankel argument about the dangers of secrets. If Poppy is honest about her gender and shares her story like the witch is telling Grumwald to do, Penn believes Poppy can "change the world," too. Grumwald seems to think this oversimplifies the problem, but the witch—and by extension Penn and Frankel—disagree. Penn implies that there is incredible power in Poppy's story, and with it, Penn believes others can become more open-minded.

PART IV: AFTER

Poppy isn't sure that coming back to school during the Valentine's Day dance is the best decision, but that is exactly what she is doing. Aggie still won't talk to her, but Natalie and Kim say they always knew who Poppy really was, even if Poppy didn't tell them exactly. Standing with Kim and Natalie in the gymnasium decorated with hearts and streamers but still smelling of socks, Poppy feels almost brave. A few people walk by and say hi, and then Jake Irving approaches. He says hello and asks if Poppy ever got his text (he sent a text apologizing for the whole "dick" comment and said Marnie made him do it). Poppy says she got it, and Jake apologizes again.

Poppy's trip to Thailand and her discovery of the "middle way" has given her the courage to return home and live as her true gender identity. The Grumwald and Princess Stephanie story allowed Poppy to see herself represented in a story, just as she saw herself represented in Thailand though K and the other transgender women. Poppy is beginning to believe she belongs, even if everybody doesn't accept her, like Aggie is clearly having a problem doing.

Jake asks Poppy if she wants to dance. He looks at the dance floor and tells her they will probably be the best dancers out there, and Poppy can't say no. She "regular-dances" with Jake, and he asks her about Thailand. She tells him she taught English to little kids, and Jake says that is because she is "smart" and "nice." Jake might be smart, he says, but he isn't nice. At least, he wasn't nice to Poppy, he says, but he is very, very sorry. Poppy says she knows, and Jake asks how. "You asked me to dance," Poppy says.

Jake takes a risk of getting harassed by the cruel kids for dancing with Poppy, but he doesn't seem too worried, which is how Poppy knows he is genuinely sorry for the cruel things he said to her. Jake and Poppy "regular-dance," which likely means they aren't slow dancing, but Jake still takes a chance by dancing with Poppy.

Rosie and Penn never intended to dance when they agreed to chaperone the dance, but they never thought they would see Poppy dancing either, so they decide to go for it. Dancing together, Rosie tells Penn that she is very proud of him and always knew this day would come. She asks what made him finally write down the Grumwald story, and Penn says it was just time. They have always lived a fairy tale, Penn says. Their "perfect love story" is like magic, but there must be room for transformation to have "happily-ever-after."

It was time for Penn to write down Grumwald because Poppy needed to see herself reflected in the world. Penn again implies that "fairytales" and "happily-ever-after" can be a reality, and Rosie is quickly beginning to understand that Penn is right. Poppy's dance with Jake implies that she is well on the mend and again sees herself as part of the world she recently pulled away from.

They can't avoid change, Penn tells Rosie, and keep Poppy a secret. Penn had to write Grumwald down so people can read Poppy's story, and "it can grow." Rosie says Penn's explanation is beautiful, but it doesn't answer the real question. "Boy or girl or in between?" Rosie asks, "Blockers or puberty? Surgery or hormones?" Penn admits the story doesn't answer the question, but it builds a place to start from and find the answers. Rosie looks at Poppy. She can't believe Poppy danced, but Penn can. "Happy middles," he says, are better than "happy endings."

Again, Penn believes there is power in Poppy's story. Stories allow others to live a vicarious experience, and stories help to build understanding and empathy, which is why Penn believes the story "can grow." Just as sharing Poppy's story won't automatically make the world a place, it is a start for a better world to grow from.

Poppy walks out of the bathroom stall to find Aggie standing by the sinks. "Hi," Aggie says. "Hi," Poppy says. They make small talk, and Aggie asks about Thailand, and then she asks if Poppy is supposed to be in the girls' bathroom. The principal said she could use the girls' bathroom way back in the first grade, Poppy says. See, Aggie says, Poppy told the principal but not her. Poppy says her parents told the principal, but that isn't the point.

Aggie's question about Poppy's right to use the girls' bathroom suggest that Aggie still doesn't understand Poppy's gender identity. Poppy has every right to use the girls' bathroom, and Aggie suggesting that she doesn't is more evidence of the discrimination the transgender community faces.

The point for Aggie is that she can't be Poppy's best friend now that everything has changed. Poppy says nothing has changed, and that she is the same person she has always been, but to Aggie, "everything's changed." They can't have sleepovers, or be "rival princesses." Yes, they can, Poppy says. Aggie asks Poppy if she is a girl or a boy. Poppy says she is both, and neither, and something else, too, even though she doesn't know what that is. "It's complicated," Poppy says, "I'm kind of a weirdo." Aggie smiles. They are too old to be princesses, Aggie says. They can be "rival weirdos" instead.

Just as Penn argues, Poppy has changed, and so has Aggie. Poppy isn't the same person she was before she went to Thailand because she has since learned to openly accept her gender identity and not conceal herself from the world. Poppy again implies that she is not entirely male or female but a hybrid mixture of the two. As Poppy still doesn't conform to traditional gender roles, she can't be Aggie's "rival princess," but they can still be friends.

Back at the house, Penn and Rosie watch their kids talk loudly and excitedly. Orion and Rigel can't believe Penn and Rosie danced. Yuck, they say. Roo tells everyone an embarrassing story about Ben at the eighth-grade dance, which sparks a series of embarrassing stories that they now laugh at all over again. Rosie smiles at Penn. This is what it is all about. Family and togetherness and happiness. They can move away—they will move away—and the kids will change into adults and seem like different people, but it is all part of their story. Rosie tells Penn that they get a happy ending after all, but Penn tells her this isn't the end. "Not even close," he says.

Penn's claim that they aren't near the end of their story implies that their story will be even better in the future. They are each headed for a very happy life, which again is evidence of the "middle way." This passage also reflects the importance of family in the novel. The most important thing to Rosie—more important than gender identity and open-mindedness—is family, and without it, Frankel implies, nothing is worth anything at all.

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