

A Child Called It



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVE PELZER

Dave Pelzer was born in California, and grew up in Daly City. His parents were Stephen, a fireman, and Catherine, both of whom were alcoholics. In his books, Pelzer describes being horrifically abused by his mother until the age of twelve, at which point Pelzer's teachers intervened and arranged for him to be placed in foster care. Pelzer later served in the military. In 1995, he published a memoir of his abuse, *A Child Called "It"* (1997), which quickly became a bestseller. Pelzer later published two further memoirs, *The Lost Boy* and *A Man Named Dave* (2000). Pelzer remains a popular lecturer and motivational speaker.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Few historical events are mentioned in *A Child Called "It"*; however, one important historical trend to keep in mind is the strengthening of child abuse laws, beginning in the mid-1970s. In 1974, one year after Dave Pelzer was removed from his home, Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which allocated considerable funds for government agencies such as Child Protective Services and played a major role in increasing the public's awareness of child abuse. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Dave Pelzer was growing up in California, surprisingly few people seemed to understand what did and didn't qualify as child abuse. Arguably one of the major changes in American society since the mid-1970s has been a heightened awareness of child abuse.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Child Called It has been compared with a number of vivid, harrowing memoirs published in the late 1990s and early 2000s, including *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) by James Frey and *Don't Ever Tell* (2006) by Kathy O'Beirne. In all three of these books, a "survivor" tells a story—presented as nonfiction—of abuse, cruelty, and trauma. However, some critics have faulted these books for indulging in the "pornography of trauma"—in other words, representing horrific pain and suffering without any real insight behind it, so that, in effect, readers have no choice but to accept the narrator's trauma without understanding it. (It's also worth noting that all three books have been criticized for distorting the truth in the interest of selling more copies. For more information, see Themes.)

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive*
- **When Written:** 1991-1994
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** Fall 1995
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Daly City, California, late 1960s and early 1970s
- **Climax:** Dave's teachers call CPS and "free" Dave from Mother
- **Antagonist:** Mother / Catherine Roerva Pelzer
- **Point of View:** First person, present-tense (in the prologue and epilogue) and past-tense (in the rest of the memoir)

EXTRA CREDIT

An American hero. Dave Pelzer served in the U.S. Air Force, and later fought in the Gulf War in the early 1990s. In 1996, he carried a torch for the Sumer Olympics, in recognition of his military service and his struggle to boost awareness of child abuse.

Controversy. *A Child Called "It"* has been praised for helping victims of child abuse come to terms with their trauma, and for giving abuse victims the courage to speak out against their abusers. However, the book has also received a significant amount of criticism, and there are some who've argued that Pelzer exaggerated or even made up the extent of his abuse. Articles in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have raised the possibility that Pelzer is exaggerating his childhood suffering to sell more books (after *A Child Called "It"*, Pelzer published two more bestselling memoirs revolving around the same traumatic experiences). Pelzer's brother, Stephen, has disputed many of the claims in the book, including that their mother stabbed Dave in the chest, burned him, or forced him to consume ammonia. Pelzer has also been criticized for repeatedly claiming that *A Child Called "It"* was taught in Harvard classes and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize (neither claim is accurate).



PLOT SUMMARY

The memoir begins in 1973, with Dave Pelzer, a fifth-grade student living in Daly City, California, doing his morning chores for his Mother, Catherine Roerva Pelzer. Mother hits Dave, and Dave thinks about all the abuse he's experienced at her hands. At school, Dave is sent to the nurse's office. The nurse notices the many bruises and scratches on his body, and alerts the principal, who calls the police. A police officer takes Dave

away, and Dave initially thinks he's being arrested. However, the officer informs Dave that he's finally "free" from his Mother—he'll never have to see her again.

Dave flashes back to the late 1960s, when he's a young child growing up in California with his two brothers, Ronald Pelzer and Stan Pelzer. Dave loves his Mother and Father, who works long hours as a firefighter. Mother is a kind, loving woman, and treats him with great warmth. As time goes on, however, Mother begins drinking more. She also becomes more and more overtly abusive to Dave. One night, while Father is out of the house, Mother hits Dave, seriously hurting his arm. Mother takes Dave to the hospital, falsely claiming that Dave fell out of bed. She later makes Dave say, "I'm a bad boy" again and again, and forces Dave to repeat the first grade, even though Dave is a bright student.

Dave notices that Mother doesn't treat him as badly when Father or his siblings are present. However, Father doesn't actively protect Dave from Mother's abuse. When Mother tells Dave that he won't be receiving Christmas presents, Father gets Dave a few gifts, but Mother becomes so furious with Father for contradicting her authority that, Dave senses, Father won't defend him again. Dave gradually learns that the only way to survive Mother's abuse is to delay, in the hopes that Father, Stan, or Ron will come home.

Mother's abuse becomes even harsher. While she takes good care of Ron and Stan (and gives birth to another child, Russell), she denies Dave food and regularly hits him. She also stops using Dave's name. At school, the principal calls Mother in for a visit, to discuss why Dave always has bruises on his body. Mother carries Russell to school, building sympathy for herself, and tells the principal that Dave has an active imagination and hits himself to attract attention. Shortly afterwards, Mother forces Dave to eat the feces in Russell's diapers. Dave refuses, but Mother smears feces all over his face, stopping only when Father, Ron, and Stan come home.

Mother continues denying Dave regular meals, and forces him to wear the same clothes to school every day, to the point where Dave begins to smell horrible, and decides that he needs to steal food to survive. He steals food from his peers, and later from a nearby grocery store. He also steals frozen lunches from the cafeteria, and fishes scraps of food from the trash can at home. However, Mother deliberately puts spoiled food in the trashcan, and later sprinkles ammonia in the trash to prevent Dave from eating any scraps. One day, after eating stolen frozen lunches, Dave comes home, and Mother forces Dave to vomit up his meal. She later shows the vomit to Father, who watches dispassionately as Mother forces Dave to eat his own vomit. Afterwards, Mother forces Dave to sleep under a table, and later in a garage. She also forces Dave to swallow ammonia, burning his tongue and causing him a night of intense pain.

One evening, Mother drinks heavily and brandishes a knife at Dave. Out of the corner of his eye, Dave sees Mother stumble

toward him, and then feels an intense pain in his chest. He realizes that Mother has stabbed him. Mother treats the wound with gauze and then orders Dave to resume doing the dishes. In the following days, Dave refuses to beg Mother for mercy. He treats his own wound and feels a deep sense of satisfaction for remaining independent. Mother later starves Dave for ten days straight, and forces him to clean an unventilated bathroom with ammonia and Clorox, almost suffocating him. She also forces him to lie in freezing cold water for hours. During these ordeals, Dave's brothers and Father do nothing to intervene. Dave no longer feels like a part of the family.

Dave enters the fourth grade, and Mother's abuse continues, harsher than ever. She beats him with chains, hits him, and forces him to vomit and inhale ammonia. When teachers ask Dave about his appearance and bruises, Dave repeats what Mother has instructed him to say—he had an "accident." He comes to despise his brothers, whom Mother continues to treat lovingly. Mother gives birth to another child, Kevin, whom Dave immediately loves.

One day, Mother abruptly tells Dave that she's sorry for hurting him. She begins treating Dave kindly and feeding him well. Then, a few weeks later, an officer from social services shows up at the house and asks Dave if his mother ever hits him. Dave realizes that Mother has been treating him well so that he won't tell the truth to the officer. Dave lies to the officer anyway, fearing that Mother will hurt him.

By the time Dave enters the fifth grade, he's almost given up on life altogether. His classmates tease him and tell him to kill himself, and he's come to doubt that there is a God—surely, no God would allow him to suffer so greatly. His brothers seem to think of him as the "family slave" and take turns hitting him. However, Dave's teacher, Mr. Ziegler, treats him with kindness and respect. Dave continues to love Kevin, although he fears that one day Kevin will grow up to hate him, just like his other brothers do.

As Christmas approaches, Father and Mother begin to argue more and more often. Shortly after the holiday, Father packs his bags and leaves forever. He apologizes to Dave for not doing more to protect him, but tells him, "I can't take it anymore." After Father leaves, Mother sneers, "You are all mine now. Too bad your father's not here to protect you."

In the Epilogue, Dave, now an adult, drives along the beach and thinks about how lucky he's been. Since being separated from Mother, he's gotten an education, served in the military, and done a lot of wonderful work raising awareness of child abuse. He's most proud of having a child of his own, Stephen, whom he treats with nothing but love, thereby breaking the vicious cycle of cruelty to children, of which he was a part.

In the final chapter, "Perspectives on Child Abuse," several people from Dave's life, including Mr. Ziegler and workers from

Child Protective Services, comment on the prevalence of child abuse in American society. People need to be vigilant and look out for signs of abuse in children—otherwise, the horrific cycle of abuse will continue, year after year.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

David Pelzer / Dave – Dave Pelzer, the protagonist and narrator of *A Child Called "It"*, is a survivor of child abuse. For years as a child, his Mother beats him, burns him, and subjects him to dozens of other cruelties. During his years in Mother's house, Pelzer goes through psychological trauma in addition to his physical abuse. He begins to hate himself, to resent his brothers for avoiding any abuse, and to question whether his life is even worth living. However, Dave escapes Mother in 1973 when his school nurse, along with a handful of teachers, decides to alert the police to Dave's condition. The police, recognizing that Dave's parents must be abusing him regularly, take Dave away from his home for good. Throughout his time living with Mother, and for the rest of his life, Dave preserves his courage and dignity, promising himself that he'll never give Mother the satisfaction of begging for mercy. Dave's life's story, while harrowing and frequently horrific, is ultimately optimistic. As an adult he has a child of his own, who he claims to treat with nothing but love and compassion. In this way, he breaks free from the vicious cycle of child abuse, and finds ways of coping with his trauma without denying or ignoring his past.

Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer – Catherine Roerva Pelzer is the antagonist of *A Child Called "It"*. For years, she abuses her son, Dave Pelzer, for reasons that are never made clear: she hits him, burns his arm, forces him to eat feces and vomit, and starves him for days at a time. While Dave suggests that Mother is a heavy drinker and may suffer from depression, he doesn't offer any theories about why she singles him out for abuse, or what motivates her to continue abusing him year after year. Sometimes, her cruel behavior seems sloppy and half-accidental—for example, when she drunkenly stabs Dave. But on other occasions, the memoir shows that Mother's cruelty is premeditated and cunningly designed to make Dave suffer as greatly as possible. Even more bafflingly, Mother sometimes treats Dave with love and tenderness and then returns to abusing him—again, readers never understand why. The result is that, even by the end of the memoir, Mother embodies evil, which can be neither explained nor understood. She's a force of pure malevolence, which Dave must escape at all costs.

Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father – Dave Pelzer's father, Stephen Joseph Pelzer, is a weak, frequently drunk father, who rarely stands up to Catherine Roerva Pelzer, his wife. Over the course of the book, Father represents a beacon of hope for the

young, terrified Dave—he thinks of Father as his protector, even after it becomes increasingly clear that Father is turning a blind eye to his child's suffering. As he grows older, Dave comes to hate Father for allowing Mother to hurt him. In the end, Father becomes so fed-up with Mother's anger that he packs his bags and leaves the family for good. He's a weak, selfish man who only cares about his own happiness, not the happiness and safety of his children. However, it's worth noting that Dave names his beloved son after his father (at least in the memoir—Pelzer has said that he changed some of the characters' names to protect them from the public). This might suggest that Pelzer still feels some love and respect for Father, since Father was the only person in the family who showed any consistent love for him. (It could also suggest that Dave wants to remind himself how *not* to raise his child.)

The nurse – The nurse is one of the few kind adults in Dave Pelzer's life. She treats him with warmth and compassion, even after other people at Dave's school shun him and make fun of him. She's also one of the first people in the book to recognize that someone is hitting Dave. In 1973, she's instrumental in bringing the police's attention to Dave's condition and ultimately freeing him from Mother.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kevin Pelzer – Dave Pelzer's youngest brother.

Ronald Pelzer – Dave Pelzer's older brother.

Stan Pelzer – Dave Pelzer's younger brother

Russell Pelzer – Dave Pelzer's younger brother.

Cindy M. Adams – A woman who pens a poem about child abuse in the final chapter of *A Child Called "It"*.

Aggie – A mean classmate of Dave Pelzer.

Aunt Josie – Dave Pelzer's aunt, with whom he sometimes stays.

Valerie Bivens – A social worker for Child Protective Services, who offers her perspective on child abuse in the book's final chapter.

Glenn A. Goldberg – Former executive director of the California Consortium for the Prevention of Child Abuse, who offers his perspective on child abuse in the book's final chapter.

Mr. Hansen – The principal of Dave Pelzer's school, who makes the decision to call the police and free Dave from Mother.

John – A mean classmate of Dave Pelzer.

Miss Moss – Dave Pelzer's second-grade teacher, who treats him kindly and later helps him escape from Mother.

Shirley – One of the Pelzers' neighbors, with whom Mother is close friends for a brief time.

Stephen – Dave Pelzer's beloved son.

Uncle Dan – A character, only mentioned once, who seems to

be Catherine Roerva Pelzer's brother.

Miss Woods – One of Dave Pelzer's teachers.

Steven E. Ziegler / Mr. Ziegler – One of Dave Pelzer's teachers, who treats him kindly, respects him as a person, and later contributes a few thoughts on teacher negligence to the final chapter of *A Child Called "It"*.



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.



CHILD ABUSE

Dave Pelzer's memoir *A Child Called "It"* is a harrowing meditation on child abuse, embodied in Dave's mother, Catherine Roerva (usually referred to either as Mother or "the bitch"). For many years, Mother abuses Dave verbally, physically, and psychologically, until, thanks to the intervention of Dave's teachers, the police finally free him from Mother's home. Child abuse is by far the most important theme in the memoir—indeed, the other themes we'll discuss are particularly important aspects of the overall theme of abuse.

Above all, Pelzer's memoir discusses the substance of child abuse; in other words, the specific actions that Mother perpetrates on Dave, and the physical and psychological effects that her actions have on Dave. Some of Mother's abuse is purely physical: she beats Dave, whips him with chains, forces him to eat feces and vomit, and commits countless other atrocities. But as horrific as Mother's physical abuse is, however, it's arguably milder than the verbal and psychological abuse to which she subjects Dave. Whenever Mother hurts Dave, she forces him to repeat, "I'm a bad boy," essentially brainwashing him into believing that he deserves his hideous abuse. Over the course of many years, this form of psychological abuse takes its toll on Dave's self-respect—even when he knows that Mother is an evil, abusive parent, he can't help but think that, on some level, he's "bad" and deserves his abuse (See "Trauma" theme.) Mother also goes to great lengths to isolate Dave from his classmates and family. She forbids Dave from eating or playing with his brothers, and forces him to wear the same smelly clothing to school every day, until his classmates grow to dislike him. By isolating Dave from other people, Mother makes Dave weaker and more dependent on her, while also limiting the possibility that a friend's parents might notice that Dave is being abused. In all, Mother's abuse is reckless and yet eerily cunning. She subjects her son to tortures so horrifying that they seem to be the product of pure,

unthinking rage, but she also seems to *plan* his abuse very carefully, in order to maximize his suffering.

Although Pelzer discusses his abuse in chilling detail, he says little about why Mother behaves the way she does—put another way, *A Child Called "It"* says a lot about the "what" of child abuse, but almost nothing about the "why." For many years, Dave acknowledges, Mother is a model parent, who loves entertaining and cooking for her family, and who treats Dave with love and warmth. Then, very abruptly, she becomes abusive. Even more bizarrely, Mother abuses Dave but still seems to treat her other children, Dave's brothers, kindly. Pelzer cannot explain why his Mother became so cruel. He mentions that Mother begins drinking heavily around the time that she becomes abusive, and seems to take out her anger with Dave's Father on Dave. But of course, there are millions of heavy-drinking parents who don't abuse their children (nor would alcoholism explain why Mother hits Dave but not Dave's brothers).

Pelzer is well within his rights to depict the "what" of child abuse without delving into the "why"; he shouldn't necessarily be expected to explain why Mother abuses him. Nevertheless, the absence of any "why" arguably limits the book's insight into child abuse. *A Child Called "It"* portrays Mother—and child abuse itself—as a force of pure, incomprehensible evil, so that, in effect, readers see Mother through the eyes of the young Dave Pelzer himself. Some critics (including writers for *Slate* and *The New York Times*) have used the word "pornographic" to describe Pelzer's depiction of child abuse, implying that Pelzer is trying to "arouse a quick, intense emotional reaction," rather than help his readers understand the psychology of abusive parents, recognize abusive parents, or do anything else to prevent actually child abuse. In short, some critics have suggested, by concentrating on the "what" instead of the "why," Pelzer is trying to shock, thrill, and even entertain his readers, instead of educating or empowering them.

However one feels about Pelzer's depiction of child abuse, one cannot deny that he provides a sobering account of a little-discussed side of life. Furthermore, by writing and lecturing across the country, Pelzer has increased awareness of child abuse and inspired people to speak out against abusive parents and come to terms with their own histories of abuse.



PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

In addition to depicting an incredibly abusive parent, *A Child Called "It"* studies the effects of child abuse on the abused children themselves. For years, Mother beats Dave Pelzer, the author and narrator of the book, leaving him with scars and bruises, but also a longer-lasting sense of shame, guilt, resentment, fear, and self-hatred—in a word, trauma. Through Dave's eyes, readers come to understand the traumatizing psychological effects of abuse

on young children and—more implicitly—how abused children can come to terms with their trauma.

A Child Called "It" suggests that the greatest harm of child abuse is often psychological, not physical. In the case of Dave Pelzer, Mother's abuse leaves Dave with a lasting sense of hatred—both for other people and for himself. For years, Mother beats him and subjects him to countless forms of physical abuse. However, she insists again and again that she's hurting Dave because he's been bad, and even forces him to repeat, "I'm a bad boy." After many years of abuse, Dave's life becomes so miserable that he comes to envy and resent other children who lead happier lives than his own. In particular, he comes to despise his brothers, who Mother doesn't abuse, and his classmates. He also comes to hate himself, partly because Mother has brainwashed him into doing so by making him repeat, "I'm a bad boy" and partly because he can't stand that he's too frightened to fight back against Mother's cruelty.

One of the greatest tragedies of child abuse is that, very often, people who were abused as children grow up to abuse their own children, creating a cycle of cruelty, trauma, and hatred. While it might seem hard to believe that victims of child abuse would beat their own children, they sometimes do so, for the very reasons that *A Child Called "It"* lists: like Dave, they hate people who seem happier than they are, and take out their frustration and self-hatred by hurting others (and, furthermore, they've been taught to do so by their own parents).

A Child Called "It" does more than simply list the evils of child abuse; it shows that Dave Pelzer escapes the cycle of abuse and learns ways of gaining some control over his trauma (as he says in the Epilogue, "I'm free"). As the book comes to a close, Pelzer writes that he's the proud parent of a beautiful boy, Stephen, whom he treats with nothing but love and warmth. That Pelzer has become a loving parent and is "free" would suggest that he's escaped the worst effects of trauma, such as self-hatred, PTSD, and chronic anxiety, and has made a happy life for himself.

Some critics, however, have pointed out that Pelzer never explains *how* exactly he copes with his trauma, and some have even suggested that Pelzer is more interested in selling shocking books than in using literature to help people. Yet Pelzer has also traveled across the country, often working one-on-one with victims of child abuse, suggesting that he's sincerely committed to helping people cope with trauma, not just thrilling his readers. Furthermore, such criticisms ignore the fact that writing *A Child Called "It"* represents, in itself, a way for Pelzer to overcome his trauma. Writing about his own abuse took tremendous courage, and by doing so, Pelzer distanced himself from his past, came to terms with his self-hatred, and, in general, found ways of coping with his trauma without denying or forgetting his experiences.



RESISTANCE

Because Dave Pelzer is a young child, he rarely fights back against Mother when she hurts him; indeed, he's only saved from horrific abuse when his teachers call the police to take him away from his home. But although Dave isn't old or strong enough to stop his Mother from abusing him, he still finds various ways of *resisting* his Mother's authority—in other words, refusing to allow her to control him entirely.

Some of the forms of resistance that Dave uses against Mother are physical. For example, at times, when Mother forces him to clean the house and do the dishes, he makes a point of doing a particularly sloppy job. On another occasion, Mother forces Dave to clean the bathroom with ammonia and Clorox, forcing him to inhale harmful gases. Dave cleans the bathroom, but positions the ammonia and Clorox next to the door in the hopes that Mother will inhale some of the gas herself when she walks inside. Although Dave finds small ways to undermine Mother's rules with action, his actions exemplify resistance because they give *him* pleasure, not because they have any discernible effect on Mother. Indeed, Dave's most important forms of resistance are psychological: even when Mother hurts his body and limits his physical freedom, Dave refuses to allow her to control his mind and his interior life. Early in the book, Dave makes himself a promise never to allow Mother to see him begging for mercy. For the remainder of the book, he takes great care to protect his dignity and his pride, honoring his promise to himself and denying Mother the satisfaction of seeing him beg. When Mother stabs Dave in the chest, for instance, Dave refuses to ask her for help; instead, he treats his own wound. Afterwards, Dave feels a deep sense of accomplishment at having taken care of himself and kept his dignity. Publicly, Dave is forced to go along with Mother's authority. Privately, however, he resists her by preserving his dignity, refusing to become any more dependent on her than he must be.

Dave's private resistance to Mother's authority consists of more than preserving his dignity; he also resists Mother by continuing to hope for freedom. Throughout his years of abuse, Dave has an active fantasy life, and he dreams of flying away from his home and escaping Mother for good. In fantasy, Dave takes refuge from the horrors of his waking life. Later, when his life becomes so miserable that he contemplates suicide, his fantasies give him the strength to resist despair and continue living. Dave also resists Mother's cruelty with the help of religion: throughout the book, he prays to God to free him from Mother. Although Dave doubts God's existence at many points in the book (surely God wouldn't allow a child to suffer so greatly), he continues praying in the hope that he'll be saved. Immediately before the police rescue him from Mother, Dave prays for deliverance from evil—implying that Dave maintains his faith throughout his long ordeal (and, perhaps, that God answers Dave's prayers when the police come). By praying to

God, hoping for the best, and refusing to surrender his dignity, Dave manages to resist Mother's tyranny. He's too young to rebel against Mother outright, but by maintaining his sanity, his self-respect, and his cautious optimism, he makes a courageous stand against her.



NEGLECT AND THE NORMALIZATION OF EVIL

One of the most startling things about *A Child Called "It"* is that for many years, and in spite of the obvious signs that Dave's parents are abusing him, nobody alerts the authorities. Although Dave's teachers, along with the principal and the school nurse, make the decision to call Child Protective Services when Dave is in fifth grade, Pelzer makes it clear that there had been signs of abuse years before: Dave regularly showed up to school with bruises and scratches. Why, then, did it take Dave's teachers so long to do the right thing? And why hadn't someone else—a concerned parent or neighbor, or even one of Dave's own family members—made a call years before?

In part, Pelzer suggests, it takes a long time for someone to call the police because in the 1970s public awareness of child abuse was very low. As Pelzer explains in the afterword, public awareness of abuse has come a long way in his lifetime, and, in the 1990s, it would be significantly harder for Mother to abuse Dave as openly as she did in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mr. Ziegler, one of the teachers who finally makes the decision to alert the authorities, reinforces Pelzer's point by noting that, in the 1970s, he was significantly more naïve about child abuse than he is now. Because they're largely ignorant of child abuse, many of Dave's teachers turn a blind eye to his appearance, and allow their preconceptions about Dave being a "bad kid" to cloud their judgment. Mother also makes a point of telling Dave's teachers that Dave injures himself to gain attention. While this excuse doesn't seem particularly believable in hindsight, it's enough to convince most of Dave's teachers not to pay too much attention to his bruises. Additionally, Dave's teachers hesitate to treat Dave sympathetically because he steals food from the other children—they regard him as a devious, untrustworthy child (even though Dave only steals food because Mother refuses to feed him enough). It's telling that the first teacher who notices Dave's bruises and cuts is a substitute—in other words, someone who doesn't have strong preconceptions about Dave being a bad kid. The substitute is no more of an expert on child abuse than any of Dave's other teachers, but because she's an outsider at Dave's school, she has an easier time seeing the obvious truth: somebody is hitting Dave.

Even if ignorance of child abuse can explain some of the neglectful behavior in *A Child Called "It"*, it can't explain why Dave's own Father and brothers allow Mother to continue hurting him, year after year. Dave's family's behavior suggests a

disturbing possibility: over time, many people can grow accustomed to cruelty, even if it's inflicted on their own family members. Over the course of the book, Mother gradually becomes less secretive in her abuse. At first, she only hurts Dave when Father and her other children are out of the house. But gradually, she begins hurting Dave in full view of the rest of the family. Because she hurts Dave every day, Mother's abuse eventually becomes normalized in her family's eyes. By the end of the book, Dave's own brothers don't bat an eye at the sight of Dave sitting in a freezing-cold tub or vomiting up his food on command; his brothers even invite other children to come stare at Dave. Even Dave's Father, who seems somewhat sympathetic to Dave at first, quickly gives up defending Dave from Mother.

In all, *A Child Called "It"* paints a disturbing picture of human nature. Mother is a cruel, evil woman, but her evil would be impossible without the neglect and tacit support of her family and her entire community. Few people would openly condone child abuse, but by ignoring the blatant truth (in the case of Dave's teachers) or by growing accustomed to evil (in the case of Dave's family), they enable it. By writing *A Child Called "It"*, perhaps, Pelzer doesn't just want readers to relive his suffering—he wants to encourage people to speak out against the cruelty they witness in their own lives, rather than remaining silent and allowing cruelty to continue.



SYMBOLS

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



THE PIECE OF WOOD

While walking along the beach, Dave Pelzer sees a piece of wood being swept back and forth by the waves. Pelzer suggests that the wood symbolizes his own life—like the wood, he's been "pushed and pulled in every direction." In the end, however, Pelzer breaks free of the cycle of child cruelty and builds a happy life for himself, in a way escaping some of the more overwhelming "waves" that have buffeted him against his will.



SUPERMAN

At a few points in the book, Dave Pelzer fantasizes about being Superman and flying away from his awful, abusive mother. Superman symbolizes Dave's hope and optimism, which are critical in helping him survive his years of abuse. Superman could also symbolize Dave's struggle to take control over his own life, instead of relying on cruel or indifferent people like his parents or his brothers.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Health Communications edition of *A Child Called It* published in 1995.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ After I count her steps, making sure she's gone, I breathe a sigh of relief. The act worked. Mother can beat me all she wants, but I haven't let her take away my will to somehow survive.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *A Child Called "It"*, Pelzer establishes one of his most important themes: the refusal to submit to cruelty. In the 1970s, Dave Pelzer is a small, defenseless boy, living with an abusive mother. Mother wields almost total power over her child; she can deny Dave food, force him to clean the house for hours, and beat him senseless, seemingly without any fear of punishment. But in spite of Mother's power, Dave finds small, personal ways of resisting Mother. Although he's too young to fight back, Dave refuses to give in to despair. No matter how horribly his mother abuses him, he won't give up and let her see his misery.

Although Pelzer's book is a harrowing read, and full of almost surreally horrific events, it's not a pessimistic story. Dave survives Mother's abuse, thanks largely to his courage and determination. Instead of giving in to despair and self-hatred, he preserves his will to survive.

☝ The police officer and I walk outside, past the cafeteria. I can see some of the kids from my class playing dodge ball. A few of them stop playing. They yell, "David's busted! David's busted!"

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter One, which takes place in 1973, a police officer escorts Dave Pelzer away from his school. Dave, still a young child, thinks that he's being arrested. In reality, Dave is being forcibly separated from his abusive Mother—after years of cruelty, he's finally free.

It's interesting that, as Dave walks away from school with the police officer, his classmates yell that he's going to jail. First, this reminds us that Dave is an unpopular student (thanks largely to Mother's manipulations—she starves him and forces him to wear the same clothes day after day, alienating him from his peers). Second, this is the first time in the memoir that readers hear Dave's name—previously, he's been referred to as "you little shit," or other terms of abuse. Readers learn David's real name at the same time that David is being freed from his Mother's cruelty; perhaps, this symbolizes a milestone in David's life. Before now, Dave has been an "it"—a dehumanized slave to his Mother's cruelty. Now, for the first time in years, Dave is being treated as a human being.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ From above, I felt someone hug my shoulders, I thought it was my father. I turned and became flushed with pride to find Mom holding me tightly. I could feel her heart beat. I never felt as safe and as warm as that moment in time, at the Russian River.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Two, Dave talks about his early childhood. Strangely, Dave's early years with his Mother are idyllic: she's a model parent, who seemingly treats her children with nothing but affection. The chapter closes with this passage, in which Dave and his siblings go to the nearby Russian River and look out at the water. Dave feels warm and secure as Mother embraces him. (Notice that, in this chapter, Dave refers to his mother as "Mom," perhaps suggesting that, at this point, he had a much more intimate, loving relationship with her.)

The passage is baffling because, only a few years later, Mother becomes a cruel, abusive parent—moreover, Dave never explains *why* she changes (he suggests that

alcoholism and marital strife are involved, but never explores either possibility in depth). Mother's volatility (i.e., the fact that she seems to love Dave but later abuses him for no apparent reason) makes her an especially terrifying character—perhaps the most frightening thing about her is that she's unpredictable and generally impossible to understand.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ Mother would simply grab me and smash my face against the mirror, smearing my tear-streaked face on the slick, reflective glass. Then she would order me to say over and over again, "I'm a bad boy! I'm a bad boy! I'm a bad boy!"

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30-31

Explanation and Analysis

As Dave Pelzer grows older, Mother begins to abuse him more and more harshly. She begins hitting him in the face, smashing his face into the mirror, and forcing him to repeat that he's a bad boy. Although Mother's physical abuse is harsh, her psychological abuse is arguably even harsher. By forcing Dave to repeat that he's been bad, she effectively forces him to accept that he *deserves* his punishment and, by extension, that he's an inherently bad person who doesn't deserve happiness or kindness. As Pelzer makes clear toward the end of the memoir, he's spent years trying to fight the psychological effects of Mother's abuse. After being conditioned to believe that he was a worthless human being, he learns to love and respect himself in the ways that most people take for granted.

☛☛ While I was cleaning the bathroom, I overheard an argument between Mother and Father. She was angry with him for "going behind her back" to buy me the paintings. Mother told Father that she was in charge of disciplining "the boy" and that he had undermined her authority by buying the gifts. The longer Father argued his case, the angrier she became. I could tell he had lost, and that I was becoming more and more isolated.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker),

Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father, Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which takes place shortly after Christmas, Dave overhears his parents arguing about his Christmas presents. Mother, who's begun to abuse Dave very harshly, has told Dave that he won't be receiving any Christmas presents because he's a bad boy. Father, on the other hand, has purchased a few gifts for Dave; however, after an argument with his wife, he seemingly agrees to submit to her authority and continue to treat Dave as a bad child.

Throughout the book, Father is the family member who Dave loves best. However, Dave also acknowledges that Father is a weak, spineless man, who declines to protect his own child from his wife's beatings. As the book goes on, Father becomes less and less willing to stand up for Dave, and eventually surrenders him to Mother's cruelty altogether.

☛☛ Standing alone in that damp, dark garage, I knew, for the first time, that I could survive. I decided that I would use any tactic I could think of to defeat Mother or to delay her from her grizzly obsession. I knew if I wanted to live, I would have to think ahead. I could no longer cry like a helpless baby. In order to survive, I could never give in to her. That day I vowed to myself that I would never, ever again give that bitch the satisfaction of hearing me beg her to stop beating me.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Although Chapter Three is full of horrific acts of cruelty, it ends on a cautiously optimistic note. Dave is still getting used to his new life: with Mother beating him and abusing him almost every day. However, he comes to realize that he must never submit to Mother's authority: at the very least, he must preserve his dignity and self-respect, rather than begging her for mercy. Dave keeps his promise to himself for the remainder of his time spent living with Mother.

Why does it matter that Dave refuses to beg Mother for

mercy? Dave isn't strong or old enough to fight back against Mother; throughout the memoir, however, one gets the sense that Mother *wants* Dave to beg her for mercy, and that she's abusing him because she wants him to acknowledge her power over him. In a way, by refusing to beg for mercy, Dave "wins" the terrifying game that Mother plays with him. The passage exemplifies the quiet, internal "resistance" that Dave maintains throughout his time in Mother's house. He's not powerful enough to escape Mother, but he's determined enough to maintain his dignity.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ When I returned from school the next afternoon, Mother smiled as if she had won a million-dollar sweepstakes. She told me how she had dressed up to see the principal, with her infant son Russell in her arms. Mother told me how she had explained to the principal how David had an overactive imagination. Mother told him how David had often struck and scratched himself to get attention, since the recent birth of his new brother, Russell. I could imagine her turning on her snake-like charm as she cuddled Russell for the benefit of the principal.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Russell Pelzer, Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Four, Dave's teachers begin to notice that he shows signs of serious abuse—his clothes are always torn, and he's covered in bruises and scratches. However, as Pelzer explains it, Mother is able to alleviate Dave's teachers' concerns by lying and claiming that Dave hurts himself to get attention, and that he's jealous of the new baby, Russell. After this chapter, Dave's teachers don't raise any serious concerns about his condition until 1973, when they finally call the police and ensure that Dave won't live with Mother anymore.

The passage paints a disturbing picture of life in the 1970s, a decade during which it was, apparently, all-too easy for abusive parents to get away with their crimes. From a contemporary perspective, Mother's excuses for Dave's appearance are utterly unbelievable—what child would hit himself every day for months out of jealousy? But perhaps because Dave's teachers don't have much experience with child abuse, or much training for how to deal with it, they accept Mother's excuses and effectively give her permission

to continue abusing her child.

☝☝ Sometimes at the grocery store, if I felt things weren't just right, I didn't steal anything. As always, I finally got caught. The manager called Mother. At the house, I was thrashed relentlessly. Mother knew why I stole food and so did Dad, but she still refused to feed me. The more I craved food, the more I tried to come up with a better plan to steal it.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father, Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Because Mother refuses food to Dave on a regular basis (she feeds him sometimes, but not enough), Dave is forced to look for food in other places. He tries raiding the trashcans at home, stealing food from his peers, and, eventually, shoplifting from a local grocery store. On one occasion, the manager of the grocery store catches Dave in the act of stealing, and reports him to Mother, who beats Dave (even though the only reason he's stealing food in the first place is that she's denying him three meals a day).

The passage is another example of how negligent people could be regarding child abuse—the manager of the grocery store is just trying to do his job and protect his property—it never occurs to him that Dave is stealing because his parents are abusing him severely, not because he's a bad kid. Furthermore, the passage shows how, as a result of Mother's abusiveness, Dave is forced to rely on his own ingenuity and courage.

☝☝ I knew no one could help me. Not my teachers, my so-called brothers or even Father. I was on my own, and every night I prayed to God that I could be strong both in body and soul. In the darkness of the garage, I laid on the wooden cot and shivered until I fell into a restless sleep.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father, Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

As Dave's life goes on, he begins to give up on other people. His mother is abusive and cruel, his brothers treat him like a slave, and go along with Mother's abuse, and even Father—seemingly the kindest person in his family—is a horrible, neglectful parent who allows Mother to hit and starve his own child. Dave teaches himself not to rely on other people; however, he also turns to God for help and comfort (*A Child Called "It"* is an explicitly Christian book at times, and Dave credits God with helping him survive his time with Mother and becoming a proud, responsible adult).

In a way, Dave is wrong to believe that he's alone in the world; indeed, the only reason he's freed from Mother's abuse is that his teachers work together to help him. However, Dave can hardly be blamed for feeling that he's alone: he has no friends or loving family members, and so he learns to rely on himself.

☝ The more I tried to focus on my options of what she might do to me, the more my inner strength drained away. Then an idea flashed in my brain: I knew why Mother had followed every step I took. She wanted to maintain a constant pressure on me, by leaving me unsure of when or where she would strike.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this chapter, Dave goes to a neighbor's house to beg for food; to his horror, the neighbor is one of Mother's friends—he's sure that the friend will call Mother, and Mother will end up beating him for daring to ask other people for food. When Dave gets home from school that day, however, he finds that Mother is unusually quiet and passive. Gradually, he realizes what Mother is trying to do: knowing full-well that Dave is terrified of her, she's trying to overwhelm with the anticipation of punishment waging psychological warfare on her son.

The passage confirms what may have been obvious already: even in her own mind, Mother isn't abusing Dave because she wants him to be a "good boy"—her only motive for hurting him is pure sadism. Furthermore, it's important to

notice that Dave matures while learning how to understand his Mother's cruelty. As he grows older and more observant, he begins to understand what tactics Mother is using to hurt him, both physically and psychologically (even though he never really learns why Mother is hurting him in the first place). Dave is clearly a smart, insightful kid, which makes Mother's claims that he is stupid, useless, and "bad" seem even crueler.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ I stuttered, "Father . . . Mo . . . Mo . . . Mother stabbed me." He didn't even raise an eyebrow, "Why?" he asked. "She told me if I didn't do the dishes on time, she...she'd kill me." Time stood still. From behind the paper I could hear Father's labored breathing. He cleared his throat before saying, "Well . . . you ah . . . you better go back in there and do the dishes."

Related Characters: Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father, David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Five, one of the most famous (and notorious) parts of the book, Mother stabs Dave with a kitchen knife while Dave is doing the dishes. Mother has been drinking heavily, and she staggers toward Dave, driving the knife into his chest. Both in the book and in interviews, Pelzer has insisted that the stabbing was, technically, an accident—Mother was very drunk and, in spite of her record of abusiveness, wasn't trying to cut her son with the knife.

In this passage, however, Dave tells Father that Mother has stabbed him. Outrageously, Father seems unfazed by this news. Instead of doing anything to help his suffering son, he tells Dave to continue following Mother's directions and do the dishes. It's clear in this passage that Father is a weak, cowardly man who has no business being a parent. Father may be the gentlest and kindest person in Dave's family, but he's about a million miles from being a good father.

☝ I willed the wound to heal. Somehow I knew it would. I felt proud of myself. I imagined myself like a character in a comic book, who overcame great odds and survived. Soon my head slumped forward and I fell asleep. In my dream, I flew through the air in vivid colors. I wore a cape of red . . . I was Superman.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Five, Dave is still reeling from his injury: Mother has stabbed him with a kitchen knife, and then treated the wound with a tiny amount of gauze. Furthermore, she forces Dave to sleep in the cold, uncomfortable garage, as usual. Dave spends the night in horrible pain. However, instead of shouting out for Mother's help, he forces himself to bear the pain. He wakes up and proceeds to treat his wound with water, until it no longer bleeds as much. Proud of himself, Dave dreams about being Superman and flying through the sky.

The passage is a key example of how Dave learns to fend for himself as a result of his parents' neglect and cruelty. No child should have to treat his own wound; however, because he does so, Dave becomes a more mature, confident person. The figure of Superman symbolizes the way that Dave teaches himself to make the most out of his dire situation, turning lemons into lemonade (notice that Superman's red cape parallels Dave's bloody red shirt). Thrust into a situation in which most people would collapse in despair, Dave summons the strength to take care of himself and remain hopeful for the future.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ To survive her new game I had to use my head. Lying on the tiled floor I stretched my body and, using my foot, I slid the bucket to the door. I did this for two reasons: I wanted the bucket as far away from me as possible, and in case Mother opened the door I wanted her to let a snoot full of her own medicine.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mother has forced Dave to clean a bathroom with Clorox and ammonia. She locks the door,

meaning that Dave has to inhale the rough, toxic fumes of the cleaning chemicals. While cleaning the bathroom, Dave makes a point of pushing the bucket of chemicals as far away from him, and as close to the door, as possible—partly because he wants to limit the fumes he's breathing, and partly because he wants Mother to inhale some of the fumes.

The passage is a great example of how Dave finds small ways of resisting Mother's authority, even as he remains her slave. Dave cleans the bathroom, as Mother commands, but he tries to undermine Mother by forcing her to inhale the fumes. Dave's actions don't do much to hurt Mother (and it's quite possible that she doesn't inhale the fumes at all); however, the very fact that Dave would try to undermine Mother's authority is a sign that he's strong, determined, and unwilling to give up his dignity.

☝☝ At times when I laid in the tub, my brothers brought their friends to the bathroom to look at their naked brother. Their friends often scoffed at me. "What did he do this time?" they'd ask. Most of the time my brothers just shook their heads, saying, "I don't know."

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Russell Pelzer, Stan Pelzer, Ronald Pelzer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

By this point in the book, Mother has become much more overt in her abusiveness. At first, she made a point of punishing Dave only when Father and Dave's brothers were out of the house. Now, after years of abuse, she punishes Dave when he's surrounded by family. Furthermore, Dave's siblings are so used to seeing their brother's suffering that they don't bat an eye at the sight of Dave sitting naked in a cold bathtub for hours. Even more disturbingly, Dave's siblings ask their friends to come to the house to look at Dave being punished—the neighborhood children seem to accept Dave's punishments as an acceptable, normal part of life.

Arguably the most horrifying aspect of *A Child Called "It"* is that, up until 1973, the adults in Dave's world are no more responsible than the children Dave describes in the passage: they gawk and sneer at Dave, with his threadbare clothing and scruffy appearance, and never make a serious

effort to help him. As a result, the passage is a powerful example of how easy it is for people to accept cruelty and outright evil in their lives, as long as it's not directed at them personally. The unspoken moral of this passage, which Pelzer reiterates later in the book, is that people need to be vigilant and do a better job of looking out for injustice in their communities.

☝☝ Mother's hand on my shoulder brought me back to reality. "Well, tell her, sweetheart," Mother said, smiling again. "Tell her that I starve you and beat you like a dog," Mother snickered, trying to get the lady to laugh, too.

I looked at the lady, My face felt flushed, and I could feel the beads of sweat forming on my forehead. I didn't have the guts to tell the lady the truth. "No, it's not like that at all," I said. "Mom treats me pretty good."

Related Characters: Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer, David Pelzer / Dave (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mother has treated Dave kindly for weeks. She's assured him that she'll never beat or starve him again, and that, from now on, she'll love him unconditionally. However, Dave eventually realizes what's going on: Mother is only pretending to be kind to Dave, so that Dave won't tell the social services officer that she beats him. In the scene described in the passage, Dave has an opportunity to tell the social services officer that Mother abuses him. However, Dave is so intimidated by Mother's presence that he doesn't take advantage of his opportunity. Dave has been conditioned to fear his Mother for so many years that, here, when he finally has a chance to free himself from her control, he's too scared to take it.

If anything, the real "villain" in this passage is Child Protection Services, as it existed in the late sixties and early seventies. It seems utterly unfair that the social services officer would ask Dave if Mother hurts him *while Mother is in the room* (since abusive parents can often intimidate their children into lying—and, in this situation, Mother clearly does). The characters in the memoir have only a limited awareness of child abuse, and there's no dependable protocol for how to deal with child abuse, even for a social services officer.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ As I sat alone in the garage, or read to myself in the near darkness of my parents' bedroom, I came to realize that I would live like this for the remainder of my life. No *just* God would leave me like this. I believed that I was alone in my struggle and that my battle was one of survival.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father, Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter Seven starts on an especially miserable note. Dave has been the victim of child abuse for many years now; after so many years, he's beginning to give up all hope that his life will get better. Dave has come to accept that beatings and starvation are regular parts of his life; furthermore, he's largely given up praying to God for salvation, or even hoping that his life might improve someday. Surely, he reasons, no God would allow him to be treated so horribly.

Although Chapter Seven begins with utter misery, it ends more optimistically. Dave regains his optimism (indeed, the last sentences of Chapter Seven are the lines from the Lord's prayer about being delivered from evil). Furthermore, Dave comes to understand, that he *can* depend on other people in his struggle; for example, his teachers risk their lives to help him reach safety. So although this passage dramatizes a crisis of faith in Dave's life, the crisis doesn't last forever. Dave learns to fend for himself, but he also comes to believe that God *does* answer people's prayers, and that it's okay for him to depend on other people—his commanders in the U.S. Air Force (in which he serves during the Gulf War), his priests, and his wife and child.

☝☝ It was a comforting thought that promised an escape from Aggie, her friends and all that I hated in the world. But my better senses returned, and I looked up and fixed my eyes directly on John's eyes and tried to hold my stare. After a few moments, he must have felt my anger because he turned away taking Aggie with him.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), John, Aggie

Related Themes: **Page Number:** 139**Explanation and Analysis**

In this tense passage, Dave contemplates suicide. He's put up with cruelty and abuse for so many years; now, however, the abuse is proving to be too much to bear. Dave has nobody to love him; even his classmates treat him with extraordinary cruelty and viciousness, urging him to jump off a ship and die.

The passage is, ultimately, a good example of Dave's impressive self-reliance and courage. Even when he believes that he has no particular reason for living, and even when everyone in his life, even his classmates, treats him with hatred, he finds the willpower to carry on living. *A Child Called "It"* is full of tragic events, but it's not a tragedy; on the contrary, as this passage reminds us, it's an inspiring story about how Dave maintains his courage and dignity in the face of almost unfathomable adversity.

☝ "Get one thing straight, you little son of a bitch! There is nothing you can do to impress me! Do you understand me? You are a nobody! An It! You are nonexistent! You are a bastard child! I hate you and I wish you were dead? Dead! Do you hear me? Dead!"

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker)**Related Themes:**  **Page Number:** 140**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Dave has just returned from school with a letter from his teacher, explaining that he's done a good job on an assignment. Instead of being proud of her son for succeeding academically, Mother tears up the letter and yells at Dave, insisting that he'll never be more than an "It" in her eyes—a worthless waste of space.

The passage is important for a couple reasons. It explains the memoir's striking title: Mother dehumanizes Dave, to the point where she claims not to think of him as a human being anymore (and, rather, an inanimate "it"). Furthermore, the passage emphasizes the psychological trauma that Dave endures as a result of living with his Mother for so many years. Mother tries to force Dave to believe that he is, in fact, a worthless waste of space—however, as Pelzer makes

clear by the end of his book, he's triumphed over Mother's bullying and cruelty and come to see himself as a good person and a proud, successful man.

☝ Father shook his head and said in a sad voice, "I can't take it anymore. The whole thing. Your mother, this house, you. I just can't take it anymore." Before he closed the bedroom door I could barely hear him mutter, "I . . . I'm . . . I'm sorry."

Related Characters: Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father, David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 149**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Father announces that he'll be moving out of the house. He and Mother have been fighting for a long time now, and now he'll be living somewhere else (shortly afterwards, Dave learns that his parents are separating permanently). The news that Father is leaving is especially tough for Dave because, in addition to the usual anxieties that accompany a parent's departure, Dave is frightened that, without Father around to protect him, Mother will begin abusing him even more severely.

The passage is also the defining example of Father's weakness. He understands that Mother is abusing Dave and, on some level, he recognizes that this abuse is fundamentally wrong. But even so, Father doesn't have the courage or the willpower to fight on behalf of his son; indeed, he seems to regard Dave as a burden, which he's eager to escape forever (notice that Father includes Dave—"you"—on the same list as Mother and the house). It's no wonder that Dave grows up believing that he can't rely on anyone but himself—his only protector in the house is a pathetic coward.

☝ As Mother drove out of the McDonald's parking lot, she glanced back at me and sneered, "You are all mine now. Too bad your father's not here to protect you."

Related Characters: Mother / Mom / Catherine Roerva Pelzer, David Pelzer / Dave (speaker), Stephen Joseph Pelzer / Father**Related Themes:** 

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, immediately after Dave says goodbye to Father for the last time, Mother confirms Dave's worst fears. Just as he's suspected, Mother is going to abuse him even more harshly than she did before. Gleefully, Mother tells Dave that he's at her mercy from now on—nobody's going to protect him from her wrath anymore. (However, in the previous chapters, it had seemed that Mother was abusing Dave more overtly and that she was no longer concerned with hiding her behavior from Father—suggesting that Father wasn't really “protecting” Dave in the first place. However, Pelzer doesn't really address this ambiguity in the book.) The passage confirms that Mother is a sadist of the first degree: she seems to take great pleasure in causing Dave the maximum amount of fear and anxiety, not just physical pain.

Perhaps the key word in this passage is “cycle.” Pelzer seems to be referring to the seemingly endless violence, both literal and psychological, that traumatized him in the early years of his life. Later in the chapter, Pelzer mentions the generational cycle of child abuse—in other words, the tragic fact that many child abusers were themselves victims of child abuse as children. Pelzer has broken from the cycle in both senses—by having a successful, happy life, and by raising a happy child.

“Even now, as salty tears run down my face, Stephen smiles, letting me maintain my dignity. But he knows why I'm crying. Stephen knows my tears are tears of joy. “Love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too, son.”

I'm free.

Epilogue Quotes

“I marvel at the wood how it reminds me of my former life. My beginning was extremely turbulent, being pushed and pulled in every direction. The more grisly my situation became, the more I felt as if some immense power were sucking me into some giant undertow. I fought as hard as I could, but the cycle never seemed to end. Until suddenly, without warning, I broke free.

I'm so lucky. My dark past is behind me now.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

In the Epilogue, Dave Pelzer takes a moment to count his blessings. He thinks back on his traumatic childhood, during which his parents pushed him around like an inanimate piece of wood. Then, quite unexpectedly, Dave's fortunes turned: the police took him away from his abusive Mother and placed him in a foster home (which Dave discusses in his other memoirs). Afterwards, Dave learned to work hard for his dreams, and became a pilot in the Air Force, and later a successful author. In short, he broke free.

Related Characters: Stephen, David Pelzer / Dave (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In the final sentences of the Epilogue, Dave Pelzer talks about his beloved child, Stephen Pelzer. It's a tragic truth that many child abuse victims grow up become abusive parents, perpetuating an endless cycle of abuse. Dave has broken “free” of the cycle of abuse, showing his child nothing but love and kindness. In interviews and speeches, Pelzer has often claimed that raising a happy kid is his proudest achievement in life.

It's also worth noting that Dave's child, Stephen, is named after Dave's father, Stephen Joseph (at least in the memoir; Dave changed the names of several characters, including his son). This might suggest that, even after all the neglect and indifference that Father showed Dave, Dave continues to feel some love for Father—perhaps because Father was *kinder* to Dave than Mother, even if he wasn't actually kind. Or perhaps Dave chooses the name Stephen to remind himself of the importance of being a loving, attentive father—in short, doing everything Father *didn't* do for him.

Perspectives on Child Abuse Quotes

☞ Once exposed, the causes of child abuse can be understood and support can truly begin. Childhood should be carefree, playing in the sun; not living a nightmare in the darkness of the soul.

Related Characters: David Pelzer / Dave (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In the final portion of *A Child Called "It"*, Dave Pelzer and a handful of other people offer their perspectives on child abuse. Pelzer writes about his personal experiences with child abuse, but also emphasizes a broader point: although his own experience with child abuse ended happily (with Pelzer's removal from Mother's house and with Pelzer's subsequent success in life), most instances of child abuse end miserably: often, children run away from home and end up living on the streets; in other cases, the children grow up to become abusive parents themselves. By adding a chapter on "Perspectives on Child Abuse," Pelzer aims to raise awareness of child abuse and protect children from danger. He ends his meditation by emphasizing the importance of keeping children happy and secure—in a word, "playing in the sun."

☞ My mind returned to the Thomas Edison School in Daly City, California, September, 1972. Enter little David Pelzer as one of my fifth-grade students. I was naive back then, but I was blessed with a sensitivity that told me there was something terribly wrong in David's life. Food missing from other students' lunches was traced to this thin, sad boy. Questionable bruises appeared on exposed parts of his body. Everything began to point to one thing: this kid was being beaten and punished in ways far beyond normal parental practice.

Related Characters: Steven E. Ziegler / Mr. Ziegler (speaker), David Pelzer / Dave

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Steven E. Zeigler, the teacher who, in 1973,

helped free Dave Pelzer from his mother's abusive household, offers his own unique perspective on child abuse. At the time of this writing, Ziegler has been teaching for more than twenty years, and he's gained a lot of important knowledge about child abuse—both how to recognize it and how to respond to it. In a way, Ziegler's experience with child abuse parallels the changes surrounding child abuse in America between the 1970s and 1990s: just as Ziegler became less naïve and more informed on the matter, so, too, did American society in general (however, this shouldn't suggest that all Americans are now well-informed about abuse—on the contrary, a lot more work needs to be done to keep children safe).

Ziegler also emphasizes the importance of staying vigilant and observant when it comes to child abuse. By using their common sense, teachers—and adults in general—can recognize abuse and alert the proper authorities as soon as possible, thereby protecting children from further harm.

☞ But now I know that I can help;
I can make a difference, too.
I'll stand with you; I'll shout with you,
And the rest can't say, "I never knew."

Related Characters: Cindy M. Adams (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In the final portion of the "Perspectives on Child Abuse" chapter, a woman named Cindy M. Adams contributes a poem on society's neglect of child abuse victims. As Adams writes, ordinary people can "make a difference" simply by speaking out against the cruelties they witness in the course of their daily lives. Throughout *A Child Called "It"*, adults witness Mother abusing Dave, and say nothing about it. Therefore, by speaking out against abuse, and refusing to remain silent, Adams strongly implies, people can prevent further cases of abuse like Dave's. Since it was published in the 1990s, Pelzer's book has been credited with raising awareness for abuse victims and catalyzing a broad movement to protect children from abusive parents. In a way, Cindy is the ideal reader of *A Child Called "It"*—a concerned, sensible person who takes Pelzer's lessons to heart and learns to speak out against injustice.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE RESCUE

It is March 5, 1973 in Daly City, California, and an unnamed narrator thinks, “I’m late.” Recognizing that he needs to finish doing his chores or risk going hungry again, he frantically tries to rinse the dishes in scalding hot water. Suddenly, “Mother” hits the narrator in the face, and he falls to the floor. He begs, “Please, just let me eat.” Instead, Mother hits him again and walks away. The narrator thinks, “I haven’t let her take away my will to survive.” He finishes the dishes and eats some of his brother’s cereal “before Mother changes her mind.” He thinks about how Mother never throws leftovers in the garbage, since she knows the narrator will dig them out later.

Later that morning, Mother drives the narrator and his brother to school. She tells the narrator that, tomorrow, she’s going to take him to Uncle Dan’s house. The narrator pretends to be afraid, but secretly he knows that Uncle Dan will be kinder than Mother. Mother tells the narrator, “Tell ‘em you ran into a door,” and then lets him out of the car. The narrator thinks about how Mother used to have beautiful hair—now she’s overweight, and she drinks constantly.

Since he’s late for school, the narrator reports to the secretary. The secretary, noticing the narrator’s bruises, sends him to the nurse, who asks him what’s happened. The narrator repeats, “I ran into a door.” When the nurse is skeptical, the narrator says, “I got hit by a bat. It was an accident.” The nurse asks him to undress, and then makes notes of the bruises and cuts on his body. She notices that his teeth are chipped, and, upon noticing a scar on the narrator’s stomach, asks, “And that is where she stabbed you?” Reluctantly, the narrator says, “Yes.” The nurse hugs him warmly and leaves the room. A moment later, she returns with the principal, Mr. Hansen, and two of the narrator’s teachers, Miss Woods and Mr. Ziegler. Mr. Hansen says that he’s had “enough of this.” Frightened, the narrator begs Mr. Hansen not to call Mother again, but Hansen promises he won’t.

The memoir begins en medias res—in the middle of the action. Right away, one gets the sense that the narrator is subservient to an abusive, angry “Mother,” who works him like a horse and denies him food. However, even if he can’t fight back, the narrator resists Mother’s abuse by preserving his dignity and his will to survive. As of yet, the narrator of the memoir is unnamed, perhaps reflecting the dehumanizing conditions in which he lives.



There are a few things to notice here. First, the narrator has become adept at hiding his thoughts and feelings from Mother. Second, Mother has trained the narrator to lie about his bruises, presumably so that his teachers won’t accuse her of abuse. Finally, the passage suggests that Mother’s abusiveness is at least partly a result of alcoholism.



The narrator has been trained to lie to adults about how he got his bruises and scars, but the nurse is perceptive enough to realize that he’s concealing the truth. Instead of playing along with his lies, the nurse asks the narrator, point-blank, if “she” (meaning Mother) stabbed him. There are also a few subtle hints that the nurse, along with the narrator’s teachers, have been aware of his bruises for a while now (hence Hansen saying he’s had enough). Like so many abused children, the narrator is terrified that if he tells the truth about Mother’s cruelty, Mother will hurt him even more harshly.



The narrator returns to his fifth grade class. He's usually a good student, but lately he hasn't had any time to study, and has, in fact, given up on "everything in my life." The students make fun of him for his old clothes and bad smell. Before long, the narrator is called to the principal's office. There, he finds Mr. Hansen, Mr. Ziegler, Miss Moss, the nurse, and a police officer. He has no idea that these adults are risking their jobs to save him.

The police officer asks the narrator to tell him about Mother, but the narrator refuses, afraid that Mother will find out. When Miss Moss assures the narrator that everything is going to be okay, he begins to cry. He shouts that getting stabbed was "an accident," and that Mother punishes him because he's bad. Miss Woods embraces the narrator, and then begins to cry. Mr. Hansen gives the narrator food, and the narrator eats it hurriedly. The police officer asks the narrator for more information, and the narrator wonders if he's going to jail. He feels relieved, since at least Mother won't be able to hit him there. The police officer walks the narrator outside. As they walk past the narrator's classmates, they cry, "Dave's busted!"

The police officer drives Dave to a police station. After completing some paperwork, he asks Dave for his Mother's phone number. Dave is initially reluctant to give him the number, since he's afraid that Mother will be angry with him for talking to the police. However, he gives the officer the number; the officer calls Mother and tells her that Dave is now in the custody of the San Mateo Juvenile Department. The officer smiles and says, "David Pelzer, you're free." The officer explains that Mother will never hurt him again. Dave begins to cry.

CHAPTER 2: GOOD TIMES

In the early sixties, Dave remembers, his family is perfect. He and his two brothers, Ronald and Stan, have been blessed with parents who love them, and they live in a nice house with a beautiful view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Dave's father, Stephen Joseph, is a fireman, and his mom, Catherine Roerva, is a determined, loving homemaker. She's extremely neat, and spends hours scouring and disinfecting kitchen. She's also a wonderful cook. Growing up, Dave loves playing with his pets, especially the pet fish, Thor.

The narrator is an outcast even among his peers, due largely to the results of his Mother's abuse. It's a sign of the general ignorance of child abuse in the 1970s that the narrator's teachers would be risking their jobs just to investigate a transparently obvious case of child abuse.



The Narrator is terrified of Mother and seems to despise her, yet she has conditioned him to repeat and even believe the horrifying lie that he deserves his punishment. Notice also that readers learn Dave's name for the first time in this passage; it's appropriate that, at the moment when Dave is freed from his Mother and begins a new phase in his life, he finally acquires a name and an identity in readers' eyes.



As this passage makes clear, A Child Called "It" begins at the end of the story: with Dave's liberation from Mother's abuse—a moment that is triumphant, but also emotionally overwhelming for Dave, since he's never experienced any life at all beyond Mother's control.



Having described how he frees himself from Mother in the previous chapter, Dave now circles back to describe his horrific early life. Strangely, Dave's mother is, at least initially, a loving woman—precisely the opposite of what she later becomes (for example, she cleans the house herself instead of forcing Dave to do it, and cooks big meals instead of starving Dave).



Dave still has vivid memories of celebrating the holidays with his family. The day after Thanksgiving, Mom would begin decorating for Christmas, and Dave loved decorating the Christmas tree and singing carols. Once, Dave sees his mother cry—when he asks her why she’s crying, she says that she’s glad to have a “real family.” Mom also takes Dave and his brothers to the zoo, where she holds his hand when he’s frightened by the animals. He and his family go on vacations to the beach and the redwood forests.

One evening, Dave’s parents take him to watch the sunset. As he watches the sun set over the nearby Russian River, Mom hugs him. He says he’s never felt as safe and warm as he does then.

CHAPTER 3: BAD BOY

Dave’s relationship with Mom changes very quickly, however, to the point where things get so bad he has “no strength to crawl away—even if it meant saving my life.” Mom begins spending all her time drinking and eating. She yells at her children more often, to the point where Dave begins to fear her.

Mother begins to punish Dave more and more harshly. At first, she punishes him for being loud by making him stand in the corner; later on, however, she simply hits Dave in the face or smashes his face into the mirror. Then, she forces him to repeat, “I’m a bad boy.” When Mother punishes Dave, his brothers shrug and keep playing without him. At first Dave is hurt that they don’t try to defend him, but later he realizes that they’re protecting themselves.

Father works long hours—sometimes twenty-four hours at a time. In times like this, Mother punishes her children especially harshly. She forces them to search the entire house for something she claims to have lost, and, when they can’t find it, she hits them. Once, Dave forgets what he’s supposed to be looking for, and when he asks Mother what it is, she hits him in the face. Dave slowly realizes that when Father is home, Mother doesn’t beat him. Once, Father says goodbye to Dave for the day by telling him to be a “good boy.” As he hears this, Dave thinks about Mother telling him that he’s a “bad boy.” He wants to hug Father; however, Father gets up to go before Dave can do anything. Sometimes, Father and Mother begin drinking around 3 PM and don’t stop until they go to bed.

Dave’s early life is happy, and, seemingly, perfectly normal—for all intents and purposes, his mother seems to love him deeply. Pelzer never describes why, exactly, his mother turns from a loving parent to an abusive one—her cruelty is capricious and impossible to understand.



The chapter ends on a note of pure happiness; however, in light of what readers know about Mother from Chapter One, the moment of happiness becomes eerie and even frightening.



It’s never fully explained why Mother begins abusing Dave; all Pelzer writes is that she begins drinking more heavily (however, there are millions of alcoholic parents who don’t abuse their children). Mother’s cruelty is impossible to understand, which it makes at all the more frightening.



“Mom” has become “Mother,” perhaps symbolizing her increasingly cold, distant relationship with Dave. Also notice that, from the very beginning, she forces Dave to say that he’s bad, implying that he deserves his punishment (and slowly conditioning him to believe that he really is “bad”). Again, it’s never explained why Mother abuses Dave but not his brothers. Pelzer suggests that life for him and his siblings was “every man for himself”—his brothers didn’t protect him because they were frightened of getting hurt themselves.



Mother is cruel, and yet she’s perceptive enough to change her behavior when Father is around the house. The passage shows how Mother’s abuse slowly trains Dave to think of himself as bad, even when his Father tells him to be good. Dave’s Father isn’t a particularly good man, but he’s somewhat kinder than Mother. Therefore, Dave naturally gravitates toward him in times of need—nobody else can protect him from Mother. Dave’s love for his Father is heartbreaking, since Father presumably knows that Mother hits Dave (he can see that his son is bruised, after all).



One day, while Father is at work, Mother yells for her children. While Dave's brothers run away, Mother—whose eyes are bloodshot—hits Dave again and again. Suddenly, Dave hears a “pop” in his arm. At dinner, Dave can't move his arm at all. That night, Mother wakes up Dave and takes him to the hospital. There, she tells the doctor that Dave fell from his bunk bed; however, Dave can tell from the doctor's look that he knows the injury was “no accident.” When Dave gets home from the hospital, Mother tells Father that Dave fell from the top bunk, and that she tried to catch him. Dave senses that Mother is “sick.”

Dave loves school because it's an escape from Mother. He makes friends and gets good grades. One day, however, Mother yells that Dave will be held back in school because he's a “bad boy.” She also tells Dave that he's forbidden from watching TV or eating dinner. That summer, Mother sends Dave to spend time with his Aunt Josie while she takes his brothers camping—Dave can't understand why. He tries to run away from Aunt Josie's house; later, Josie tells Mother about his attempts to escape, and Mother punches Dave. She also shoves a bar of soap in his mouth when he tries to speak. Afterwards, Dave isn't allowed to speak unless spoken to.

After the summer, Dave repeats the first grade. He's the most knowledgeable kid in class, since he already knows the material. Dave is in the same class as his younger brother, Stan. In class, Dave and Stan are friendly, but at home Stan ignores Dave. One day, when Dave does well on an assignment, he shows the assignment to Mother; Mother responds by telling Dave that he won't be receiving anything for Christmas. On Christmas, Dave receives few gifts, and Mother tells Dave and his brothers that Santa only brings presents for good boys and girls. Later, Dave hears Mother arguing with Father, who's bought Dave a few gifts. After the argument, Dave senses that Father will no longer defend him.

Mother is forced to lie to other people about how her son gets his injuries; as time goes on, she forces Dave to lie about his injuries, too. The fact that the doctor seems to know that Mother is lying, and yet does nothing to stop her cruelty, speaks volumes about society's tendency to turn a blind eye to abuse: Dave's years of abuse are only possible because his friends, peers, teachers, and neighbors look the other way.



In addition to punishing Dave physically, Mother devises more abstract forms of punishment, humiliating him into repeating the first grade, even though, it's implied, he's more than clever enough to advance to second grade. (However, it's never explained how Mother convinces Dave's teachers to hold him back a year). Mother's punishments seem to be designed to inhibit Dave's mental growth (silencing him at an age when he should be learning new words, preventing him from learning new information, etc.), perhaps in order to make him even more dependent on her.



At this point in his life, Dave is still close with his siblings; however, Mother's new cruelty splits apart the family and alienates Dave from his brothers. As before, Father is the only person in the family who defends Dave, but he only defends his son in the most pathetically simple ways. Instead of standing up to his wife for abusing their son, Father goes along with his wife's sadism without much protest.



In the spring, Mother becomes “den mother” for the local Cub Scouts team. She invites children to the house and treats them kindly; some of them tell Dave they wish their mothers were as kind as his. One Wednesday, when Dave is preparing to go to practice, Mother smashes Dave’s face into the mirror and then forces him to tell the other den mother that he can no longer go to practice because he’s been a “bad boy.” Afterwards, Mother forces Dave to undress and explains that he’s being punished for playing on the grass. When Dave insists that he’s never done so, Mother punches him. Then she holds his arm over the hot stove and yells for him to climb up on the stove and sit on the flames. Terrified, Dave tries to stall—if he can wait for Ron to come home, perhaps Mother will stop trying to hurt him. Suddenly, Ron walks through the door. Mother freezes, and Dave grabs his clothes and run away.

Alone in the garage, Dave realizes that he’s used his brains to survive. From then on, he decides that he’ll try as hard as he can to delay or defeat Mother—he’ll never, ever give in to her or give her the pleasure of begging her to stop hurting him. Even though Dave’s arm is burned, he tells himself not to cry. He can hear Mother telling Ron that she’s happy she doesn’t have to worry about Ron becoming like Dave—a bad boy.

Mother’s cruelty toward Dave is especially sickening because she can turn on the charm at any moment—thus, other children wish that she was their mother. She continues forcing Dave to repeat that he’s a bad boy, brainwashing him into submitting to her authority. However, instead of giving into Mother’s authority, Dave learns how to resist his Mother by stalling for time. Mother is cruel to Dave, but also cunning—she tortures her son, but only when they’re alone together (perhaps because she thinks that Dave’s Father or brothers would rush to his defense).



In spite of the grimness of his life, Dave finds little ways to fight back against Mother. Even though he’s too young to defeat Mother, he quickly learns the importance of preserving his own dignity—therefore, he vows never to beg for mercy. Meanwhile, Mother tries to alienate Dave from the rest of the family by brainwashing Ron into believing that Dave’s bad.



CHAPTER 4: THE FIGHT FOR FOOD

After Mother burns Dave, school becomes his refuge. In September, he returns to school with new clothes; however, Mother makes him wear the same clothes again and again, until they become worn. Sometimes Mother refuses to feed Dave dinner, meaning that he has to steal food to survive. Dave’s classmates hate him and tell their teacher when he steals from them—his teacher then tells Mother, who punishes Dave by hitting him and denying him more food.

At home, Dave is barely a part of the family anymore. Mother no longer uses his name, and Ron, Stan, and Father mostly ignore him. Sometimes, Father feeds Dave when Mother is especially drunk. Father and Mother fight over Dave, and Dave is grateful to Father for fighting for him.

Mother’s cruelty toward Dave seems designed to keep him as weak, lonely, and frightened as possible—thus, she alienates him from his classmates, seemingly because she doesn’t him developing friends or allies (whose parents might question why Dave is always bruised). Dave is a thief, but only because his Mother starves him.



As before, Father sticks up for Dave, but only in pathetically small ways. Instead of taking care of his child, Father generally goes along with Mother’s cruelty and abusiveness. However, because Father is the closest thing to a loving family member that Dave has, he continues to love Father.



The year Dave goes to the second grade, Mother becomes pregnant. Miss Moss, Dave's teacher, asks Dave why he has so much trouble paying attention in class. Dave lies and says he's been watching TV. Miss Moss asks Dave why he has bruises on his body, and why his clothes are so threadbare. Dave tells Moss the lies Mother has trained him to repeat. One day, Moss becomes so suspicious that she sends Dave to the principal, who calls Mother and asks about Dave's condition. When Dave goes home that day, Mother is so angry that she knocks out one of Dave's teeth. The next day, Mother goes to the principal, carrying her baby, Russell. She later explains that she's told the principal that Dave has a wild imagination and hurts himself to get attention.

Over the summer, Dave and the rest of the family drive out to Russian River to go camping. Dave gets along with Mother better than he has in a long time, but the "magical feeling" is gone. One day, Mother yells at Dave for making too much noise. While Dave's Father and brothers are out of the house, Mother takes one of Russell's diapers and smears it in Dave's face. Then she tells Dave to eat it. Panicking, Dave tries to avoid looking Mother in the face. Then he "switches tactics" and begins to cry, thinking that he'll be able to "slow her down." Mother responds by hitting Dave again and again. Mother hears Russell crying and goes to take care of him. She comes back with another one of Russell's soiled diapers, and again orders Dave to eat the feces. She slams Dave's face in the diaper and rubs it around. Suddenly, Mother lets go of Dave—she gasps, "They're back!" and orders Dave to clean himself immediately.

In September, Dave returns to school, wearing the same clothes he wore last year. Instead of driving Dave to school, Mother forces Dave to run to school. At school, Dave's old friends make fun of him for wearing the same clothes and stealing food. At home, Father tries to sneak scraps to Dave, but "with little success." Dave is so desperate for food that he decides to run to the grocery store during recess and steal food. Dave takes weeks to plan his theft: he knows he has to run to make it back to school in time. One day, he finally works up the courage to steal from the store. After the bell rings, he sprints to the store. Inside, he senses that everyone is looking at him. Nevertheless, because he's desperate for food, he steals some graham crackers.

Through Dave's child, a handful of teachers and parents wonder why his body is covered with bruises. However, Pelzer suggests that Mother is able to assure the authorities that she's not abusing Dave by claiming that Dave hurts himself. The fact that a school principal would swallow an alibi that, from the reader's perspective, probably seems like an obvious lie might suggest that, in the 1970s, public awareness of child abuse was low, and people were significantly more likely to overlook abuse than they would be in the 21st century.



One of the most horrific things about Mother is her volatility. At times, she treats Dave kindly and even lovingly; however, by this point in his life, Dave is familiar enough with his mother's cruelty to recognize that, soon enough, she'll go back to abusing him. This is one of the most disgusting and traumatic passages in the entire book. As in the last chapters, Mother's abuse seems both unfathomably cruel and cunningly calculated (she works hard to conceal the evidence of her cruelty from the rest of the family). Mother is a terrifying character because she's a mess of contradictions: drunk and out of control, yet cunning; intermittently kind and abusive.



Mother continues to isolate Dave from the rest of his family, not even allowing him to sit in the car with his siblings. In spite of his adverse conditions—or, in a way, because of them—Dave learns to use his ingenuity to fend for himself and steal enough food to survive. Although Pelzer isn't condoning breaking the law, the young Dave's attempts to find food reflect his defiance and his heroic attempts to resist his mother's cruelty.



Dave runs back to school with the graham crackers and hides them in a garbage can. Then, later in the afternoon, he goes to the bathroom, eager to eat the crackers—but when he goes to the bathroom, he finds that the custodian has emptied the trash. Shortly afterwards, however, Dave is transferred to the school across the street. There, he begins stealing food from his classmates again, while also stealing from the store. One day, the manager catches him and calls Mother; Mother beats Dave.

After dinner, Mother scrapes leftovers into the garbage can and then makes Dave wash the dishes with scalding hot water. Desperate for food, Dave decides to eat from the trash. After Mother catches Dave eating trash, she lets him continue. But one evening, after Dave eats some scraps of pork, he gets diarrhea—he later learns that Mother has purposefully let the pork spoil before throwing it away. Afterwards, Mother sprinkles ammonia in the trashcan.

Dave's next plan to get food is to steal frozen lunches from the cafeteria. In the morning, when delivery trucks drop off frozen lunches, Dave sneaks into the cafeteria and swallows pieces of frozen hot dogs. When he returns to the classroom, he's proud that he's fed himself. But when he comes home that day, Mother punches him in the stomach and forces him to stick his finger down his throat and vomit. Dave vomits up pieces of hot dog meat. Mother hisses, "I thought so," and orders Dave to scoop the vomit into a small bowl. That evening, Mother shows Father the bowl and insists that Dave has been stealing food. Father, who looks very tired, points out that Mother should let Dave eat. Furious, Mother shouts, "He can eat this!" Father tries to argue, but Dave notices the saddened look on his face and realizes "immediately who won." Dave proceeds to eat the vomit, while Father watches, drink in hand. At this time, Dave hates Father even more than he hates Mother.

After Dave eats his vomit, Mother throws some old newspapers at him and informs him that, from now on, he'll be sleeping under a table, with the papers as his blanket. In the coming months, Dave learns how to keep warm. Then Mother forces him to sleep in the garage. As he falls asleep every night, Dave fantasizes about being a "real person," with a warm blanket and loving parents. Sometimes, Dave prays to God to make him strong "both in body and soul."

Dave's plan to steal food ultimately fails, thanks to the custodian. The sad irony of Dave's situation is that Mother punishes him for stealing food when, in reality, he only has to steal food because Mother punishes him. Although Pelzer, writing as an adult, is well aware of this fact, Dave the young child seems to believe that he's a fundamentally bad kid, just as Mother tells him.



As the book goes on, Mother's torture becomes increasingly elaborate and cruel. It's clear, from the fact that she goes to the trouble of placing rotting pork in the trash, that Mother isn't trying to teach Dave a lesson or prevent him from being a "bad boy," as she claims—she's just toying with him, trying to cause him as much suffering as possible.



This passage was one of the most frequently discussed—and hotly debated—in the entire book. Some praised Dave for his bravery in reliving what must have been a harrowing moment in his early life. Others questioned the veracity of the episode—particularly, the fact that Mother seems to know immediately that Dave's eaten food, that she manages to force Dave to vomit, and that Father doesn't react at all to the sight of his child eating his own vomit. Dave's brother Stephen has claimed that the incident was completely made up. Setting aside the disputes over the passage's accuracy, however, Pelzer conveys his boyhood self's hatred for his Father, whose passivity could be said to symbolize the general passivity of 1970s American society, which, by and large, looks the other way at Dave's abuse.



Throughout his abuse, Dave maintains an active fantasy life—he remains hopeful that, someday, life will get better for him. Pelzer is a pious Christian, and when discussing his childhood, he frames his optimism in explicitly Christian terms.



Dave begins begging for food on his way to school. He stops at various houses and asks mothers to make him an extra lunch; many of them take pity on him and do so. However, one day, Dave asks a woman who knows Mother, and he's terrified that the woman will call Mother. All day long, Dave tries not to think about the beating he'll receive that night. After coming home from school he begins washing dishes, and listens to the sounds of children playing outside. Suddenly, he turns—Mother is standing behind him. She sneers, "You find time to beg for food." Dave tenses, expecting Mother to beat him. Instead, she goes to watch TV. Dave proceeds with his chores—scouring the bathroom and the other rooms of the house. Mother sees how terrified Dave is, and smiles. By dinnertime, Dave is "exhausted with fear." Then he realizes that Mother is trying to "maintain a constant pressure" over him.

Suddenly Mother calls Dave upstairs. She tells him, "I have a cure for your hunger," and orders him to wait for everyone else to go to bed. Dave is frightened, and wishes he could fly away forever. As night falls and everyone else goes to bed, Mother calls Dave to the table. She pours ammonia into a spoon and orders him to swallow it. Frightened and exhausted, Dave does so. Right away, he feels a horrible pain, and senses that he's going to die. As Dave writhes in agony, Mother drinks a "glass of booze" and sends him to bed. The next evening, Mother makes Dave swallow more ammonia, this time in front of Father, who watches, "lifeless." This time, Dave tries to fight back; however, he still swallows some ammonia, and spends the night in agony. The next day, Dave looks in the mirror and sees that some flesh has peeled off his tongue. Mother never makes him drink ammonia again, but she does make him swallow Clorox and soap, giving him diarrhea.

One day, Mother squeezes soap into Dave's mouth and makes him swallow. Secretly, Dave doesn't—he just keeps the soap in his mouth, and spits it out when Mother isn't looking. Dave is proud of himself for "beating Mother at her own game." He also steals frozen food from the freezer in the garage. He likes to imagine that he's a king, eating lavish meals.

CHAPTER 5: THE ACCIDENT

In the summer of 1971, Dave is ten years old. He's come to learn what punishments to expect from Mother—above all, beatings. He's also learned to reflexively tense his body whenever Mother is nearby. He's given little food—on average, one evening meal every three days.

Mother seems to be well aware that Dave asked one of her friends for some food; however, instead of beating Dave, as she usually does, she prefers to toy with him, manipulating his natural fear of a beating. Instead of being confused and overwhelmed with his mother's cruelty, however, Dave perceptively realizes what Mother is trying to do, suggesting that he's smarter and more insightful than Mother realizes. Even if he's too small to fight back against Mother, Dave doesn't sacrifice his dignity or self-respect; he's frightened of Mother, but he's composed enough to understand that she's trying to frighten him.



This passage, like the vomit-eating passage, has been disputed since A Child Called "It" was published in 1995. More than a few people have argued that, had Dave, a small, weak child, actually been fed ammonia twice in twenty-four hours, he either would have died or would have needed to go to the hospital immediately. (As with the vomit-eating incident, Dave's sibling has denied this ever happened.) In many ways, there is nothing to say about Dave's torture as it's described in this passage: it's so brutal (and readers are told so little about why Mother tortures her son) that readers have no choice but to read Pelzer's memoir in a state of total shock.



In spite of the horrifying torture that Dave experiences in this chapter, he finds little ways of rebelling and resisting Mother's authority. He can't fight her, but he can disobey her from time to time. Perhaps most importantly, Dave "escapes" from Mother in his dreams and fantasies.



By 1971, Dave has become so used to his abuse—something no human should ever have to experience, let alone grow accustomed to—that he's not surprised when Mother beats him. He's still frightened of Mother, yet he's coming to accept cruelty as a basic part of his life.



One evening in July, Dave sits by the stairs while the rest of the family eats dinner—Dave isn't allowed to eat with the rest of his family. Suddenly, Mother shouts for Dave to come into the kitchen and clear the dishes. As he clears the dishes, Dave notices his little brother Russell, who's now old enough to tattle to Mother when Dave steals food. Russell has become Mother's loyal helper, and sometimes he invents stories of Dave's wrongdoings so that he can watch Dave be punished. Dave hates Russell, even though he understands that he's been "brainwashed."

As Dave clears the dishes, Mother continues to yell, brandishing a big knife at him and threatening to kill him if he doesn't do the dishes quickly. Dave is so used to Mother's threats that he's not particularly afraid. Suddenly, Mother begins to stumble and sway, as if she's very dizzy. Out of the corner of his eye, Dave sees Mother's hand waving an object, and then he feels a sharp pain in his stomach, so intense that he passes out. When he comes to, Dave sees Mother applying gauze to his bleeding stomach. Dave senses that Mother has stabbed him accidentally. He tries to forgive her, but he's too weak to speak.

When Dave wakes up again, Mother is wrapping a cloth around his chest. Mother often said that she'd intended to be a nurse before meeting Father, and Dave trusts her nursing abilities completely. Dave feels a strange sense of relief—he senses that "it was over. This whole charade of living like a slave had come to an end." After half an hour, Mother stands up and tells Dave, in her normal tone, that he has half an hour to finish the dishes. Bewildered, Dave stands up and proceeds to wash the dishes, in spite of the massive pain in his abdomen.

Father walks into the house. Dave gasps, "Mother stabbed me." Without raising an eyebrow, Father asks, "Why?" Dave explains that he'd been doing the dishes, and Father replies, "You better go back in there and do the dishes." He promises Dave that he won't tell Mother that Dave told him about being stabbed—"It'll be our little secret," he claims. Dave is shocked, and whatever respect he had for Father is gone. He turns, bleeding underneath the gauze, and resumes doing the dishes. He wants to curl up in misery, but he remembers the promise he made himself—he'll never show Mother—"The Bitch"—that she's beaten him.

Mother turns her children against Dave—especially Russell, who, Dave suggests, she brainwashes to despise Dave almost as soon as he's born. Dave is conflicted: on one hand, he's smart enough to realize that it's not Russell's fault that he's been brainwashed; on the other, Dave hates that his brother is cooperating with a cruel torturer like Mother.



In this passage, it's not entirely clear if Mother intends to stab Dave or not. She's very drunk, and seems to stumble toward Dave (suggesting that she wasn't intended to hurt him); on the other hand, she's just waved a knife at him and threatened to kill him. Dave believes that the stabbing was an accident (and, as an adult, has continued to claim that it was an accident)—but of course, whether or not Mother "meant" to stab her son, she should never have been waving a knife at him in the first place, let alone threatening to kill him. (It's worth noting that Pelzer's brother has disputed that their mother stabbed Pelzer.)



It's tragic that Dave continues to trust and depend on Mother, even after she stabs him. Dave has never known any life other than life under Mother's control, perhaps explaining why he trusts her. The passage suggests that, on some level, Dave wishes for death; his life is so miserable that death would be a relief. Perhaps the most horrifying thing in this passage is that Mother still expects Dave to do the dishes after being wounded, suggesting that she has no sympathy for Dave and, perhaps, that she thinks of wounding him as a regular part of her life.



Father continues to comply with Mother's wishes, even when it means ignoring his own child's obvious need for a doctor. Tragically, being stabbed is an important "coming of age" moment for Dave: he begins to see that Father isn't his protector at all; he's just Mother's pawn. Even in the depths of despair, Dave tries to stay strong and defy Mother.



As Dave is finishing the dishes, he succumbs to the pain and collapses. He feels Father helping him to his feet. Father tells Dave to change his shirt, and Dave looks down and sees that his shirt is covered in blood. Dave goes upstairs, where Mother removes his shirt and dresses him in an oversized T-shirt. Mother allows Dave to rest for a few moments, and then gives him a glass of water. Monotonously, she tells Dave that she'll feed him in a few hours when he feels better. Dave limps outside to Ron and Stan, who ignore him. It's the Fourth of July, and Ron and Stan wave sparklers. Mother offers Dave a sparkler, and he accepts. For a few precious seconds, he wonders if Mother is going to be nicer to him from now on. Then, his sparkler fizzles out.

Before going to bed, Mother feeds Dave some food. He sleeps in the garage, trying not to think of the pain. Eventually he falls asleep from exhaustion. He wakes up in the middle of the night to find Mother applying a cold washcloth to his forehead. Dave feels safer knowing that Mother is nearby. The next morning, however, Dave wakes up to find that his shirt is covered in dried blood. Speaking in her normal voice, Mother orders Dave to proceed with his chores.

Three days after the "accident," Dave feels awful, but Mother is back to her old ways. Dave doesn't ask Mother for any help. In private, he treats his injury by running cold water over it. The pain is almost unbearable, and a disgusting yellowish substance oozes from the wound. Dave is about to call for Mother—but then thinks, "I don't need that bitch's help." He forces himself to take care of his wound—he uses a rag to clean the pus, fighting back tears. That night, Dave's wound doesn't bleed as much as it has been. In his dream that night, Dave wears a red cape—he's **Superman**.

CHAPTER 6: WHILE FATHER IS AWAY

After Dave's stabbing, Father spends less and less time at home. He makes excuses, but Dave doesn't believe them. When Father is home, Mother doesn't hurt Dave as often. One evening, Father helps Dave do the dishes, and tells him, "Some day, you and I will both get out of this madhouse." This makes Dave feel a little better. Later, however, Mother stops Father from helping Dave. Afterwards, Dave senses, Mother has "complete control over everybody in the household." One day, Father tells Dave that he's sorry for everything, and Dave notices that Father has dark circles under his eyes and lots of gray hairs.

Mother cares for Dave by giving him a glass of water and a T-shirt, but she shows him no real compassion. The scene ends with the almost surreal revelation that today is the Fourth of July (usually, a fun, family holiday), emphasizing the "gap" between Dave's life and the lives of other American children (including his own brothers). Dave's sparkler could be said to symbolize his vain hopes that Mother will return to being nice—just as the sparkler fizzles out, his hopes "fizzle," and he realizes that Mother will never change.



As before, Dave hates and fears his mother, but he has no choice but to rely on her for help and protection. Dave's life is so miserable that Mother—here, his main source of comfort—is also his main source of misery.



Throughout his ordeal, Dave remains brave and strong. Instead of begging Mother for help, he summons the courage and self-reliance to take care of himself. Dave's dream, in which he becomes Superman, flying through the sky, symbolizes Dave's ability to find small ways of escaping his misery, and, furthermore, his ability to retreat from the misery of his waking life with the help of fantasy, faith, and optimism.



Pelzer implies that, although Father doesn't want oppose Mother by defending Dave, he feels guilty and uncomfortable being around the house, and therefore makes himself scarce. Although Dave has said that he hates Father for his negligence, he sometimes expresses sympathy for Father's—here, for example, Dave notes the physical toll that Mother's cruelty has taken on Father. (It's also worth keeping in mind that Dave names his child after his father, again suggesting that Dave maintains some sympathy for him.)



During one period when Father is gone for work, Mother starves Dave for ten days. She makes sure that Dave eats no food, locking the freezer and throwing all the food down the garbage disposal. Dave survives by drinking water. By the sixth day, Dave is so weak that he can barely move. When Dave begs for food, Mother laughs and sarcastically calls him a “poor baby.” After ten days, however, she gives him a plate of cold leftovers and tells him he has two minutes to eat. Dave has no idea why Mother treats him so horribly. As his brothers eat their dinners and watch television, he silently curses them.

When Father is away, Mother forces Dave to clean the bathroom with ammonia and Clorox. She locks him inside, so that the air becomes misty, and Dave’s eyes began to burn. Even though he can barely breathe, Dave cleans the bathroom quickly, for fear of angering Mother. He places the ammonia and Clorox as close to the door as possible, both to protect himself from the fumes and so that Mother will inhale some of the fumes when she opens the door. Later that night, Dave coughs up blood.

During the summer, Mother makes Dave mow lawns and give her the money he earns. The previous Easter vacation Mother also made Dave mow lawns, and set a high quota for Dave. Frightened that he wouldn’t meet his quota, Dave stole nine dollars from a little girl. When the girl’s father told Mother about Dave’s theft, Mother beat Dave. That summer, Dave continues mowing lawns, and some of his customers take pity on him and feed him. Once, Dave brings his lunch into the car when Mother picks him up; furious, mother throws away the food before Dave can eat it. That summer, Dave begins to give up on God. He decides that God must hate him for letting him live in such miserable conditions.

One day, Mother summons Dave to the bathroom, where he finds her filling the tub with cold water. Mother forces Dave to push his head underwater. At first, she won’t let him up for air until he thrashes and digs his fingernails into her shoulder. Then, Mother tells Dave to lie in the water, his nostrils “barely above the surface of the water.” The water is extremely cold, but Dave is too frightened of Mother to protest. Hours pass, and Dave’s brothers walk in and out of the bathroom; instead of being friendly, they glare at Dave and ignore him. Around dinnertime, Mother yells for Dave to get out of the tub; she doesn’t let him dry himself before putting on his clothes. Mother forces Dave to sit in the shadiest corner of the backyard, out of the sun, while she serves food to her children and husband inside.

Because Father spends less time around the house, Mother becomes even bolder in her abuse—not only does she starve him for more than a week; she mocks him. This passage is notable for being one of the only points in the book during which Dave poses the question of why Mother tortures him. Because Pelzer never fully answers this question, readers cannot understand Mother’s behavior, and therefore have no choice but to experience it from Dave’s childhood point of view, in its full, unfathomable horror.



Even when he’s in danger of losing consciousness, Dave remains loyal to Mother’s commands, since he’s frightened of being tortured even more. But even here, he finds tiny ways to resist Mother’s tyranny, such as forcing her to inhale some of the fumes when she opens the door.



As before, Mother “punishes” Dave for committing crimes that were only necessary in the first place because of her abuse. At this point in the story, Dave’s faith in God begins to waver. His life is so uniformly miserable that he has no good reason to believe that a just God exists—surely no God would allow a small boy to suffer the way Dave has suffered.



The fact that Dave’s brothers ignore his torture suggests how thoroughly Mother has brainwashed her family into accepting her cruelty. From Stan, Ron, and Russell’s perspective, Dave is a “bad boy” who deserves the grotesque punishments Mother doles out to him. Mother’s cruelty has become such a normal part of their lives that they don’t think twice about it—even when their own brother is sitting right next to them, freezing in the bath.



In the coming weeks, Mother begins to use the “bathtub and backyard treatment” on Dave more and more often. Dave’s brothers bring their friends into the bathroom to look at Dave; when they ask Dave’s brothers what Dave did to deserve this, they just shrug and say they don’t know.

Perhaps even more horrifying than their tacit acceptance of Dave’s punishment is the fact that Dave’s brothers exhibit Dave to their friends. Evidently, they’ve ceased to think of Dave as a brother, or perhaps even a human being—as far as they’re concerned, he’s become a curiosity to be laugh and gawked at.



Fall arrives, and Dave begins the fourth grade. For the first two weeks, the class has a substitute teacher, who gives the good students ice cream and plays pop records. Dave earns ice cream in his second week. That Friday, Dave tells the substitute that he doesn’t want to go home for the weekend and begs to stay a little longer. The substitute lets Dave stay longer and listen to another record. Then Dave runs home, where he begins his chores, and afterwards, Mother forces him to sit in the backyard in the cold. Dave begins to cry—the substitute teacher has been so kind to him that he’s developed a crush on her.

Although Dave endures some horrific torture, his life isn’t completely tragic. There are some people who treat him kindly, such as the substitute teacher. It’s never explained why the substitute lets Dave stay after school, but it’s loosely suggested that, on some level, she can tell that he’s frightened of his family. It’s natural for Dave to develop a crush on this teacher—she’s seemingly the only person in his life who treats him with warmth and kindness.



By October, Dave’s life has gotten even worse. Bullies tease him, and he has a hard time finding food. After school, Mother makes him vomit to prove that he hasn’t eaten anything that day. She whips him with a chain, forces him to sit in cold water for hours, beats him, and forces him to mow lawns to earn money for her. Dave stops praying to God, and concentrates on surviving, one day at a time.

As the year goes on, Dave falls into a horrific routine of beatings and forced vomiting. Confronted with so much pain and suffering, Dave seems to give up on God altogether—thus, his priority is surviving, not dreaming of future salvation.



One morning, Dave is sent to the school nurse. At first, Dave tells the nurse the lies Mother has instructed him to repeat. But gradually he begins to trust the nurse, and tells her the truth about Mother. The nurse takes notes, and tells her to come visit anytime he wants. Later on, Dave learns that the nurse became interested in seeing him because of reports from the kind substitute teacher who gave him ice cream early in the year.

It’s interesting that, after many years of going through the school system, Dave is only referred to the nurse because of one substitute teacher’s actions. This might suggest that an outsider—a substitute who isn’t completely familiar with Dave’s school or who the school’s “bad kids” are supposed to be—has an easier time recognizing the blatant truth: somebody’s been beating Dave regularly.



In late October, Dave’s brothers carve pumpkins for Halloween while Dave sits alone in the cold bathtub. Dave can hear Mother telling her other children ghost stories and treating them with love and warmth—he’s so furious that he wants to scream. Later, Mother goes into the bathroom and orders Dave to go sleep in Father’s bed. Lately, Dave notes, Mother has been sleeping in the same bedroom as her sons, while Dave sleeps in Father’s bed. That night, Father comes home late, and goes to sleep next to Dave without saying a word.

Pelzer hints at the widening rift between Mother and Father—they’re no longer sleeping in the same bed. (Pelzer does not pursue the possibility, subtly hinted at in this passage, of Mother sexually abusing of her other children.) The passage might also suggest that Mother associates Father with Dave, and vice versa, which would further suggest that she takes out her anger at Father on Dave.



Christmas is a rough time of year for Dave, because he doesn't get to go to school. For Christmas, he receives a pair of roller skates, which he later learns are another instrument of torture: Mother forces Dave to skate outside without a jacket in the cold while the other children stay warm inside.

In March, Mother goes into labor, and Father takes her to the hospital. Dave is very relieved to have Mother out of the house, even for a few days. While Mother is in the hospital, Father lets Dave play with his brothers, and serves everyone sandwiches. The brothers play at their neighbor Shirley's house. Shirley is kind, and reminds Dave of Mother in the "days before she started beating me." A few days later, Mother comes back from the hospital with a new baby named Kevin. Within weeks, everything is back to normal: Mother is cruel to Dave, and Father stays out of the way. However, Mother becomes close friend with Shirley. When Shirley is around, Mother pretend to be a loving parent. When Shirley asks Mother why Dave isn't allowed to play with his brothers, Mother makes up various excuses. Then one day, without warning, Mother severs all ties with Shirley, and goes around the house calling her a "bitch."

One Sunday, Mother tells Dave that she's sorry, and that she wants to "make up for all the lost time." She holds Dave tightly, and they both start to cry. Dave asks mother, "Is it really over?" Mother replies, "It's over, sweetheart." She gives Dave a warm bath and dresses him in the new clothes he got for Christmas, which he hasn't been allowed to wear all year. Dave begins eating meals with the rest of the family, and Mother allows him to watch television with the rest of the family.

Shortly afterwards, a woman from social services arrives and asks to speak with Dave. The woman asks Dave if he's happy; Dave says that he is. When the woman asks if Mother ever hits him, Davis hesitates. He realizes that Mother has been spoiling him recently so that he'll lie to the woman from social services. Feeling like a fool, Dave tells the woman that he's only punished when he's a bad boy. The woman nods and leaves. Afterwards, Mother screams at Dave and hits him several times in the face. Afterwards, Dave thinks that, at the very least, he got "two good days" with Mother, even if Mother was only pretending to love him.

Early in the mornings, Father wakes up in the same bed as Dave and kisses him goodbye, whispering, "Try to make her happy and stay out of her way." Although Father doesn't know it, Dave cries every morning when Father leaves—Dave loves Father and always feels that he's never going to see him again.

As the book goes on, Mother's abuse becomes increasingly public. Before, she was careful to hide her abuse from her husband and children; now, she parades her abuse before the entire neighborhood.



Whenever something important happens to Mother, such as having a baby, Dave hopes that she'll become a kinder parent—but she never does. The entire time, Mother remains a cunning manipulator; Dave gives us the impression that she can "turn on the charm" at any time, fooling other people into believing that she's the best of mothers. However, Pelzer also implies that Mother severs ties with Shirley at least partly because Shirley is concerned that Mother isn't treating Dave well.



Suddenly, Mother seems to have turned a new leaf: she treats Dave kindly, and doesn't hit him anymore. Dave has been beaten and abused for so many years that he's desperate to believe that Mother is sincere in her desire to be kind to him.



In the end, it becomes clear that Mother wasn't treating Dave well because she loved him; she was just trying to avoid attracting the attention of Child Protective Services. (It's possible that Shirley called CPS, considering that she and Mother had a falling out shortly before the social services officer shows up). It might seem odd that Dave wouldn't tell the truth about his mother when he has the chance; however, many abused children are so brainwashed, or so frightened of their abusers, that they don't seize the opportunity to speak out when they have the chance.



To state the obvious, Father is an awful parent: he sits back and drinks when he should be protecting his child from his wife's abuse. However, from Dave's perspective, Father is the one thing standing between him and Mother's cruelty—he gravitates toward Father because he doesn't have anyone else.



CHAPTER 7: THE LORD'S PRAYER

Shortly before entering the fifth grade, Dave decides that there is no God: he's convinced that no God would let Mother beat him. On the surface, Dave has learned to appear calm and emotionless, even when Mother beats him, but deep down, he hates Mother. He no longer dreams about being **Superman**, flying away from his misery. The words "hope" and "faith" have no meaning for him. He's become so desperate for survival that he doesn't care about humiliating himself—if necessary he'll eat half-eaten scraps out of the garbage can. There is so little joy in Dave's life that he becomes jealous and angry when he hears the sounds of other kids playing in the sun.

Dave thinks about killing Mother, and making her feel his pain and loneliness. He also despises Father for being a coward and failing to protect him from Mother. Sometimes, when Mother argues with Father, she forces Dave to repeat Father's words from previous arguments. Dave understands that Mother is trying to turn Father against him. Meanwhile, Dave has ceased to feel any familial connection with his brothers. They take turns hitting him, and think of him as the "family slave." Dave has no love for anyone in his life—hate is the only emotion he has left. He even hates himself for being too weak and frightened to stand up to Mother.

At school, Dave's classmates bully and tease him. A girl named Aggie regularly tells him to "drop dead," and complains that he smells awful. In the fifth grade, when Dave and his classmates take a field trip to a San Francisco clipper ship, Dave walks to the bow of the ship, and Aggie whispers, "I know all about you Pelzer, and jumping is your only way out." Aggie's friend John agrees and urges Dave to jump off the ship. Dave feels a powerful urge to jump, but his "better senses" keep him from doing so.

In fifth grade, Dave's teacher is Mr. Ziegler. Unlike some of the other teachers, Ziegler makes an effort to treat Dave like a "normal kid," not a "problem kid." After Dave wins a competition to come up with a catchy slogan for the school newspaper, Ziegler makes a point of praising Dave, and even writes Mother a letter complimenting Dave. Mother reads the letter and laughs derisively. She tells Dave that she hates him, and adds, "You are a *nobody*! An *It*!" Even though he's used to Mother's cruelty, Dave is stunned—he can sense that Mother isn't being mean to him simply because she's drinking—she sincerely and deeply despises Dave. In this moment, Dave wishes that he could die.

The chapter begins on a note of total hopelessness: Dave has given up on God, since no God would subject him to so much misery and pain. Dave hasn't just given up on God; he's given up on the possibility that life will ever get any better for him. Perhaps even more tragically, Dave has come to distrust the very concept of happiness—there's so little happiness in his own life that he resents his peers and classmates when he can see that they're enjoying themselves.



After years of abuse, Dave is full of frustration and rage. In part, he directs his rage outward at his parents—and with good reason. In retrospect, however, Pelzer seems to understand that his brothers aren't to blame for hitting Dave—Mother has manipulated them into hating him. Even more tragically, though, Dave has come to despise himself—his only dream is to fight back against Mother, and so he hates himself for being too small and frightened to do so.



Mother's cruelty toward Dave leads other people to treat him cruelly; because she forces him to wear the same clothes day after day, Dave's classmates come to despise him and even urge him to kill himself. But in spite of his misery, Dave continues to believe that his life is worth living—suggesting that, on some level, he believes in the possibility that life will get better.



Unlike many of the other teachers at school, Mr. Ziegler doesn't think of Dave as a problem kid; on the contrary, he recognizes that Dave is smart and bright, and encourages Dave. Mother seems to compensate for Mr. Ziegler's praise by trying to debase Dave still further. By calling Dave "It," Mother dehumanizes her own child, treating Dave like a mere object, which Mother can hurt and abuse whenever and however she pleases.



In the coming weeks, Dave begins doing his chores more and more carelessly. He wants Mother to know “I didn’t care anymore.” Once, when Mother takes Dave to a grocery store, he shouts and acts out; later, Mother hits Dave, and gets her other children to hit him, too. Back at home, she mixes ammonia and Clorox and forces Dave to clean the bathroom with the door closed. Dave stays in the bathroom until he feels that he’s going to faint. Afterwards, Dave stops rebelling.

The only thing that keeps Dave sane is his baby brother Kevin, who he loves. Shortly before Mother gives birth to Kevin, she tries to choke Dave, and Dave fights back by kicking Mother in the stomach. Mother hisses that Dave has given her baby a birth defect. After Kevin is born, Dave isn’t allowed to see Kevin often, but whenever he does, he feels calm and happy. But deep down, Dave is frightened that one day Kevin will grow up to hate him, just like his other brothers do.

As the holiday season approaches, Mother argues with her own mother on the phone, and then takes out her anger on Dave. She also yells at Father, calling him a “drunken loser,” and even bans him from the house for a few days. On the day that Father is supposed to come home, Mother prepares a big meal and spends hours fixing her hair and makeup. Father shows up with a friend from work, and they’re both very drunk. Dave realizes that Father has come home to pack some things—he packs and then walks out the door. As he leaves, Father tells Dave, “The whole thing, You mother, this house, you. I just can’t take it anymore ... I’m sorry.”

That year, for Thanksgiving, Father comes to the house and Mother allows Dave to eat with the rest of the family. The dinner is silent and sad. Afterwards, Mother and Father get into a loud argument. By Christmas, they’re fighting more often than they ever have. Shortly after Christmas, Mother packs the last of Father’s things and takes them to a motel, where Father will be staying. Dave realizes that his parents are separating. Mother takes Dave and his brothers to say goodbye to Father, but forces Dave to wait in the car. Before Mother drives away, Father goes down to Dave and gives him a package—information “for a book report.” Dave sees the sadness in Father’s eyes, but also feels jealous of him for escaping from Mother. As Mother drives away, Dave begins to cry. In this moment, he hates God. Mother sneers, “You are all mine now. Too bad your father’s not here to protect you.”

Dave tries to rebel against Mother in bigger and more overt ways, but Mother continues to hold all the power—when she notices that Dave is trying to fight back, she abuses him even more harshly than usual, and Dave has no choice but to back down.



Even though Dave’s life is miserable, there are some people whom he loves deeply, such as his baby brother, Kevin. However, since 1995, Kevin, who has Bell’s palsy (a disorder which causes slurred speech, the “birth defect” Dave mentions in the passage) has spoken out against his brother’s book, suggesting that Dave exaggerated or invented many of the episodes therein (in real life, his name is Stephen).



Mother and Father begin to argue more and more frequently, to the point where it becomes clear that Father is on the verge of leaving the family altogether. Father’s words to Dave exemplify why he’s such a singularly awful parent: he’s so selfish that he seems oblivious to the fact that his wife is abusing their child (and, on some level, he seems to blame Dave for his difficulties with his wife).



Even when the family says goodbye to Father, Mother refuses to allow Dave to say goodbye along with his brothers. Father seems to make a special effort to say goodbye to Dave; however, instead of leaving him with kind words or even some memorable advice, he gives Dave some book report materials—an apt symbol for how, whenever Dave needs his father to provide love and comfort, Father disappoints him. With Father out of the picture, Mother seems to be looking forward to abusing Dave with total impunity. (The New York Times has suggested that Dave fabricated some of Mother’s dialogue in this passage.)



As Mother drives home, Dave clasps his hands together and silently prays. As the car pulls into the driveway, he ends his prayer, "... and deliver me from evil. Amen."

Although the chapter began with the knowledge that Dave has almost given up on God, it ends with the Lord's Prayer. In spite of his misery, Dave hasn't entirely given up hope—he still prays for a brighter future. And, as Pelzer already established in the Prologue, Dave's prayers are shortly answered when his teachers free him from Mother's tyranny and place him in a foster home.



EPILOGUE: SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The epilogue begins, "I'm so alive." David Pelzer stands on the beach, looking out at the Pacific Ocean—it's a beautiful day. He notices a **piece of wood** with an "odd, twisted shape." The wood is swept back and forth in the waves, and seems to be "struggling to stay ashore." Then the waves pull the wood back into the ocean. In many ways, the wood reminds Dave of his former life—his life began with "being pushed and pulled in every direction." Dave struggled to escape the cycle of cruelty and torture—and then, unexpectedly, he broke free.

The memoir ends with Dave as an adult, looking back on his old life. Like a piece of wood, Dave was once at the mercy of powerful, cruel forces—above all, his cruel, manipulative mother. But now, Dave claims, he's broken free of the past. (However, Dave doesn't go into detail about how he adjust to his new life in a foster home, or how he struggles to come to terms with his traumatic experiences.)



Dave knows that he's been very lucky. He made himself a promise: if he ever came out of his situation alive, he would make something of himself and be "the best person that I could be." Dave has learned how to let go of his past and appreciate the things that most people take for granted. Most of all, Dave has come to learn that "the good Lord" is always watching over him, giving him love and encouragement when he needs it. Dave enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and developed a love for American values and tradition. He's come to realize that America is a place in which people can come from humble beginnings and become winners.

Without delving into much detail, Dave describes how he's learned to overcome self-hatred with the help of Christianity. He's found ways of leading a productive life—first by serving in the military (in real life, he served in the Air Force during the Gulf War in the early 1990s) and later by working as a spokesman for child abuse victims. Although, in many ways, Dave is a victim of American society's indifference to suffering (for years, after all, Dave's neighbors turned a blind eye to his abuse), he's come to see America as a great country in which people can pursue happiness.



Dave gets back in his car and drives out to the city of Guerneville. He stops outside "the same home where a lifetime ago my family and I stayed during our summer vacations." He steps outside and leads his son Stephen beside the house, and stares out at the Russian River. As Dave stares out, Stephen says, "Love you, Dad." Crying with joy, Dave responds, "Love you, too, son." He concludes, "I'm free."

Perhaps Dave Pelzer's proudest achievement is raising a son. One of the greatest tragedies of child abuse is that victims of child abuse often grown up to become abusive parents. However, the Epilogue suggests that Dave has become no such thing—he's become a loving father, effectively ending the cycle of child abuse. Notice, also, that his son is named after Father—suggesting that, in spite of Father's indifference to cruelty, Dave has continued to show him some love.



PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD ABUSE

The chapter begins with David Pelzer explaining that he was not alone—there were thousands of other abused children in California. Indeed, it's estimated that one in five children are physically, emotionally, or sexually abused in the United States. Too many people believe that this "abuse" is nothing more than parents exercising their right to discipline their offspring. But the reality is that many parents take out their anger and frustration on their children. Furthermore, many abused children run away from home and wind up homeless. In 1992, there were almost three million reports of child abuse in America.

By telling his story, Dave has tried to give a sense for what child abuse is like from the perspective of the abused child. For years, Dave felt like a "loser." Now, he's learned how to serve his country—first by serving in the military, and now, by giving seminars and workshops for victims of child abuse. Dave is also proud of being a loving father, "whose only guilt is that of spoiling his son with love and encouragement." However, Dave reminds readers that there are millions of abused children and traumatized adults in desperate need of help. "Children," he concludes, "should be carefree, playing in the sun; not living a nightmare in the darkness of the soul."

In the next portion of the chapter, Steven E. Ziegler, David Pelzer's former teacher, describes September 1992, the month when Dave reached out to him about the child abuse reports Ziegler made twenty years before. Ziegler was overjoyed to learn that Dave has graduated college and become a successful teacher. Ziegler remembers how naïve he was about child abuse in the early 1970s. Luckily, Ziegler had the good sense to recognize that Dave was clearly being beaten and starved. Ziegler praises Dave for having the courage to write a book about his traumatic experiences, and concludes, "there is absolutely no doubt in my mind how far you have truly come."

In the next section, Valerie Bivens, a social worker for Child Protective Services, discusses the public's ignorance of "the extent of child abuse." Children are often unable to speak out against their parents' crimes, with the result that their rage turns against other people, or inward against themselves. Luckily, the public is beginning to educate itself about child abuse, thanks to books, films, and child abuse survivors like Dave.

Although A Child Called "It" is a memoir, Dave Pelzer acknowledges that his experiences aren't necessarily the same as those of other child abuse victims—indeed, many victims of abuse never escape their parents, or run away and end up living on the streets. In writing such a personal, intimate memoir, however, Pelzer hopes to raise awareness of child abuse and ensure that the public isn't indifferent or unaware of the suffering of children.



Although the memoir effectively ends with Dave's literal departure from his Mother's house, Pelzer acknowledges that his ordeal didn't end right away. On the contrary, Dave had to cope with the trauma of abuse long after his bruises and scratches faded away—and perhaps he still has to cope with trauma. However, Dave is immensely proud of having grown into a confident, mature father. He takes great pleasure in raising a happy, carefree child.



Mr. Ziegler was the kind schoolteacher who treated Dave with respect and compassion, and encouraged him to work hard in school. Even though Ziegler plays an important role in freeing Dave from his mother's abusive household, he admits that he was extremely ignorant about child abuse in 1970s—as was American society, it would seem. Implicitly, then, Ziegler suggests that Pelzer's book can play an important social role by drawing attention to abuse issue and ensuring that children like Dave aren't forced to endure years of abuse before teachers and parents notice that something is wrong.



Bivens confirms one of Dave Pelzer's most important insights: the victims of child abuse often wind up taking out their anger on themselves. Just as Dave began to hate himself for being too frightened to fight back against his mother, may other child abuse victims come to despise themselves for what they perceive as their own weakness.



Glenn A. Goldberg, former executive director of the California Consortium for the Prevention of Child Abuse, argues that people like David Pelzer need to tell their stories, “so that we can mobilize Americans to create a country where it won’t hurt to be a child.” He reminds readers to remember the tens of thousands of children who aren’t as lucky as Dave—those who don’t survive their abuse, or who survive and then perpetuate the cycle by hurting their own offspring.

The final part of the chapter consists of a poem written by a woman named Cindy M. Adams. In the poem, Cindy admits that she never knew “how bad it was” for abused children. Many of the worst scars and bruises for abused children are psychological, rather than physical. However, Cindy will “make a difference” by standing alongside child abuse victims, drawing awareness to their suffering, and mobilizing other people.

Goldberg brings the book to the sobering conclusion that, for every inspiration story of overcoming child abuse (like Pelzer’s) there must be thousands of tragic stories that end in misery, self-hatred, and—worst of all—more child abuse.



Adams’s poem brings the book to an end, encouraging readers to go out and educate themselves about child abuse, rather than remaining passive and, implicitly, allowing abusive adults to continue their cruelty. Readers can make a difference by refusing to be passive, speaking out against abuse, and offering their support to the victims of abuse.





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