

A Little Life



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HANYA YANAGIHARA

Hanya Yanagihara was born in 1975 in Los Angeles. She and her family moved frequently, and as a child, she lived in various places throughout the United States, including New York and Hawaii. Her father was a hematologist and oncologist who introduced Yanagihara to the works of Philip Roth, Iris Murdoch, and Barbara Pym. Yanagihara attended high school in Hawaii and went on to graduate from Smith College in 1995. From there, she moved to New York to work as a publicist. During this time, she also worked as a writer and editor for *Conde Nast Traveler*. She published her first novel, *The People in the Trees*, in 2013. *A Little Life* followed in 2015 and was met with much critical success—it was shortlisted for the 2015 Man Booker prize for fiction, and it was also a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award in Fiction. Following the success of *A Little Life*, Yanagihara accepted a position as a deputy editor at *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, eventually becoming the magazine's editor-in-chief in 2017. She published her third novel, *To Paradise*, in 2022.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Curiously, *A Little Life* contains very few references to pop culture or historical events, making it effectively impossible to situate the novel in a specific point in time. For instance, though much of the plot unfolds in New York, the novel makes no reference to the September 11 terrorist attacks. The effect of this is that the reader can direct all their focus to characters' emotional states. Leaving out historical reference points also gives the story a timeless and universal quality. There are passing cultural references scattered throughout, however. The last film that Willem Makes, *The Happy Days*, is about the final years of Rudolf Nureyev, a Soviet-born ballet dancer and choreographer who famously was the first Soviet artist to defect during the Cold War. Nureyev became an international sensation and one of the greatest male ballet dancers of his generation. He is considered either gay or bisexual (he had heterosexual relationships with women when he was younger). He died of AIDS complications at age 54, less than a decade after testing positive for HIV. He publicly denied his illness for years, though by the late 1980s his health began to decline and his dancing abilities suffered. In this way, Nureyev's body betrays him as Jude's does, making him a richly symbolic figure for Yanagihara to include among the book's scant cultural references. Referencing Nureyev, too, also enables Yanagihara to reference (at least in passing) the AIDS epidemic, which in light of the novel's numerous gay (or at least, not overtly

heterosexual-identifying) main characters and focus on human suffering, seems relevant for her to include. The epidemic was first observed by doctors in the U.S. in 1981, and it disproportionately affected gay and African American men. As of 2018, 700,000 people have died of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. During the height of the epidemic, the LGBTQ community faced additional stigmatization and acts of violence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hanya Yanagihara's two other novels, *The People in the Trees* and *To Paradise*, share some common themes with *A Little Life*. *The People in the Trees* was inspired by the true story of Daniel Carleton Gajdusek. Gajdusek was an American physician, researcher, and co-recipient of the 1976 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his research on kuru, a rare and incurable neurodegenerative disorder, who was later convicted of sexually abusing his children. *The People in the Trees* and *A Little Life* both grapple with the difficult subject matters of trauma, abuse, and human suffering. *To Paradise* is set in an alternate version of New York City. The novel consists of three sections, each set 100 years apart on the novel's alternate timeline (1893, 1993, and 2093). In the New York of the novel's future, climate change and disease have drastically changed life in the city. Meanwhile, the section set in 1993 takes on the impact of the AIDS crisis on that section's protagonist, a young gay man with a mysterious, traumatic past. Like *A Little Life*, *To Paradise* spends much of its time exploring the depths of human suffering. Another recent book that offers an unfiltered, dismal glimpse at human suffering is *Love Me Back* by Merritt Tierce. The novel follows a waitress at an upscale Dallas restaurant who conceals her personal struggles by day but drowns them in a self-destructive wash of drugs, unpleasurable sex, and other forms of degradation by night. *A Little Life* also shares some similarities with *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov's infamous novel is narrated (unreliably) by "Humbert Humbert," (a pseudonym) a loathsome pedophile who gradually becomes obsessed with the 12-year-old daughter of his landlady, Charlotte Haze. After Charlotte's sudden death, Humbert kidnaps Lolita and travels across the country with her. They stay in motels, and Humbert sexually abuses her. *Lolita* and *A Little Life* take on the same difficult subject matter of pedophilia, and the horrific "road trip" on which Brother Luke takes Jude in *A Little Life* even seems to reference *Lolita* at certain points.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Little Life
- **When Written:** 2010s

- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction; Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** New York; Cambridge, Massachusetts; the western U.S.
- **Climax:** After enduring a lifetime of endless pain and suffering, Jude St. Francis dies by suicide at the age of 53.
- **Antagonist:** Brother Luke; Dr. Traylor; Caleb Porter
- **Point of View:** first person; third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Another Life. In 2018, Dutch theater company Toneelgroep Amsterdam debuted its stage adaptation of *A Little Life*. Staying true to the book (which is over 800 pages long), the production lasted four hours.

Fade to Black. Rather fittingly, author Hanya Yanagihara has described *A Little Life* as like an ombre cloth, which begins light on one end and gradually darkens until it appears nearly black at the other end. Her description is certainly apt, as the novel follows protagonist Jude St. Francis from a place of relative stability to complete despair, and finally, to death.



PLOT SUMMARY

A Little Life follows its protagonist Jude and his close friends Willem, JB, and Malcolm over many years after they move to New York in search of fame, fortune, success, and meaning. The novel begins when Jude and Willem move into a small, rundown **apartment** on **Lispensard Street**. Willem is an aspiring actor who has yet to receive any major roles; in the meantime, he waits tables. He's tormented by an unhappy childhood spent caring for his older brother, Hemming, who had cerebral palsy and died of cancer when Willem was in college. To this day, Willem feels guilty about his failure to save Hemming.

Jude, meanwhile, is a brilliant young lawyer. Jude's past is as mysterious to his friends as it is to the reader; Jude is orphaned and suffers from chronic pain in his legs and back, but it's unknown how Jude injured his legs and back or what happened to him in his childhood. Willem loves Jude but also worries about him and feels pressure to be his protector. JB and Malcolm, by contrast, have had much more support—though they're not happy. Malcolm comes from a wealthy family, but he's ashamed to admit that, at 27, he still lives at home. JB, an artist, is frustrated that the art world has yet to recognize his talent. He has recently been working on a series of paintings based on photos he's taken of Willem, Jude, and Malcolm.

That winter, JB decides that Willem and Jude should host a New Year's Eve party. The night before the party, Jude wakes

Willem and asks if Willem will take him to see Andy, Jude's longtime doctor: he accidentally cut himself. Andy tends to Jude's injury and explains to Willem that Jude *purposefully cuts* himself. Jude apologizes profusely to Willem but refuses to talk about his self-harm. At the party, Willem, Jude, JB, and Malcolm go to the roof and lock themselves out. Jude insists that the others lower him off the roof's ledge so he can fall to the fire escape and reenter the apartment through the bedroom window. Willem follows Jude in leaping off the ledge of the building. It's terrifying, but they both make it.

Several years pass; Jude is now nearing 30. He and Willem still live at Lispensard Street. By now, Willem is getting enough work to support himself as an actor. During one of his weekly walks, Jude meditates on his past, and the narrative segues into a series of flashbacks from Jude's earlier years. Jude reflects on Ana, a social worker who helped him recover after a Dr. Traylor caused his injuries. Ana's the only person Jude has opened up to about his past, though she died of cancer the summer before Jude left for college.

Jude attended college and then law school in Cambridge. At Cambridge, he became close with one of his professors, Harold Stein. Harold was kind and generous with Jude: he bought Jude suits for work, and he and his wife Julia often had Jude over for dinner. But Harold also asked a lot of prying questions about Jude's past. Jude wanted to become close to Harold but struggled to open up. He also worried (and still worries) that Harold will abandon him once he grows tired of his evasiveness. But despite Jude's fears, his and Harold's relationship grows; Jude often returns to Harold and Julia's house to celebrate Thanksgiving with them. Jude also reflects on the monastery in South Dakota, where he was raised by monks who physically, emotionally, and sexually abused him. One monk, Brother Luke, was kind to Jude. Brother Luke told Jude that he loved him and made plans for them to run away together—but when they did finally run away, Brother Luke forced Jude into sex work and then sexually assaulted Jude himself. This went on until Jude was 12, when the police located them and Brother Luke hanged himself.

Back in the novel's present, a few weeks before Jude is supposed to join Harold for Thanksgiving, he receives a painting from JB—it's an apology for showing a painting of Jude without asking Jude's permission. The incident, which happened 18 months prior, caused a major rift between JB and Jude and Willem. Later, on Thanksgiving weekend, Harold and Julia tell Jude that they love him and would like to formally adopt him. Harold and his first wife, Liesl, had a young son, Jacob, who died of a rare neurodegenerative disorder when he was only five. In Jude, Harold sees a second chance to care for—and save—a son. Jude wants Harold and Julia to adopt him. Still, the traumatic experience of a prospective family backing out of adopting him when he was a child leaves Jude terrified that Harold will change his mind. In the months that follow,

Jude's anxieties cause his mental health to sharply decline. Nevertheless, that February, the adoption goes through. Harold and Julia hold a party at their house, and all of Jude's friends attend. Jude covertly slips a CD of himself singing (a skill he learned at the monastery) and a letter inside Harold's bookcase.

More time passes. Willem has become a well-known movie star. He's recently broken up with his girlfriend, Philippa, who was turned off by Willem and Jude's "codependent" friendship. Willem and Jude have since moved into their own apartments, but Willem spends all his time at Jude's Greene Street apartment. Jude, now 36, is paying Malcolm to renovate his new apartment. Jude is doing well financially since accepting a job at a prominent law firm. He made this decision after a major health scare made him realize that he will need a lot of money to afford adequate, dignified care as his condition worsens with age. JB, meanwhile, continues to alienate his friends due to developing a drug addiction. Things come to a head when Jude, Willem, and Malcolm hold an intervention for JB. JB, irritated and under the influence, mocks Jude's limp. JB's cruelty creates a rift in his friendship with Willem and Jude that never quite heals.

These days, Willem is always away shooting a new film, and Jude is increasingly lonely. Jude starts dating a man named Caleb, who is emotionally and physically abusive. But Jude thinks that someone as "deformed" as himself doesn't deserve anyone better. He continues to see Caleb, even as Caleb beats Jude and berates him for occasionally needing a **wheelchair**. One night, Caleb sneaks into Jude's apartment and brutally beats him. When Harold comes by the next day, he realizes the truth about Jude's injuries (Jude has been lying to Harold and Andy that his recent bruises are from playing tennis) and rushes him to Andy's office.

When Willem returns from a movie shoot, Jude lies to him about his injuries. Andy pressures Jude to talk to Dr. Loehmann, a psychiatrist. But Jude doesn't see Loehmann, and his mental health deteriorates following his break with Caleb. Unwanted memories of his traumatic childhood overwhelm Jude, and he eventually attempts suicide. Jude's friend Richard finds Jude in time to save him, and Jude is hospitalized. Upon Jude's release, Willem moves into Greene Street full-time to look out for Jude.

A year passes, and Jude and Willem are still living together. Willem realizes that he has feelings for Jude, and they begin a romantic relationship. Things are complicated, though, because Jude's childhood sexual abuse (which he hasn't told Willem about yet) makes it impossible for him to enjoy sex, and Jude is constantly afraid that he'll disappoint Willem. With Jude's blessing, Willem eventually starts to have sexual relationships with women outside of their relationship. For a while, Jude has sex with Willem, fearing that Willem will leave him otherwise. But when they get into a huge fight over Jude's continued

cutting and secrecy, Jude finally comes clean about some of his childhood sexual abuse, and Willem realizes that he can't subject Jude to sex anymore. They remain together and grow closer as Jude continues to open up to Willem, but they are never sexually intimate again. Jude also finally tells Willem about the accident that caused his back and leg injuries, which occurred Brother Luke's death. After the police rescued him, Jude went to live at a boys' home. But the counselors there physically and sexually abused him, and Jude eventually ran away. He hitched rides with truck drivers and was ultimately abducted and held captive by a sadistic psychiatrist, Dr. Traylor, who sexually assaulted him. Eventually, Dr. Traylor ran Jude over with his car.

Back in the present, Jude suffers a series of serious infections. When he's 46, he agrees to have his legs amputated. His recovery is difficult, but his pain gradually lessens. Willem's career continues to flourish. He and Jude hire Malcolm to design a house for them upstate that they call Lantern House. Two years after Jude's amputation, he and Willem spend Labor Day weekend at Lantern House. But as Willem drives to the house with Malcolm and his wife Sophie, all three are killed when a drunk driver hits their car.

Jude grieves horribly for Willem. After ignoring JB for many months, Jude attends JB's retrospective. There, JB shows Jude a hyper-realistic painting of Willem (*Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story, Greene Street*), and Jude breaks down. But JB tries to kiss Jude, and after this, Jude and JB don't see each other again. Jude finds life increasingly unbearable and stops eating, so his friends hold an intervention and have him committed. He is released on the condition that he starts to see Dr. Loehmann. Jude agrees, but he doesn't take therapy seriously and he resents his friends for keeping him alive when he'd rather die. Things come to a head one night when Harold calls Jude "sweetheart," a name that only Brother Luke used. Jude breaks down and cries in Harold's arms. Afterward, Jude starts to think he might be capable of healing and redemption. He speaks to Dr. Loehmann about his past and declares that he's "decided to stay."

But in the novel's closing chapter, which Harold narrates, Harold reveals that Jude dies by suicide only three years after Willem's death. After Jude's death, Harold finally finds the CD and letter Jude hid in his bookcase. In the letter, Jude describes his traumatic past and apologizes to Harold for "deceiv[ing]" him. Harold is relieved to finally answer the many questions he had, but it crushes him to realize that Jude died not knowing how loved and blameless he was. In the novel's final scene, Harold recalls walking past Lispenard Street with Jude after Willem's death and listening to Jude tell him the story of jumping off the roof at the New Year's Eve party all those years before.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jude St. Francis – Jude, the novel’s protagonist, is an ambitious and brilliant lawyer haunted by a troubled, mysterious past. He suffers from chronic pain in his legs and back that worsens as the result of a horrific accident—when Jude was 15, a sadistic doctor named Dr. Traylor abducted and assaulted Jude before running over him with his car. Prior to this, Jude also suffered horrific physical, sexual, and emotional abuse from the monks who raised him. Jude’s unresolved childhood trauma shapes the course of his life, instilling in him a deep sense of shame and self-hatred, and making it difficult for him to trust those who genuinely care about him, like his law professor Harold, his doctor Andy, and his friend and later life partner, Willem. Even after Harold and his wife Julia adopt Jude as an adult, Jude is constantly afraid that Harold will abandon him if he finds out about Jude’s past. Jude copes with his trauma in a number of unhealthy ways: he throws himself into his law career, **self-harms**, and gets into an abusive relationship with a cruel man named Caleb who maintains that Jude is “deformed” and unworthy of love or redemption. Prior to his relationship with Caleb, Jude was on the path toward recovery, but after Caleb, things only get worse for Jude. However, in the years following the end of his relationship with Caleb, Jude enjoys a happy life with Willem and even starts to share with him details about his past he’s kept secret from everyone else. But after Willem, Malcolm, and Sophie die suddenly in a car accident, Jude no longer finds his life worth living. Jude ultimately dies by suicide when he is 53. Jude’s tragic arc suggests that some wounds are too deep to heal.

Willem Ragnarsson – Willem is Jude’s closest friend and, later, his life partner. Though he initially struggles to advance his acting career, he eventually becomes a famous and successful screen actor. Jude and Willem have always been closer to each other than with Malcolm and JB, and Willem is fiercely loyal to Jude. Willem grew up in rural Wyoming, the son of a humble and hardworking ranch hand. Growing up, Willem was the main caregiver for his older brother Hemming, who was nonverbal and confined to a **wheelchair** due to a severe form of cerebral palsy. Unlike Willem’s parents, who cared for Hemming but regarded him mostly as a responsibility, Willem genuinely loved Hemming, and he’d often push Hemming around his family’s land and read to him. Hemming dies of cancer while Willem is away at college, and Willem never forgives himself for his failure to help Hemming. Willem’s commitment to his relationship with Jude seems, in part, to arise from his desire to fix Jude where he failed to fix Hemming. In time, as Willem realizes that Jude’s suffering is too extensive and complex for him to fix, he accepts that the most he will ever be able to do is alleviate some of Jude’s suffering, if only temporarily. Willem remains by Jude’s side, even as their “gay” relationship affects

his career; and even as Jude’s self-harm, relentless secrecy, and inability to maintain a sexual relationship complicates their relationship. Willem and Jude remain life partners until Willem, Malcolm, and Sophie die in a car accident.

Malcolm Irvine – Malcolm Irvine is an architect and one of Jude’s best friends from college. At the start of the novel, Malcolm is unsatisfied with his life. He’s ashamed to be 27 years old and still living at home, dependent on his wealthy parents. Malcolm is miserable working at Ratstar, a corporate architecture firm that stifles his creativity. But he is determined to impress his wealthy, demanding, and overly critical father (Mr. Irvine), who has never tried to conceal his favoritism for Flora, Malcolm’s older sister. Though Malcolm eventually moves on from Ratstar and has a successful and fulfilling career, he never feels that he has impressed or mended his relationship with his father. Malcolm struggles with his identity throughout the book. He’s biracial (his father is Black) but never really connects with his Black identity. And though he questions his sexual orientation—he has been in scattered relationships with women, but he’s also felt attracted to Willem and Jude—he never reaches any conclusions. He eventually marries Sophie, a friend from architecture school, but their marriage seems more convenient than romantic. Sophie and Malcolm, along with some of Malcolm’s former Ratstar colleagues, eventually found a successful architecture firm together, Bellcast. Whenever tensions brew between JB and the others, Malcolm often takes JB’s side or assumes the role of mediator. But Malcolm also cares deeply for Jude. When Jude later hires Malcolm to renovate his Greene Street **apartment**, Malcolm pushes to ensure that the design adheres to ADA guidelines. Toward the end of the novel, Malcolm, Sophie, and Willem die when a drunk driver strikes their car.

Jean Baptiste “JB” Marion – JB is one of Jude’s best friends from college. A painter, JB initially struggles to achieve the recognition he thinks he deserves. JB, like the rest of the four central characters, is highly ambitious. But unlike the others, his ambition makes him selfish, and he isn’t afraid to use and alienate his friends to advance his career; in fact, JB’s most successful paintings depict his friends. JB’s happy childhood and supportive family also set him apart from his friends. His parents are Haitian immigrants, and though JB’s father died when he was young, JB’s mother ensured that her son received an education and opportunities. JB’s good fortune has made him insensitive to his friends’ hardships: he ignorantly wishes that he could’ve had a bad childhood like Jude, believing that such trauma would give his art depth. JB also alienates Jude when, at his first show, he displays a painting of Jude without Jude’s consent. Years later, JB develops a drug addiction that further alienates his friends. He befriends Jackson, a sculptor who enables JB’s drug habit and ridicules JB’s friends. Things come to a head one night when JB, high on drugs, mock-imitates Jude’s limp. JB eventually becomes sober and pleads

for Jude's forgiveness. Though their relationship improves over time, Jude and Willem never fully forgive JB. JB tries to reach out to Jude after Willem and Malcolm's deaths, but he ends up pushing Jude further away when he tries to kiss Jude. In the end, JB is the only one of his friends to live to old age, but his longevity comes at a cost: though he has his health and his career, he has lost all the people who knew him best.

Harold Stein – Harold Stein is Jude's law professor and later, his adoptive father. Harold immediately recognizes Jude's brilliance and takes him under his wing. He and his wife Julia frequently have Jude over for dinner at their **house** in Cambridge. Harold has a hard time accepting Jude's secrecy and repeatedly bugs him with questions about his parents and his past. It's difficult for Harold to understand Jude's guardedness when Harold repeatedly goes out of his way to show Jude how unconditionally he cares about him. Over the course of their friendship, Harold struggles to reconcile his longing to fix Jude with his gradual understanding that some of **Jude's wounds**—emotional and physical—might be too deep to heal. Harold's desire to help Jude stems, in part, from his failure to save his and his first wife, Liesl's, biological son, Jacob, who died of a rare neurodegenerative disorder when he was only five years old. In Jude, Harold sees a second chance to love, support, and heal a son. After Willem's death, though, Harold increasingly wonders whether it is actually inhumane for him to keep Jude alive when Jude has clearly decided his life is no longer worth living. After Jude's death by suicide, Harold discovers a CD (of Jude's singing) and letter that Jude slipped inside Harold's bookcase after the adoption ceremony so many years ago. In the letter, Jude finally discloses all the details of his traumatic past. He also apologizes for "deceiv[ing]" Harold about who he really was. Harold feels grateful to finally have answers to the questions Jude would never answer while he was alive, but he feels deeply that sad that Jude died not knowing how loved, blameless, and worthy of redemption he was.

Brother Luke – Brother Luke is a monk at the monastery in South Dakota where Jude grew up. He's also one of the novel's antagonists and one of Jude's many childhood abusers. Whereas the other monks beat, sexually assault, and belittle Jude, Luke is initially kind. On Jude's eighth birthday, Luke gives him a muffin with a candle in it, as well as a toy set of logs Jude can build **houses** with, including replicas of the cabin that Luke claims he and Jude will live in as father and son once they escape the monastery. Luke claims to love Jude, and Jude is too young to recognize that Luke's supposed "love" is really a pedophile's manipulative grooming. When Jude is nine, Brother Luke and Jude run away from the monastery to begin their supposedly happy life together. In reality, they spend most of their time hiding out in motel rooms. Luke forces Jude into sex work, eventually sexually assaulting Jude himself—all while insisting that he and Jude are "in love." After years of abuse, the

police finally rescue Jude, who is then 12 years old; Brother Luke hangs himself in the motel bathroom to avoid imprisonment. Though on one level Jude can recognize that Luke exploited and abused him, Luke educated Jude well and instilled in him a passion for books and music. And Luke was also the first person who ever really "loved" Jude, even if that love was predatory. For these reasons, Jude can't bring himself to fully vilify Luke—even as the enduring psychological effects of Luke's abuse leave Jude incapable of experiencing sexual intimacy in adulthood. As a result, Jude redirects blame and hatred he might otherwise have aimed at Luke toward himself, and he spends the rest of his life believing that he is defective, shameful, and deserving of all the suffering he's endured.

Dr. Traylor – Dr. Traylor is a sadistic psychiatrist who abducts, imprisons, and abuses Jude after Jude runs away from the boys' home. Dr. Traylor is initially kind, if rather aloof: he gives Jude a comfortable place to stay in the basement of his home, and he feeds Jude and treats Jude's STD. But Traylor also locks Jude in the basement and ignores Jude's cries to let him out—and he begins starving Jude once Jude's infection is gone. Jude's time with Dr. Traylor also adds to the internalized shame Jude carries into adulthood; Traylor always acts disgusted when he's around Jude, claiming that Jude is "diseased." He also calls Jude a "prostitute," even though it clearly upsets Jude. Traylor eventually begins sexually assaulting Jude, claiming that Jude needs to repay him for his "hospitality." Traylor eventually tires of Jude, so he drives him to a remote field and forces Jude to run as he trails him in his car. When Jude falls down and can't get up, Traylor runs Jude over with his car, inflicting the spine and back injuries that will affect Jude for the rest of his life. In passing, the novel reveals that Traylor is incarcerated for his crimes and later dies in prison. Jude keeps what happened with Dr. Traylor a secret from most people for his entire life—only Ana and Willem know about him while Jude is alive, and Harold only finds out after Jude's suicide. To everyone else, Jude claims that his injuries came from a car accident. As an adult, Jude refuses to acknowledge his limited mobility or to identify as a person with disabilities, because he thinks doing so would mean that he's surrendered to Traylor.

Caleb Porter – Caleb Porter is a cruel and abusive man Jude dates before he begins his relationship with Willem. Jude endures Caleb's abuse because he's lonely and believes that someone like him doesn't deserve anyone better. Willem is away shooting a film for the duration of the relationship and doesn't know about Caleb—much less the horrendous abuse he inflicted upon Jude—until years later, when Jude reads Caleb's obituary in the paper and finally tells Willem about the relationship. In the brief time they are together, Caleb relentlessly degrades Jude and belittles his disability. **Jude's wheelchair**, which Jude occasionally uses when his leg and back pain makes it too painful for him to walk, visibly disgusts Caleb. He claims that Jude is weak for using a wheelchair when,

in theory, he is capable of walking. Caleb also beats and sexually assaults Jude. Harold (and Jude) regards Jude's relationship with Caleb as a major turning point in Jude's life, not least because Caleb inflicts major injuries on Jude. Before Caleb, Jude seemed to be on a path toward recovery. After Caleb, though, Jude chooses to believe Caleb (who confirmed all of Jude's fears about being disgusting and unworthy of love) and ignore his friends (who tried to convince Jude that he was good, blameless, and deserving of love). And once Jude decided he was broken beyond repair, the novel (and Harold) seems to suggest, that Jude would one day die by suicide was all but guaranteed. Caleb later dies of pancreatic cancer. Harold and Andy think that Caleb deserved this painful death, but Jude doesn't express such animosity.

Andy Contractor – An orthopedic surgeon, Andy Contractor is Jude's longtime doctor and friend. Andy is the only doctor Jude trusts to examine him. Other than Willem, Andy is the only person who has seen Jude's unclothed body since his he was 15 years old. Over the years, Andy sees Jude through many physical and psychological struggles, from instances of **self-harm**, to physical wounds others inflict on Jude, to Jude's worsening mental health. Jude likes Andy because, unlike other people in Jude's life, Andy regards Jude's physical condition realistically—he's the first person to tell Jude that Jude's injuries will never heal (and will in fact get worse as Jude ages), and he never sugarcoats Jude's situation. It's Andy who eventually tells Jude that amputation is Jude's only real option if Jude doesn't want to risk contracting a potentially lethal infection. Andy wants to do well by Jude—he's Jude's doctor and Jude's friend, so he has professional and personal reasons to want to see Jude get better. As a result, Andy often gives Jude frustrating ultimatums, such as threatening to have Jude committed if Jude doesn't stop his self-harm. But Andy's efforts to "fix" Jude assume that total healing is possible, and this contradicts the novel's central thesis that some wounds are too deep to heal, and that it's impossible to eradicate all suffering. Toward the end of Jude's life, Andy struggles to reconcile his ethical belief that he has a responsibility to help fix Jude and keep him alive with his personal obligation to honor Jude's decision to make choices about when and why his life is no longer worth living. In the novel's closing section, Harold reveals that Andy dies of a heart attack several years after Jude's suicide.

Hemming – Hemming was Willem's older brother who he died before the novel's present day, when Willem was still in college. Hemming was born with a severe form of cerebral palsy; he was nonverbal, and his limited mobility required him to use a **wheelchair**. Willem cared for Hemming while Willem's mother and Willem's father worked and loved him deeply; in addition to performing basic duties of feeding, bathing, and clothing Hemming, Willem would push Hemming around the ranch in his wheelchair and read to him. Willem hated that his parents

treated Hemming like an obligation rather than a child they loved. When Willem was in college, Hemming became sick (likely with cancer), and Willem flew home to sit beside Hemming's hospital bed, though at this point Hemming likely couldn't have registered Willem's presence. Willem eventually had to go back east, and Hemming died not long after. It haunts Willem that he couldn't do more to help Hemming and alleviate his suffering. In many ways—even if Willem doesn't realize it consciously—Willem's commitment to Jude is his way of atoning for his inability to save Hemming. Abandoning Hemming is Willem's great failure in life. As he struggles to make a career and life for himself in New York, Willem sometimes longs to return to the simplicity of life on his family's ranch in rural Wyoming, a place he recalls with a painful sense of nostalgia and regret. Hemming's face is the last thing Willem sees before he dies in a car crash, and this reaffirms how centrally Hemming (and Willem's failure to "fix" him) figured in Willem's life.

Julia – Julia is Harold's wife. She's a microbiologist who is originally from the United Kingdom. She and Harold are both professors in Cambridge. Julia, like Harold, loves and cares for Jude, and this love compels them to adopt him when he's 30 (Julia and Harold have no biological children together). Like Harold, Julia hates to see Jude in pain and wants to see him heal psychologically, and she tries to support him through his struggles. At least at first, Julia seems more understanding of Jude's desire for privacy, or at least cautious of it, than Harold is. When Jude first comes to over for dinner at their home in Cambridge, Harold asks a lot of prying questions about Jude's past and calls out Jude for his failure to answer any of the questions. Julia, though, seems to sense that Jude has his reasons for being so secretive, and she urges Harold to leave Jude alone.

Richard – Richard is a good friend of Jude, JB, Malcolm, and Willem. He's a sculptor, and he shares studio space with JB at the beginning of the novel, when JB is still trying to get his career off the ground. Richard, at that point, constructs sculptures out of ephemeral materials like chocolate or butter, and he then films the finished sculptures as they disintegrate. JB respects Richard and thinks his work is truly great. Richard owns (and lives in) the building on Greene Street where Jude later buys an **apartment**. It's Richard who discovers Jude the night of Jude's attempted suicide, and Jude would have died were it not for him. Richard remains a good friend for all of Jude's life. He routinely checks on Jude after Willem's death, and he's one of the friends who holds an intervention when Jude effectively tries to starve himself to death in the aftermath of Willem's death. Richard dies of brain cancer five years after Jude's suicide.

Dr. Loehmann – Dr. Loehmann is a psychiatrist to whom Andy refers Jude following Jude's suicide attempt. Despite his friends' protests, Jude initially refuses to see Dr. Loehmann.

Following a major fight with Willem over Jude's continued **self-harm**, Jude finally starts to see Dr. Loehmann, but he refuses to answer any of Dr. Loehmann's questions or else skips their sessions entirely. Following Willem's death, Jude falls into a deep depression and nearly starves himself to death. As a result, his friends hold an intervention, commit him to a hospital, and only release him on the condition that he start to take care of himself and agree to see Dr. Loehmann. Jude agrees, though he continues to avoid discussing his past with the psychiatrist. At the very end of the novel, Jude seems to have a breakthrough and shows signs that he will begin to take his sessions with Loehmann seriously. However, this optimism is short-lived, as the next (and final) section of the book reveals that Jude dies by suicide not long after this final session.

Ana – Ana was Jude's only social worker. She began working his case after Dr. Traylor's attack and helped Jude through his recovery. Before Willem, Ana was the only person in whom he confided the details of his traumatic childhood. Ana genuinely cared about Jude and encouraged him to apply to college, and when Jude was accepted to a prestigious university in Boston, he attributed his success to her (though Ana guffawed at this, insisting that Jude had only himself to thank for his success). Ana encouraged Jude to open up about his past, promising him that it will help him to heal. But she also warned him that it would only become more difficult to talk about everything the longer Jude waited. Ana dies of cancer the summer before Jude leaves for college, and her death is very difficult for him—so difficult that he even considers suicide.

Jacob – Jacob was Harold's son with his first wife, Liesl. In a long first-person account spread throughout multiple chapters, Harold describes the swift decline Jacob underwent between the age of four, when he had his first seizure, and Jacob's death at age five. Jacob suffered greatly that year, and Harold and Liesl were powerless to do anything about it. Harold remembers that he was initially upset with Liesl for handling Jacob's illness so pragmatically—he felt her pragmatism meant she'd given up on Jacob and his ability to recover—but in retrospect, Harold realizes how disillusioned he was to assume that Jacob would recover and live a normal, long life. In many ways, Harold seems to view adopting and caring for Jude later in life as a way for him to fix his second son in all the ways he failed to fix his first son.

Lucien Voigt – Lucien Voigt is Jude's boss at Rosen Pritchard and Klein, one of the city's most important firms. He's always impressed with Jude's work, though he also urges Jude to take some time off when it's clear that Jude is working too hard (or using work to distract himself from other aspects of his life). Jude accepts Lucien's job offer after a particularly frightening health scare makes him realize that he'll need to have a lot of money to afford good, dignified care as his condition worsens later in life. Jude tries to hide as much of his disability and personal struggles (and personal life, for that matter) from his

colleagues as he can, but Lucien comes to Jude's aid when a janitor stumbles upon Jude in the midst of an episode late at the office one night. Lucien is one of the few characters in the novel who lives to old age, but his longevity isn't devoid of suffering: Lucien suffers a massive stroke that greatly impacts his physical and cognitive abilities, greatly diminishing his quality of life. Jude regularly visits Lucien in the years after Willem's death.

Mr. Irvine – Mr. Irvine is Malcolm's father. He's demanding and highly critical. Mr. Irvine and Malcolm have never had a great relationship, and Malcolm has always known that his father favors Flora, Malcolm's older sister. Mr. Irvine has a special affection and respect for Jude: like Jude, Mr. Irvine grew up in poverty and went on to become a highly successful and wealthy lawyer. At the beginning of the novel, it's revealed that Malcolm turned down the opportunity to found a new architecture firm with his college friends to accept a position with Ratstar, a prominent (but corporate and soulless) architecture firm, just to impress Mr. Irvine. After Malcolm dies, Mr. Irvine pulls Jude aside to talk in private, and then he begins to weep as he asks Jude if Malcolm knew that he loved him. Jude wishes that it were Malcolm—not himself—who was there to experience this moment with Mr. Irvine.

Flora Irvine – Flora Irvine is Malcolm's older sister. Malcolm has always known that Flora is Mr. Irvine's favorite child (Mr. Irvine has lots of affectionate nicknames for her and constantly sings her praises). Malcolm longs for his father's approval, but he doesn't resent Flora for being the favorite. After Malcolm dies, Flora sends Jude a box of things that Malcolm bequeathed to Jude and Willem, including scale models of Lispenard Street and Lantern **House**.

Mrs. Irvine – Mrs. Irvine is Malcolm's mother. She runs a literary agency. Mrs. Irvine is more affectionate with Malcolm than Mr. Irvine is, but she can be somewhat distracted. Mrs. Irvine sees how Mr. Irvine's preference for Flora hurts Malcolm and tries to convince him that it doesn't mean anything, but her reassurance doesn't do much to make Malcolm feel any better. Mrs. Irvine and Mr. Irvine are wealthy and let Malcolm continue to live with them while Malcolm gets his career off the ground, but they demand a lot of attention, and Malcolm can't wait until he can afford to move out.

Willem's Mother – Willem's mother was a Danish immigrant. She and Willem's father worked on a ranch in rural Wyoming all Willem's life. She died before the novel's present day, when Willem was still in college. Willem's parents treated him well, but they had a hard life and this made them rather aloof, pragmatic, and unfeeling. All but two of their children (Willem and his older brother, Hemming) died in childhood, and Hemming was born with a severe form of cerebral palsy which left him confined to a **wheelchair**, nonverbal, and unable to care for himself. Willem always hated how his parents treated Hemming as a responsibility for them to deal with rather than a

child they loved. Willem cuts off contact with his parents following Hemming's death. After they die, he realizes how much they loved him, even if they couldn't show it.

Willem's Father – Willem's father was an Icelandic immigrant. He worked as a ranch hand in Wyoming all Willem's life and died before the novel's present day, when Willem was still in college. Willem's father is humble and hardworking, and he passed down these traits to Willem. Willem's father and Willem's mother suffered many tragedies: two of their children died in childhood, and Hemming, Willem's older brother, was born with a severe form of cerebral palsy that left him confined to a **wheelchair**, nonverbal, and unable to care for himself. Willem's parents' hard life made them aloof and practical, and it always pained Willem to see them treat Hemming as a responsibility rather than a child to love. When Hemming is dying, presumably of cancer, Willem's father's distant, unfeeling attitude toward Hemming's illness prompts Willem to lash out at him for the first time in his life. Willem cuts off contact with his parents following Hemming's death. After they die, he realizes how much he loved them, even if they couldn't show it.

Judge Sullivan – Judge Sullivan is the judge Jude clerks for in Washington, D.C., after law school. Harold urges Jude to apply for the position and even serves as a reference. During Jude's interview with Judge Sullivan, the judge asks Jude to sing a song for him (he's somehow heard that Jude is a talented singer) that says something about Jude's character. Jude thinks he's failed the interview, but Judge Sullivan ends up hiring him.

Laurence – Laurence is Harold's best friend and an appellate court judge in Boston. He oversees the proceedings of Jude's adoption. Jude sees Laurence and his wife, Gillian, at dinners and holiday gatherings at Harold and Julia's **house**. Harold calls Laurence to ask for advice when he and Julia are considering adopting Jude, and Laurence urges Harold to be cautious. Laurence, like Harold, likes Jude and recognizes his obvious brilliance. But Laurence also acknowledges that there is so much about Jude—and about Jude's past—that they don't know, and he thinks Harold should be wary of this.

Liesl – Liesl was Harold's first wife. She's a doctor. Harold recalls the horrific year they endured together as they watched their young son, Jacob, suffer and die from a rare neurodegenerative disease. Their grief eventually destroyed their marriage beyond repair. Though they are on friendly terms and genuinely want the best for each other, it's too painful for them to remain in touch on a regular basis.

Dr. Kashen – Dr. Kashen is one of Jude's math professors at MIT. He dies sometime after Jude has graduated from college. When Caleb later throws Jude down the stairs, Jude recalls Dr. Kashen, who once asked Jude what his favorite axiom was. Jude had replied that his favorite was "the axiom of equality," which states that $x=x$ —that an assigned value is always equal to itself—though this is impossible to prove. As he falls down the

stairs, Jude thinks that this beating has proven that $x=x$: Caleb's cruelty proves that Jude is and always will be worthless.

Father Gabriel – Father Gabriel is one of the monks at the monastery in South Dakota where Jude grew up. He and the other monks physically, sexually, and emotionally abused Jude, instilling in Jude a sense of internalized shame and worthlessness that he carries with him for the rest of his life. The mistreatment Jude experiences at the monastery causes Jude to lash out and misbehave, and he starts to steal things. When he's caught stealing Father Gabriel's silver lighter, Father Gabriel takes Jude to his office, rubs oil on Jude's hand, and then lights it on fire to punish him. As an adult, Jude recreates this act of punishment, only this time he does it to himself. The novel explicitly notes that Father Gabriel and Brother Peter sexually abuse Jude, though they're not the only monks to do so.

The Learys – The Learys are a family who express interest in adopting Jude (then a young boy) at an adoption event in Montana. Jude spends a weekend with the Learys and tries his best to win them over, only to later discover that they've changed their minds and no longer want to adopt him. The Learys' rejection—and the fear that he must have done something to make the Learys decide not to go through with the adoption—causes Jude to feel anxious and insecure when, many years later, Harold and Julia ask Jude if he would like for them to adopt him as an adult.

Sophie – Sophie is Malcolm's wife. She, like Malcolm, is an architect; they met in college. Sophie and Malcolm, along with some of Malcolm's former Ratstar colleagues, eventually form their own firm, Bellcast. Sophie and Malcolm have a tumultuous relationship and seem to have a marriage of convenience rather than a marriage of romance. Toward the end of the novel, Sophie, Malcolm, and Willem die in a car accident when a drunk driver strikes their car as they drive from the train station to Lantern **House**.

Jackson – Jackson is a sculptor JB meets after his (JB's) second show. Jackson isn't the type of person JB would normally befriend: he's rich and entitled, his sculptures are "stupid" and uninteresting, and he's a drug addict who enables JB's drug use. JB's friends beg JB to stop seeing Jackson, but JB ignores them. Jackson, in return, ridicules JB's friends for their concern. On one occasion, when he and JB are alone together, he even mock-imitates Jude's limp. Later, in a drug-fueled rage, JB copies Jackson's cruel imitation, and this thoughtless act of cruelty irreparably damages JB's friendship with Jude and Willem.

Leslie – Leslie is Ana's girlfriend. After Ana's death, Leslie tried to stay in touch with Jude, sending him a Christmas card his first year at college. But the card was Jude's last remaining physical connection to Ana, and Jude was so determined to leave his painful past behind him and reinvent himself that he

threw away the card and lost touch with Leslie.

Philippa – Philippa, a costume designer, is one of Willem’s girlfriends prior to his relationship with Jude. She and Willem eventually break up over Willem’s friendship with Jude, which Philippa feels is too “codependent.” Jude feels guilty about the breakup, but Willem doesn’t think that friendships should be any less important than romantic relationships.

Robin – Robin is one of Willem’s girlfriends prior to his relationship with Jude. They eventually break up. Robin once asked Willem if Jude was gay or straight, and Willem realized that he didn’t have the answer to her question, since he’s never known Jude to date anybody. Later on, he cites his inability to answer Robin’s question as evidence that Jude has convinced himself that he’s too ugly or unworthy of love to pursue a relationship with anybody.

Ezra – At the beginning of the novel, when the central characters are in their 20s and still struggling to get their careers off the ground, JB lives with Ezra, an untalented artist whose wealthy family pays his way. Ezra, though untalented and spoiled, is generous: he lets struggling artists like JB live rent-free at his [warehouse](#), and he throws lavish parties.

Felix Baker – Felix Baker is a boy Jude tutors when he is in his late 20s. Felix’s family is wealthy and has very little time for him. Felix is shy and insecure. He also has no friends and is very lonely. Jude feels sympathy for him for being so let-down by the world at such a young age. He wants to tell Felix that things will change one day—even though Jude’s past has taught him that nobody is guaranteed happiness and companionship in life.

JB’s Mother – JB’s mother is a second-generation Haitian immigrant. JB is unlike the rest of his close friends in that he has a loving and supportive family. She is a successful educator and professor, and she has worked hard to put JB through the best schools. Her husband (JB’s father, also a Haitian immigrant) died when JB was three. Like the rest of JB’s family, JB’s mother has always believed in JB and his art.

Kit – Kit is Willem’s agent. When Willem starts to give up film roles to stay home and care for Jude, Kit remarks that such behavior would be understandable if Willem were caring for a sick child or spouse, but it seems extreme to hurt his career to care for a friend. Willem rejects Kit’s notion that friendship is less important than family or romantic partners—but Kit’s remark also makes him consider explicitly for the first time whether he might be interested in Jude romantically.

Claudine – Claudine is a jewelry designer and acquaintance of Willem’s. Willem begins a sexual affair with Claudine during his and Jude’s relationship. Though Jude has given Willem permission to pursue sex outside of their relationship, Willem feels guilty (and he suspects that Claudine is more emotionally attached to him than she claims to be), and so he eventually breaks things off with her.

Sanjay – Sanjay is Jude’s colleague at Rosen Pritchard and

Klein. After Willem’s death, Sanjay informs Jude’s other friends of how infrequently Jude feeds himself, and this contributes to everyone’s decision to hold an intervention for Jude. Following the intervention, Jude’s hospitalization, and Jude’s return to work, Sanjay continues to monitor Jude, and Jude knows Sanjay will tell Andy if he continues to starve himself.

Marta – Marta was one of Jude, Willem, JB, and Malcolm’s suitemates in college. Marta, Francesca, and Edie—who are all lesbians—were in a band together called Backfat. They used to participate in protests and hold unconventional jobs. Eventually, Marta and Francesca settle down together and live a more conventional life, and JB resents how tame they’ve become since their college days.

Francesca – Francesca was one of Jude, Willem, JB, and Malcolm’s suitemates in college. Francesca, Marta, and Edie—who are all lesbians—were in a band together called Backfat. They used to participate in protests and hold unconventional jobs. Now, Francesca and Marta have settled down together and live a more conventional life, and JB hates how tame they’ve become since their college days.

Edie – Edie was one of Jude, Willem, JB, and Malcolm’s suitemates in college. Edie, Marta, and Francesca—who are all lesbians—were in a band together called Backfat. After college, Edie transitions, and Jude, Willem, JB, and Malcolm attend a party at Marta and Francesca’s Brooklyn [apartment](#) to celebrate the occasion. JB, who longs to return to his college days, is the only one of his friends who genuinely enjoys the party.

Idriss – Idriss is Willem’s therapist. When Idriss tries to get Willem to talk about the issues he’s having with his sex life, Willem realizes he doesn’t want to think about his relationship with Jude as a series of problems he needs to fix—instead, he wants to think of their relationship as something that works despite its problems.

Boyd – Boyd is a counselor at the boys’ home where Jude lives after the authorities remove him from Brother Luke’s custody. When Boyd drops off Jude at the Learys’ [house](#) for a “probationary weekend,” he orders Jude not to mess anything up, since, as an older child, this is likely Jude’s last chance to be adopted. Jude takes Boyd’s advice to heart, and when, for unknown reasons, the Learys back out of the adoption, he believes it’s his fault.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Citizen – Citizen is one of Jude’s fellow clerks at the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Jude is friendliest with Citizen and Rhodes, with whom he works on securities fraud cases. They remain friends after their clerkship ends and they move on to different jobs.

Rhodes – Rhodes is one of Jude’s fellow clerks at the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Jude is friendliest with Rhodes and Citizen,

with whom he works on securities fraud cases. They remain friends after their clerkship ends and they move on to different jobs.

Dr. Li – Dr. Li is one of Jude’s math professors at MIT. He delivers a moving eulogy at Dr. Kashen’s funeral about “the axiom of zero,” a mathematical concept that explores the unprovability of nothingness. Dr. Li argues that in dying, Dr. Kashen “has proven the concept of zero.”

Brother Peter – Brother Peter is one of the monks at the monastery in South Dakota where Jude grew up. He and the other monks physically, sexually, and emotionally abused Jude, instilling in Jude a sense of internalized shame and worthlessness that he carries with him for the rest of his life.

Brother Michael – Brother Michael is one of the monks at the monastery in South Dakota where Jude grew up. He and the other monks physically, sexually, and emotionally abused Jude, instilling in Jude a sense of internalized shame and worthlessness that he carries with him for the rest of his life.

Brother Pavel – Brother Pavel is one of the monks at the monastery in South Dakota where Jude grew up. He and the other monks physically, sexually, and emotionally abused Jude, instilling in him a sense of internalized shame and worthlessness that he carries with him for the rest of his life.

Annika – Annika is one of JB’s coworkers at the arts magazine in SoHo where he works before his career takes off. At the beginning of the novel, Annika leases her aunt’s vacant **apartment** on Lispenard Street to Willem and Jude.

Mr. Baker – Mr. Baker is young Felix’s father; Jude tutors Felix for a time. Mr. Baker is very wealthy and has little time to understand his son or help him through his problems.

JB’s Father – JB’s father is a Haitian immigrant; he died when JB was three. JB didn’t know his father well enough to miss him.

JB’s Aunt – JB’s aunt is a detective. She took JB to the Museum of Modern Art when he was young, and this began his lifelong passion for art and inspired career as a painter. JB’s aunt, like the rest of JB’s family, has always believed in him and his art.

Black Henry Young – Black Henry Young is a friend that Jude, Willem, Malcolm, and JB have in common. They call him Black Henry Young to differentiate him from Asian Henry Young.

Asian Henry Young – Asian Henry Young is a friend that Jude, Willem, Malcolm, and JB have in common. They call him Asian Henry Young to differentiate him from Black Henry Young.

Giles – Giles is a therapist JB starts seeing (at his family’s insistence) after his family holds an intervention over JB’s drug use.

Linus – Linus is the doctor Andy selects to replace him when he retires from his practice. Jude appreciates Linus’s matter-of-fact approach, but he knows that he’ll never feel comfortable removing his clothes or sharing his history with any doctor

besides Andy.

Harold’s Father – Harold’s father was a doctor who died not long before Harold first meets Jude. Harold was close with his father, but the shame Harold felt about his failure to save Jacob in the final year of Jacob’s life makes it hard for Harold to face his father.

Adele – Adele was Harold’s father’s office manager. She married Harold’s father after Harold’s mother’s death and loved Harold as her own child. Harold, in turn, loved Adele and saw her as his mother. Adele died not long before Harold first meets Jude.

Rodger – Rodger is one of the cruelest counselors at the boys’ home in Philadelphia where Jude lives after the police take him away from Brother Luke. Once, when Jude (unsuccessfully) tries to run away, Rodger beats Jude so hard his nose bleeds.

Colin – Colin is one of the counselors at the boys’ home where Jude lives after the police take him away from Brother Luke. Jude runs away from the home one night after Colin sexually assaults him in the barn.

The Douglasses – The Douglasses are an evangelical Lutheran family that fosters Jude and two other disabled children, Agnes and Rosie, as Jude recovers from Dr. Traylor’s attack.

Alex – Alex is Rhodes’s wife. She works for Rothko, the fashion label at which Caleb is the new CEO. This is how Caleb comes to attend Rhodes and Alex’s dinner party, which where he and Jude meet.

Tomasz – Tomasz is a new boyfriend JB starts seeing sometime after Willem’s and Jude’s deaths. Harold likes Tomasz and thinks Willem and Jude would have liked him, too.

India – India is Richard’s wife. She’s an artist, too.

Ali – Ali is an artist with whom JB shares studio space at the beginning of the novel.

Gillian – Gillian is Laurence’s wife. She’s an English professor.

Jane – Jane is Andy Contractor’s wife.

Findlay – Findlay is Willem’s boss at Ortolan, the upscale restaurant Willem works at as he struggles to get his acting career off the ground.

Merritt – Merritt is Willem’s former roommate. He’s also an actor.

Mr. Ahmed – Mr. Ahmed is a driver Willem’s assistant hires for Jude when Jude suffers a series of serious infections prior to his amputation surgery.

Patrizia – Patrizia is a nurse who cares for Jude when a series of serious infections require him to receive an IV drip after his release from the hospital.



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.



TRAUMA

Jude St. Francis, the protagonist of *A Little Life*, endures unspeakable trauma and abuse throughout his early life. As a child, Jude is

orphaned and brought up in a monastery by monks who physically, sexually, and psychologically abuse him. He manages to escape, but every subsequent semblance of a home he finds himself in as a young person manages to be just as traumatic as the last. When Jude flees the abusive environment of a boys' home, for instance, a sadistic psychiatrist named Dr. Traylor abducts Jude, sexually abuses him, and crushes him beneath his car, leaving Jude with debilitating injuries that cause him to experience agonizing pain and limited mobility for the rest of his life. Jude's past leaves him scarred physically and emotionally. His abusers teach him that he is worthless, disgusting, and deserving of whatever wretchedness comes his way. Over time, Jude internalizes this message and believes that he is fundamentally flawed, irreversibly damaged, and undeserving of love, respect, and redemption. In his adult life, Jude doubts the sincerity of people who show him love and compassion, and he struggles to divulge his past to people who genuinely wish to help him.

Jude subsequently turns to **self-mutilation** to cope with the unresolved trauma. Jude's behavior may be seen as an attempt to regain the control and personal agency that his abusers stole from him in childhood. When Jude harms himself, he is trying to exert control over the psychological effects of his childhood trauma (the internalized shame, the lack of self-worth, the inability to trust) over which he has no control, and which continue to harm him. As such, Jude's self-mutilation—the physical trauma he inflicts upon himself—is a visual manifestation of the trauma Jude endured as a child. *A Little Life* uses Jude's struggle to illustrate how trauma and psychological damage stay with a person throughout their life. The novel takes a pessimistic stance on a person's ability to overcome and heal from trauma, suggesting that psychological injury isn't so different from physical injury: there are limits to what the body and mind can endure, and some wounds never heal.



IDENTITY

At its core, *A Little Life* is a coming-of-age story about four friends who move to the city to pursue their passions and find themselves. In time, each of

the book's four central characters achieve fame and success in their chosen field. Their professional lives offer concrete, obvious means to measure their success: for JB, it's when museums start to hang his work; Willem knows he's made it as an actor when film directors start casting him in lead roles; and Malcolm can measure his success as an architect by the physical structures he erects. But finding themselves proves trickier, and the friends spend their lives making sense of how they want to define themselves, how much control they have over who they are, and the people they become. Jude, for instance, wants to open up to Willem and engage in healthy intimacy with him, but his childhood sexual abuse prevents him from doing this. Jude's traumatic childhood has led him to believe that he is a monstrous and deformed person, and he fears that he is incapable of redemption or change. Willem, meanwhile, is all too aware of the way his identity changes over time. He spent much of his childhood caring for his older brother, Hemming, who had a severe form of cerebral palsy that left him nonverbal and confined to a **wheelchair**. Hemming died when Willem was in college, and his death forced Willem to reevaluate who he was when he could no longer inhabit the role of Hemming's brother and caregiver. Through its central characters' quest to find themselves, then, *A Little Life* portrays identity as complex, fluid, and shifting; it suggests that identity is not a fixed and fundamental trait, but, rather, the culmination of self-expression and circumstance.



SUCCESS AND HAPPINESS

A Little Life follows four close friends (Jude, Willem, Malcolm, and JB) as they graduate from college and move to New York in pursuit of fame, success, and wealth. The friends are all ambitious and talented, and over the course of the novel, each achieves great success in his chosen field (Jude is a lawyer, Willem is an actor, JB is an artist, and Malcolm is an architect). Yet, as they advance in their careers, they discover that success doesn't guarantee happiness and personal fulfillment. What's more, they find that success often comes at a cost. After years of being overlooked, for instance, JB finds fame and success as a painter, but he develops a drug addiction and alienates some of his closest friends in the process. JB's first solo show is called "The Boys," a series of paintings he modeled after photographs he took of Jude, Willem, and Malcolm. Though JB had promised Jude, who is extremely private and guarded against the way people see him, that he would seek Jude's approval before painting any photographs of him, JB goes back on his promise and hangs a photo of Jude, looking exposed and vulnerable, at his first show. Jude and Willem take JB's betrayal badly, and their friendship with him is never the same. JB prioritizes ambition over friendship, and he suffers for it. Jude, meanwhile, joins Rosen Pritchard and Klein—one of the city's most prestigious law firms—to ensure that he's wealthy enough to afford proper,

dignified care as his health and mobility worsen with age. After Willem dies suddenly in a car crash, though, Jude wishes he had spent less time at work and more time with Willem. And while the trajectory of Jude's life might be outwardly successful—he overcomes an abusive childhood to become a brilliant, wealthy lawyer with a movie-star partner—ultimately, his childhood trauma continues to haunt him throughout his life. *A Little Life* suggests that outward success does not guarantee inner happiness and fulfillment—and more often, prioritizing success and ambition leads to unhappiness, alienation, and regret.



FRIENDSHIP AND HUMAN CONNECTION

A Little Life may be brutal in its depiction of abuse, pain, and human suffering—but it is not relentless.

As often as the novel subjects Jude to physical and psychological torture, it also grants him temporary relief in the happy moments he shares with his friends. Jude, Malcolm, JB, and Willem meet and form a close bond in college, and their friendship endures, deepens, and evolves as they move through life. Jude and Willem's especially close friendship later develops into a romance, and they remain life partners until Willem's tragic death in a car accident. Willem cannot reverse Jude's **injuries** or eliminate his suffering—ultimately, though Jude tries, they are unable to have a sexual relationship due to Jude's history of sexual abuse—but his love alleviates some of the pain. Later, Jude develops a meaningful bond with Harold Stein, his law school professor. Harold and his wife, Julia, ultimately adopt Jude, offering him the unconditional parental love Jude never had the chance to have as a child.

But there is an asymmetry between the love people offer Jude and the love Jude is able to accept. Jude's history of abuse has left him reluctant to trust others. When Jude was young, he befriended Brother Luke, a monk at the monastery where Jude grew up. Brother Luke didn't beat Jude like the other monks, and Jude believed he could trust him. However, Luke later kidnaps Jude, forces him into sex work, and then ends up raping Jude himself—all under the guise of love. Jude's experience with Brother Luke, and with virtually every adult he encountered throughout his childhood, teaches him to assume the worst in people. As an adult, then, Jude struggles to be open and vulnerable with his friends—even with Harold and Willem, who he knows, at the intellectual level, would never harm him. *A Little Life*, then, celebrates the strength and complexity of human connection. The book sees friendship as essentially restorative—it can offer comfort, relief, and stability in an otherwise brutal and unpredictable world. At the same time, though, the novel shows that there are limits to what love and friendship can fix.



PAIN AND SUFFERING

The world of the novel is a wretched place where suffering, tragedy, loss, and human cruelty spare nobody. Jude endures a lifetime of unbearable pain, health complications, and impaired mobility after a sadistic doctor runs him over with his car when he is 15, and his condition only worsens with age. He also struggles with unresolved trauma from an abusive childhood. Most characters die, many of them young and tragically. By the novel's end, JB is the only one of the four friends who remains: Willem and Malcolm die in a car wreck, and Jude dies by suicide shortly thereafter. An exception is Jude's mentor, friend, and adoptive father, Harold, who lives to old age. But Harold's longevity is no happy thing. In exchange for a long life, he endures the death of two sons: first, his biological son, Jacob, dies in childhood; and then Jude dies by suicide many years later. Thus, the novel portrays pain, misery, and human suffering as fundamental facts of life that anyone alive will inevitably endure.

Throughout the book, characters struggle to overcome, understand, and accept the existence of human suffering—and each of them fail. Some believe people can overcome and defeat despair. Many of Jude's friends (Andy and Harold, most notably) believe Jude can heal his psychological wounds through talk therapy. Others try to find a logical or moral framework to explain suffering. They seem to think that if they can understand *why* people suffer, they might avoid suffering themselves—or at least take comfort in the fact that it has happened for a reason. For instance, after Caleb, Jude's abusive ex-partner, dies of pancreatic cancer, Harold and Andy express gratitude that Caleb, an objectively wretched person, died a young and excruciatingly painful death. It comforts them to think that Caleb got what he deserved. By contrast, many characters seem to think that Jude's suffering is especially tragic because Jude is a good person who, they believe, does not deserve to suffer. But neither of these opposing views is quite right. Rather, the novel proposes that nobody deserves or is inclined to suffer more than anybody else: it's just something that happens, unfair or unsatisfying as this may be. There is no way to explain why good people die young, or why cruelty goes unpunished. *A Little Life* suggests that human suffering is a fundamental, unavoidable part of the human experience, and trying to overcome or explain it only invites more suffering.



SYMBOLS

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



JUDE'S SELF-HARM

The cuts, scars, burns, and bruises Jude incurs from his recurrent self-harm symbolize Jude's childhood

trauma and his inability to overcome that trauma. Jude began to use self-harm to cope with feelings of internalized shame, pain, and worthlessness in childhood. When Jude was living at the monastery, he would bang parts of himself (his wrists, his elbows, or his cheeks, for example) against the corner of dinner tables or desks. Doing this gave Jude a sense of control over the monks who abused him: seeing the “anger and noise and power” of Jude’s self-harm scared the monks. It also allowed Jude to reclaim control over his body: it allowed him to inflict pain upon himself, when he was otherwise subject to the pain of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse the monks inflicted upon him. Jude continues to hit and cut himself as an adult. And for the most part, his reasons for doing so remain the same: he wants to regain the control over his body, mind, and life that his abusers took away from him. In this way, then, Jude’s injuries reflect the enduring effects of Jude’s childhood trauma, and his enduring efforts to cope with that trauma.

Though Jude turns to self-harm to cope with his trauma, his self-inflicted injuries are also the source of additional shame and self-hatred. Jude wears long-sleeved shirts to hide his self-harm from others, and for much of his life, nobody besides Andy, Jude’s trusted doctor, knows about them. Jude hides his injuries from others because he is ashamed of them. Not only do his injuries remind him of a past that he’s ashamed of, but they are also a visual manifestation of Jude’s continued failure to work through and recover from his childhood trauma—his inability to leave the past behind him and become a better, restored person. As an adult, Jude recognizes that his continued self-harm is counterproductive: his body has been abused and scarred in so many ways that were beyond his control, and now, he continues to willfully subject his body to further injury. Still, his self-hatred and shame run too deep for him to adopt healthy coping mechanisms to work through his trauma and alleviate some of his inner suffering. In this way, then, the vicious cycle of Jude’s self-harm and self-hatred illustrates the broader psychological hang-ups that create obstacles to his recovery. That is, he hurts himself because he feels that he is “deformed” and unworthy of anything but pain and suffering, and then he sees the cuts and scars he inflicts upon himself as visual proof that he is truly “deformed” and undeserving of healing, compassion, and redemption. Thus, the cycle continues.



HOUSES, APARTMENTS, AND CABINS

Houses symbolize security and protection. The novel opens when Willem and Jude, in their 20s and fresh out of college, move into their Lispenard Street apartment. The apartment is objectively awful—it’s impossibly small and grimy—yet Willem and Jude love it. Willem and Jude both come from disadvantaged backgrounds and regard having a place of their own, even one as lackluster as Lispenard Street, as a significant success. They also view Lispenard Street as

proof that they can control their lives. Willem has come from a relatively disadvantaged upbringing in rural Wyoming, and Jude’s childhood was defined by horrific abuse and abject poverty. Yet, here they are: driven, college-educated young men who have a place to call their own. Lispenard Street specifically, then, symbolizes a person’s ability to reinvent themselves and take control of their lives and destiny.

Lispenard Street (and all the other houses they live in together) also symbolizes Jude and Willem’s evolving relationship and commitment to each other. It will be years before their relationship morphs from a close friendship to a romance. Still, the way their commitment to each other transforms Lispenard Street from a rundown and depressing hovel to a happy, meaningful place reinforces the close bond that has always been the foundation of their relationship. Many years later, when Jude and Willem have achieved great success in their respective careers, they hire Malcolm to design a house for them upstate, Lantern House. Lantern House is a visual measure of their success: it reflects their ability to transform their lives from fraught and damaged to grand and beautiful. It’s also a measure of their evolved relationship: they began as close friends, but now they have grown to become life partners.

Even before Lispenard Street, houses had a special resonance for Jude. When Jude is still living at the monastery, Brother Luke gives him a toy set of round cylinders of wood that resemble logs for his eighth birthday. Jude uses the toy logs to build miniature versions of the cabin that Brother Luke promises he and Jude will build and live in together once they run away from the monastery. But Jude’s happy future with Brother Luke in the cabin never comes to fruition. Instead, upon fleeing the monastery, Brother Luke forces Jude into sex work and sexually abuses Jude himself, weaponizing Jude’s dream of the cabin to manipulate and control Jude. So, Jude’s relationship to houses is multifaceted and complex. On the one hand, he recognizes that superficial markers of success, such as building a house or advancing in his career, aren’t always enough to counteract the enduring trauma of his past. Still, the fact that Jude, in his own words, continues to “fetishize” houses as an adult symbolizes his enduring hope that achieving financial security and forming meaningful bonds with others might still be enough to help him heal from that past and become the restored, undamaged person he longs to be.



JUDE’S WHEELCHAIR

Jude’s wheelchair symbolizes his struggle to accept his trauma and disability. Though Jude learns how to walk again after Dr. Traylor runs over him with his car, the attack leaves Jude with chronic pain and mobility issues that persist for the rest of his life. The Philadelphia doctor who treats Jude in the immediate aftermath of the attack vaguely

suggests that Jude's spine and legs might one day heal. So, for many years, Jude lives with the hope that he might one day regain the physical strength and mobility the accident took from him many years before. It's devastating, then, when years later, Andy tells Jude that the opposite is true: that he will never recover from his injuries, and that his pain and mobility issues will only grow more extreme and debilitating over time. This revelation forces Jude to acknowledge that, despite the professional and financial success he's experienced as an adult, his physical limitations will always be there, effectively gluing him to the past and all the shame and trauma he associates with it.

As Jude's condition worsens, some days, the pain is so bad that he must use a wheelchair, and this makes it impossible for him to hide his injuries completely. In many ways, Jude seems to see his deteriorating physical health as a sign of his worsening mental health. His wheelchair, thus, reinforces how unworthy and abnormal he believes he is: ordinary people recover from their injuries over time; meanwhile, Jude's condition grows steadily worse. Jude's abusive relationship with Caleb only reaffirms his self-hatred, his internalized shame, and the negative associations he has with his wheelchair. Caleb is visibly disgusted by Jude's disability and wheelchair. He even cancels their dinner plans on the spot one night when Jude shows up in his wheelchair. Caleb claims that Jude is "weak" for using his wheelchair when he "technically" can walk (though the pain makes it effectively impossible to walk). Caleb's criticism not only reaffirms Jude's big fear that other people see him as deformed and different, but also that his failure to work through his trauma and heal (psychologically) is his own fault.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor edition of *A Little Life* published in 2016.

Part 1: Lisperard Street: Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ "But Jude," he said, quietly, "you're in pain. We have to get you help."

"Nothing will help," he said, and was silent for a few moments. "I just have to wait." His voice was whispery and faint, unfamiliar.


"What can I do?" Willem asked.

"Nothing," Jude said. They were quiet. "But Willem—will you stay with me for a little while?"

"Of course," he said.

Related Characters: Willem Ragnarsson (speaker), Jude St. Francis

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

The day Willem and Jude move into their Lisperard Street apartment, Jude has a pain episode. This leads Willem to recall the first time he witnessed one of Jude's episodes, which happened late one night while they were alone in their suite in college. The dialogue in this passage is the exchange that occurred between them that night.

This exchange between Willem and Jude is short and simple, but it aptly captures the heart of their relationship. From the moment he first meets Jude, Willem feels a responsibility to help him but doesn't know how. He also struggles to accept that some of Jude's problems—his chronic pain, unresolved trauma, and intimacy issues, for example—are beyond his ability to fix. Jude, meanwhile, is notoriously unforthcoming about himself and resentful of others' efforts to help him—both coping mechanisms he has developed out of a need for self-preservation. Jude has been abused, betrayed, or abandoned by nearly every adult in his life who should have protected him, which makes intimacy and vulnerability difficult for him. He needs help, yet he's afraid to ask for it; he wants to confide in someone, yet he fears their judgment.

In time, though, Willem and Jude learn to accommodate each other's needs and accept the things they can't change or fix in each other. Jude learns to be vulnerable around Willem, and Willem discovers that even when he can't totally fix Jude, it can also be enough simply to "stay with [him] for a little while" until the pain passes.

Part 1: Lisperard Street: Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ It was a great painting, and he knew it, knew it absolutely the way you sometimes did, and he had no intention of ever showing it to Jude until it was hanging on a gallery wall somewhere and Jude would be powerless to do anything about it.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Jean Baptiste "JB" Marion

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, JB is a struggling artist living in New York City and waiting for the art world to discover him. Now, at work in his cramped studio space, he contemplates the painting of Jude he knows will give him his big break—and the issues that this painting will raise for its subject.

All of Jude's friends know he's incredibly secretive about his past and protective of his private life. So, when JB began his current series of paintings some months back (a series featuring paintings of his three best friends based on candid photographs he took of them on nights out), he knew Jude would have a problem with the project. And the painting JB is working on now, which depicts Jude looking very vulnerable and slight, is almost certainly something Jude wouldn't want on display in a gallery for the whole world to see. Though JB promises to ask for Jude's permission before starting work on a painting of him, he goes against his promise and paints Jude anyway.

Indeed, in this passage, JB even boasts that Jude won't know about the painting "until it was hanging on a gallery wall somewhere and Jude would be powerless to do anything about it." In other words, Jude won't know about the painting until JB has used it (and Jude) to solidify his place in the art world. Of the four main characters, JB is, by far, the character willing to sacrifice most for ambition, and his thought process in this scene illustrates this selfish aspect of his personality.

☞ When did pursuing your ambitions cross the line from brave into foolhardy? How did you know when to stop?

Related Characters: Willem Ragnarsson, Jean Baptiste "JB" Marion

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Now a young aspiring actor, Willem walks to his restaurant job and considers how far a person ought to take their ambitions: when does ambition "cross the line from brave into foolhardy?" The question gets at Willem's insecurities about failing to secure any impressive acting roles, working at a restaurant, and maintaining the illusion—to himself and the rest of the world—that he's going to make it big one day. Often, he wonders whether life might have been better if

he'd stayed home and worked on his parents' ranch in rural Wyoming.

The same anxieties that plague Willem also plague each main character, though to varying degrees. Though Willem aspires to be a successful actor (and eventually achieves this goal), in the end, he recognizes that success and ambition are less important than things like friendship. And ultimately, a person will feel more fulfilled by their meaningful friendships than any professional accolades they've collected over the years.

JB, by contrast, has always placed his career and ambition first, and this has seriously alienated him from his friends on numerous occasions. For instance, JB, Willem, and Jude have a major falling-out after JB betrays Jude's trust by hanging a portrait of Jude at a gallery show without Jude's consent. So, this question of when ambition stops being "brave" and becomes "foolhardy" is a major concern in the novel and illuminates the broader concern of what makes a person's life meaningful.

☞ Perhaps because of this, he felt he always knew who and what he was, which is why, as he moved farther and then further away from the ranch and his childhood, he felt very little pressure to change or reinvent himself. He was a guest at his college, a guest in graduate school, and now he was a guest in New York, a guest in the lives of the beautiful and the rich. He would never try to pretend he was born to such things, because he knew he wasn't; he was a ranch hand's son from western Wyoming, and his leaving didn't mean that everything he had once been was erased, written over by time and experiences and the proximity to money.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Hemming

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

As Willem heads to his shift at Ortolan, the upscale restaurant he waits tables at while he tries to get his acting career off the ground, he considers how he has and hasn't changed since his modest upbringing in rural Wyoming. Though the life Willem leads now as a struggling actor in New York City is a far cry from his humble roots, he never loses sight of where he came from. His parents were hardworking, hardened Scandinavian immigrants, and Willem's father in particular instilled a great sense of

humility in him. This makes it hard for Willem to feel at home in his new life, and he constantly feels like “a guest in the lives of the beautiful and the rich.” For Willem, there’s not even a point in trying to “reinvent himself” or distance himself from his past, since the lessons he learned in his formative years in Wyoming will shape every new experience he encounters. With this, the novel proposes that people can move away and their priorities might evolve, but they will be “a guest” in whatever new life they try to create for themselves; in short, a person’s past stays with them forever.

Willem’s musings concern his own experiences exclusively, but they’ll become relevant to Jude when the two later enters into a romantic relationship. Jude had an incredibly traumatic childhood, and his unresolved trauma negatively affects nearly every aspect of Jude’s life and his relationship with Willem. Willem desperately wants to help Jude confront and work through his trauma, but ultimately, he’ll come to the same realization he touches on in this passage: the past stays with a person forever. Ultimately, Jude’s demons will always haunt him, no matter how much compassion, patience, love, and security Willem tries to give him. Jude’s past, much like Willem’s, cannot be “erased, written over by time and experiences and the proximity to money.”

this passage, the reader can discern that Jude didn’t have a great childhood; it’s even plausible (and correct) to infer that Jude was abused as a child—indeed, his admission that “there was only misery, or fear,” points in this direction.

Jude’s past influences his ideas about happiness. He doesn’t think happiness is a given in life; instead, he finds it “an extravagance, an impossible state to maintain,” and something that’s “difficult to articulate[.]” Jude’s pessimistic take on happiness is a consequence of his abusive childhood. For Jude, “there was only misery, or fear, and the absence of misery or fear,” but there was no happiness, and so it’s hard for him as an adult to take for granted the existence of something his abusers took away from him when he was a child. One of the book’s central concerns is the degree to which a person can reinvent themselves and leave the past behind. For Jude, as for other characters, it’s impossible to part ways with the past entirely, and Jude’s stance on happiness in this passage is evidence of this.

☛ But the odd thing was this: by his story morphing into one about a car accident, he was being given an opportunity for reinvention; all he had to do was claim it. But he never could. He could never call it an accident, because it wasn’t. And so was it pride or stupidity to not take the escape route he’d been offered? He didn’t know.

Part 2: The Postman: Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ But what was happiness but an extravagance, an impossible state to maintain, partly because it was so difficult to articulate? He couldn’t remember being a child and being able to define happiness: there was only misery, or fear, and the absence of misery or fear, and the latter state was all he had needed or wanted.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Felix Baker, Mr. Baker

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In his 20s, Jude takes on part-time work tutoring a young, shy, and sad boy named Felix. One day, Felix’s father, Mr. Baker, asks Jude what Jude thinks is “wrong” with Felix, prompting Jude to contemplate the idea of happiness. His thoughts offer additional insight into Jude’s mysterious past, much of which remains unknown to the reader (and to most people in Jude’s life) at this point in the novel. From

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Malcolm Irvine, Jean Baptiste “JB” Marion, Dr. Traylor

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Jude recalls a time in college when Malcolm put him on the spot, asking him how he injured his legs. Jude told a partial truth and claimed he got his injuries in “a car accident” (though, in fact, he got the injuries after Dr. Traylor intentionally ran over Jude with his car). Jude’s friends (minus Willem) accepted his explanation without question, and in this passage, Jude considers why he hadn’t seized this “opportunity for reinvention” and “claim[ed] it” for himself, too.

Jude is extremely private about his miserable, abusive childhood, fearing that others will distance themselves from him if they know all the horrific details of his past. Suppose Jude could simply erase Dr. Traylor’s attack from his personal narrative and replace it with the decidedly more

typical experience of a car accident. In that case, he'd have a chance to be the normal, conforming person he's always longed to be. And yet, either "pride or stupidity" prevented him from calling what happened to him an accident. Jude's contemplations in this passage consider how much control a person has to author their own life and create a new identity for themselves. In other words, does a person's past define them absolutely, or do they have the freedom to break free from their past and reinvent themselves as they see fit? Overwhelmingly, the novel grimly proposes that a person can never truly break free from their past.

☞ "If I were a different kind of person, I might say that this whole incident is a metaphor for life in general: things get broken, and sometimes they get repaired, and in most cases, you realize that no matter what gets damaged, life rearranges itself to compensate for your loss, sometimes wonderfully."

Related Characters: Harold Stein (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Jacob

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 152-153

Explanation and Analysis

After Jude accidentally breaks a mug that Harold's late son, Jacob, made for Harold, he's mortified and ashamed to have destroyed something that meant so much to Harold and assumes that Harold will never forgive him. Much to Jude's surprise, Harold writes him a letter in which he accepts Jude's apology and conveys his unconditional love for him.

Harold's remark sheds light on his relationship with Jude and his views on tragedy and suffering. In Harold's letter, the broken mug is a metaphor for the tragedy of Jacob's death. After Jacob died, Harold explains, Harold's life "g[ot] broken" and has always stayed that way. But in the aftermath of this great tragedy, Harold's "life rearrange[d] itself to compensate for [his] loss" when Jude, who will become Harold's adopted son, came into Harold's life. Harold is saying that it's impossible to eliminate suffering and prevent things from breaking in the first place—life is messy and unfair, and many horrible things happen to undeserving people. Nevertheless, sometimes this brokenness "rearranges itself" to help a person work through that loss. *A Little Life* suggests that people should not only be grateful for this, but that they should also take this as proof that life is fundamentally worth living, even if suffering and misery are inevitable.

Part 2: The Postman: Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Fairness is for happy people, for people who have been lucky enough to have lived a life defined more by certainties than by ambiguities.

Related Characters: Harold Stein (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Jean Baptiste "JB" Marion

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

In a first-person address to Willem (at the end of the novel, it's revealed that Harold, after Jude and Willem have died, is speaking to a portrait JB painted of Willem), Harold recalls what Jude was like as a first-year law student. In particular, Harold was struck by Jude's disinterest in fairness, a concept most overly idealistic first-year law students can't help but fixate on.

Jude was different than most of these students. Harold will only learn the full extent of the abuse and tragedy that shaped most of Jude's childhood after Jude's death, but even then, when Jude was Harold's student, Harold could tell that Jude had had a hard life. And, Harold summarizes here, it was Jude's hard life that made him so indifferent to fairness. "Fairness is for happy people," Harold asserts. Happy people's lives are marked by good fortunes they feel they deserve, and so they develop a skewed sense of the reality in which good things happen to good, deserving people, and bad things happen to bad people who deserve to suffer: in other words, life is essentially fair.

But for Jude, who by 15 has been abused and let down by nearly every adult in his life, fairness is a fantasy "for people who have been lucky enough to have lived a life defined more by certainties than by ambiguities." Happy people, the novel implies, never question what they've done to deserve the bad thing that's happened to them, or whether people can be simultaneously good and evil, and simultaneously loving and abusive. Due to Jude's history of abuse (and his rampant unhappiness), Jude had to accept long ago that life isn't fair—bad things can happen to anyone, especially him.

Part 2: The Postman: Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Every day the improbability of the situation seemed to grow larger and more vivid in his mind; every time he glimpsed the reflection of his ugly zombie's hobble in the side of a building, he would feel sickened: Who, really, would ever want *this*? The idea that he could become someone else's seemed increasingly ludicrous, and if Harold saw him just once more, how could he too not come to the same conclusion?

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Harold Stein, Julia , The Learys

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Following Harold and Julia's announcement that they want to adopt Jude, Jude falls into a deep depression. He starts to avoid Harold and Julia, whom he genuinely loves, because he fears that they will change their minds about the adoption; he wants to shield himself against that hurt preemptively.

Jude was nearly adopted before, back when he was a teenager living in a boys' home in Montana, by a family called the Learys. But the Learys backed out last minute, and Jude has always felt it was his fault that they didn't choose him—that there was something wrong about him that repulsed everyone. As a result, Jude can't be genuinely happy about Harold and Julia wanting to adopt him, since he's afraid that they, too, will see Jude for the ugly and damaged person he believes he is and decide they don't want him in their lives after all.


This is one of Jude's greatest conflicts. Jude was abused and rejected so often throughout his childhood (the monks who raised him drilled it into his head that he was monstrous, repulsive, and evil) that he now believes he's undeserving of love, compassion, and respect. As an adult, Jude struggles to accept love from people who genuinely care for him, like Harold and Julia, thinking it "increasingly ludicrous" that anybody in their right mind would want him.

Part 3: Vanities: Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ "But I'm not even in a wheelchair," he'd said, dismayed. "But Jude," Malcolm had begun, and then stopped. He knew what Malcolm wanted to say: But you have been. And you will be again. But he didn't. "These are standard ADA guidelines," he said instead. "Mal," he'd said, chagrined by how upset he was. "I understand. But I don't want this to be some cripple's apartment."

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Malcolm Irvine (speaker), Dr. Traylor

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

Malcolm is showing Jude his plans for Jude's apartment renovations, which include several accessibility features, like grab bars in the bathroom.

When Jude was a child growing up in a monastery in South Dakota, he was raised by monks who physically, emotionally, and sexually abused him. They made Jude believe he was a monster, and he's never been able to shake this idea. Jude's disability, the result of Dr. Traylor running over him with his car when he was 16, only confirms his fear that he's a monster: he sees his disability as physical evidence of his strangeness and monstrosity. Jude resents his wheelchair, in particular, because it's a visual reminder of his disability. Out of shame and fear, Jude tries to hide and deny his disability as best he can, fearing that his friends, like the monks of Jude's youth, will reject and revile Jude once they see him as the broken and deformed (in Jude's mind) person he is. So, when Malcolm, with only Jude's best interest in mind, suggests that he incorporate ADA-approved accommodations into his designs for Jude's apartment, Jude angrily snaps that he "do[es]n't want this to be some cripple's apartment."

Of course, the irony of this situation is that by pushing Malcolm away and rejecting his help, Jude only further alienates himself, making it more unlikely that he will have the strength and support he needs to heal from his past and learn to love himself. In his efforts to protect himself against loneliness and suffering, he thus invites more loneliness and suffering into his life. The novel suggests that friendship and human connection can offer a person respite and relief from the suffering and misery of daily life. Yet, there are limits to

friendship's ability to alleviate suffering, as this passage demonstrates. Jude is surrounded by people who accept him and want to help him, yet his deep-seated trust issues and unspeakably horrific past leave him psychologically ill-equipped to recognize and accept the help others offer him.

☝ He could be more like Malcolm, he thinks; he could ask his friends for help, he could be vulnerable around them. He has been before, after all; it just hasn't been by choice. But they have always been kind to him, they have never tried to make him feel self-conscious—shouldn't that teach him something? Maybe, for instance, he *will* ask Willem if he could help him with his back: if Willem is disgusted by his appearance, he'll never say anything.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Malcolm Irvine, Sophie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

Jude goes shopping for a suit with Malcolm for Malcolm's wedding, and Malcolm confides in Jude about his doubts about his upcoming marriage to Sophie. As he listens to Malcolm's woes, Jude inwardly compares his own emotional defensiveness with Malcolm's emotional vulnerability. He wishes he could be more like Malcolm, recognizing that his inability to open up to his friends puts strain on their relationship and ultimately ends up hurting him too.

Jude even acknowledges the flaw in his main reason for being so private: he feels that his friends will judge him for his struggles and think differently of him. Jude's physical condition—his chronic pain and limited mobility—has forced him to “be vulnerable around [his friends],” and they have not abandoned him as a result. In fact, “they have always been kind to him, [and] they have never tried to make him feel self-conscious.” They've seen him suffer through pain episodes and haven't judged him or made him feel abnormal or lesser. Realizing this makes Jude feel even worse about his inability to confide in his friends. They've repeatedly proven that their love for him is unconditional, yet he still fails to trust them.

This type of thinking is characteristic of Jude: he often takes something he's struggling with (say, his trust issues and low self-esteem) and then blames himself for these destructive traits rather than the abuse that caused him to develop these traits in the first place. And in blaming himself, Jude

only reaffirms what his low self-esteem and trust issues tell him all along: that he is a flawed, broken person unworthy of friendship and compassion.

Part 4: The Axiom of Equality: Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ “You'll find your own way to discuss what happened to you,” he remembers Ana saying. “You'll have to, if you ever want to be close to anyone.” He wishes, as he often does, that he had let her [...] teach him how to do it. His silence had begun as something protective, but over the years it has transformed into something [...] that manages him rather than the other way around. [...] He imagines he is floating in a small bubble of water, encased on all sides by walls and ceilings and floors of ice, all many feet thick. He knows there is a way out, but he is unequipped; he has no tools to begin his work [...]. He had thought that by not saying who he was, he was making himself more palatable, less strange. But now, what he doesn't say makes him stranger, an object of pity and even suspicion.

Related Characters: Ana (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Ana

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

Willem and Jude get into an argument about Jude's secrecy after Jude suggests that he's not made to be in a relationship with anybody, at which point Willem criticizes Jude for never opening up to anyone—including Willem. Inwardly, Jude considers how his secrecy—a coping mechanism he developed long ago to protect himself against further betrayal, disappointment, and loneliness—has, over time, “transformed into something near oppressive, something that manages him rather than the other way around.” At first, Jude built a wall of secrecy around himself to seem “less strange” to others. He thought if nobody knew about all the abuse he endured as a child, then he might be able to pretend he's normal like everyone else. He reasoned that this might allow him to disown his past altogether and live a functional, good life.


Over time, though, this coping mechanism backfires and ends up “mak[ing] him stranger, an object of pity and even suspicion.” The unresolved trauma Jude refuses to talk about with others and confront himself festers inside him, gaining power and strength the longer he keeps it bottled up inside. He feels as though he's “floating in a small bubble of water, encased on all sides by walls and ceilings and floors

of ice,” and lacking the “tools to begin” the task of breaking through. With this, Jude realizes that his old social worker, Ana’s, warning has come true: keeping everything inside has hindered his ability to form healthy, close relationships with others. To Willem, for instance, it’s not Jude’s history of abuse that makes him “an object of pity and even suspicion,” but his “silence.” The novel repeatedly shows how friendship and connection can offer a person relief from the misery and suffering that are a fundamental part of human existence. Yet, it also shows that there are limits to the relief friendship can provide a person like Jude, who is too afraid of being judged or misunderstood break down the walls that separates himself from others.

●● When he has clothes on, he is one person, but without them, he is revealed as he really is, the years of rot manifested on his skin, his own flesh advertising his past, its depravities and corruptions.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Caleb Porter

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 347

Explanation and Analysis

Jude considers his naked body, which is covered in scars from self-harm injuries, as well as injuries Jude’s abusers have inflicted upon him over the years. Jude has been thinking badly of his body more often than usual since he started seeing Caleb, a cruel man who repeatedly abuses Jude and convinces Jude that one of his worst fears is true: his scars make him freakish, repulsive, and unlovable.

Jude hides his body from the world (he’s uncomfortable with sexual intimacy, and he always wears long sleeves to cover his self-harm scars, for instance) because he fears that the world will see him “as he really is, the years of rot manifested on his skin, his own flesh advertising his past, its depravities and corruptions.” The disgust Jude’s scars arouse in Jude—and the disgust he fears they arouse in others, too—illustrates Jude’s flawed interpretation of his past. He believes his skin displays “depravities and corruptions” because he sees the abuse he suffered, not to mention the self-harm he practices to cope with his history of abuse, as fundamentally his fault. He believes (incorrectly) that his abusers chose him because they could tell there was something fundamentally wrong and corrupt

about him. In other words, Jude feels like an enabler rather than a victim of his childhood abuse, and this causes him to feel a lot of shame and self-hatred. This is why Jude doesn’t want people to see his scars: he thinks that they will look at them and see a wretched person rather than a victim of wretchedness—that his scars will elicit disgust rather than compassion.

●● But now he knows for certain how true the axiom is, because he himself—his very life—has proven it. The person I was will always be the person I am, he realizes. The context may have changed [...]. But fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated. And in that microsecond that he finds himself suspended in the air, [...] he knows that x will always equal x , no matter what he does, or how many years he moves away from the monastery, from Brother Luke, no matter how much he earns or how hard he tries to forget. It is the last thing he thinks as his shoulder cracks down upon the concrete, and the world, for an instant, jerks blessedly away from beneath him: $x = x$, he thinks. $x = x$, $x = x$.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Brother Luke

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 386

Explanation and Analysis

Jude flies through the air after Caleb throws him down the stairwell of Jude’s Greene Street apartment (Caleb had been waiting for Jude to arrive, at which point he attacked and beat Jude severely). Before Jude hits the ground, he considers the axiom of zero, a mathematical equation that describes the concept of nothingness. In math, nothingness is assumed; that is, it can’t be proven. But Caleb’s attack tonight has made Jude realize that the trajectory of his life has in fact proven the axiom of zero, $x = x$.

Jude was abused by practically every adult figure he encountered throughout his childhood, and he struggles with things like trust, intimacy, shame, and vulnerability as a result. Since childhood, he’s made a life for himself: he’s a successful lawyer, he has a close group of friends, and he even has a romantic partner now, Caleb Porter. However, at the back of Jude’s mind, Jude fears that all this is just a charade, and that he will always be the broken, pitiful child his abusers made him become, though he’s had no way of

proving this suspicion correct—until tonight.

When Caleb attacks Jude and throws him down the stairs, Jude takes it as confirmation that he's no different than he was as a child growing up at the monastery—that is, he's no less susceptible to abuse, and no more deserving of love, compassion, or respect. Jude started seeing Caleb because he was lonely—and he boldly dared to think he had grown into something another person might desire. But Caleb immediately began to abuse Jude, effectively showing him that “x will always equal x, no matter what he does, or how many years he moves away from the monastery, from Brother Luke, no matter how much he earns or how hard he tries to forget.” In other words, Jude sees Caleb's abuse as punishment for Jude daring to think he might be capable of recovery and redemption—that he could leave his past behind him. Caleb's abuse has effectively put Jude in his place, showing him that he is—and always will be—nothing.

Part 4: The Axiom of Equality: Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ I had meant what I told him that weekend: whatever he had done didn't matter to me. I knew him. Who he had become was the person who mattered to me. I told him that who he was before made no difference to me. But of course, this was naïve: I adopted the person he was, but along with that came the person he had been, and I didn't know who that person was. Later, I would regret that I hadn't made it clearer to him that that person, whoever he was, was someone I wanted as well. Later, I would wonder, incessantly, what it would have been like for him if I had found him twenty years before I did, when he was a baby. Or if not twenty, then ten, or even five. Who would he have been, and who would I have been?

Related Characters: Harold Stein (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Jean Baptiste “JB” Marion, Julia

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 397-398

Explanation and Analysis

In a first-person address to Willem (at the end of the novel, it's revealed that Harold, after Jude and Willem have died, is speaking not to Willem himself, but to a portrait JB painted of Willem), Harold laments his failed efforts to show Jude how much he loved him. Jude, fearing rejection, started to avoid Harold and Julia after they made plans to move forward with Jude's adoption. Later, he told Harold that he was afraid Harold would change his mind about adopting Jude if he knew half the things that had happened to him as

a child (Jude was severely abused as a child, and unresolved trauma from that time of his life has caused him to blame himself for all that happened to him).

Harold, without knowing exactly what Jude was talking about (Jude is extremely secretive about his past), assured Jude that “whatever he had done didn't matter,” and that all that did matter was “who he had become[.]” Harold tried to make Jude understand this—that Jude was not the abused child he once was, and that he was good, and blameless—but ultimately, Jude's pain is too great, and he dies by suicide at the end of the novel. In this passage, Harold expresses how much he regrets not “ma[king] it clearer to him that that person, whoever he was, was someone I wanted as well.” Harold wonders if could have tried harder to show Jude that his love for him was unconditional.

This passage also highlights the idea that a person's past continues to shape them well after it's gone. Harold wonders if he could've changed things for Jude had he entered Jude's life earlier—that is, if instead of the monks raising Jude and Jude suffering abuse from the monks, Brother Luke, and Dr. Traylor, *Harold* had been around to show Jude love and compassion and teach young Jude that Jude deserved those things. This is, of course, a futile exercise—it's impossible to change the past. But in wondering if intervening in Jude's life earlier would've changed things, Harold recognizes that perhaps adult Jude is unfixable, but perhaps this wouldn't be the case had Jude had a different upbringing.

Part 4: The Axiom of Equality: Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ He was careful never to say his name aloud, but sometimes he thought it, and no matter how old he got, no matter how many years had passed, there would appear Luke's face, smiling, conjured in an instant. He thought of Luke when the two of them were falling in love, when he was being seduced and had been too much of a child, too naïve, too lonely and desperate for affection to know it. He was running to the greenhouse, he was opening the door, the heat and smell of flowers were surrounding him like a cape. It was the last time he had been so simply happy, the last time he had known such uncomplicated joy. “And here's my beautiful boy!” Luke would cry. “Oh, Jude—I'm so happy to see you.”

Related Characters: Brother Luke (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Harold Stein, Dr. Traylor

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 480

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the end of a flashback to Jude's time with Brother Luke, a monk at the monastery where Jude was raised. Brother Luke groomed Jude, abducted him, human trafficked him, and then sexually abused Jude himself, all under the guise of love. As an adult, Jude can recognize that what Brother Luke did to him was wrong. However, Brother Luke also made Jude feel loved. Everybody Jude encountered before Luke abused him and treated him cruelly, but Luke treated him with kindness, called him "my beautiful boy," and treated Jude like he was special and good, rather than a burden. Because of this, Jude, even in adulthood, struggles to wholly condemn Luke as evil.

In many ways, Luke—as opposed to obviously cruel abusers, like Dr. Traylor—has been most destructive for Jude as he tries to navigate life with years of unresolved trauma holding him back; Luke's abuse has left Jude unable to distinguish love from abuse, happiness from suffering. As a result, Jude struggles to know whom he can trust, fearing that even people who genuinely seem to care for him, like Willem or Harold, are capable of hurting and betraying him, like Brother Luke. When Jude was under Luke's care, he was "too much of a child, too naïve, too lonely and desperate for affection to know" and understand how Luke was using him, and so Jude still regards his days with Luke as "the last time he had known such uncomplicated joy." After Luke's abuse, which conditioned Jude to confuse love with abuse, and happiness with suffering, Jude would know no more "uncomplicated joy."

his love for Jude. Throughout the book, houses (and apartments and cabins, etc.) symbolize the security and protection that friendship and human connection can give a person. And more specifically, the houses that Willem and Jude live in together throughout the novel (Lispenard Street, Greene Street, Lantern House) become symbols of their developing, deepening relationship, as well as the life they have built together over the years.

Willem's declaration also compares his love for Jude to the feeling of coming home. When Willem says that "home was Jude," he's suggesting that he doesn't feel like he's a guest when he's around Jude. Willem feels safe when he's with Jude; he can let his guard down and be vulnerable around him. In *A Little Life*, the world is cruel and unforgiving place where pain, suffering, and injustice strike indiscriminately. Often, a person's friends are the only means through which they may find relief from the cruelty of the outside world—a place to seek shelter from the storm. So, when Willem describes Jude as "home," he's saying that Jude provides him comfort and relief from the struggle of human existence.

☞ "Willem's not a health-care professional," he remembered Andy saying. "He's an actor." And although both he and Jude had laughed at the time, he wasn't sure Andy was wrong. Who was he to try to direct Jude's mental health?


"Don't trust me so much," he wanted to say to Jude. But how could he? Wasn't this what he had wanted from Jude, from this relationship? To be so indispensable to another person that that person couldn't even comprehend his life without him? And now he had it, and the demands of the position terrified him. He had asked for responsibility without understanding completely how much damage he could do.

Part 5: The Happy Years: Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ He was home, and home was Jude.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 505

Explanation and Analysis

After many years of knowing and living with each other, Willem realizes that he loves Jude as more than a friend. This quote distills Willem's realization into a single line: "He was home, and home was Jude." One crucial detail to note is Willem's metaphorical use of the word "home" to describe

Related Characters: Willem Ragnarsson, Andy Contractor (speaker), Jude St. Francis

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 537-538

Explanation and Analysis

Willem and Jude are now in a relationship. And though Willem is sure he loves Jude, he's often disappointed that this love isn't enough to make Jude happy and help him to overcome his trauma. Willem frequently agonizes over his inability to "fix" Jude through love, patience, and compassion. Here, Willem recalls a warning Andy gave them once before about how Willem's lack of medical expertise leaves him ill-equipped to take on all of Jude's struggles.

Though they'd laughed at Andy's remark at the time, the implication has become less funny to Willem, who struggles to reconcile his love for Jude with the immense pressure that being with Jude places on his shoulders.

Though Willem had once thought that it would be nice "[t]o be so indispensable to another person that that person couldn't even comprehend his life without him," being with Jude, whose deteriorating psychological and physical health means that he often needs Willem quite literally, makes Willem realize that being a person's whole world is not as romantic as it seems in the abstract. The longer Willem is in a relationship with Jude, the better he understands that he is more likely to hurt Jude than to heal him. Jude's problems run deeper than Willem had imagined, and though his love for Jude never wavers, it troubles him to realize that love alone might not be enough to heal Jude.

Part 5: The Happy Years: Chapter 2 Quotes

●● Eventually, he made some rules for himself. First, he would never refuse Willem, ever. If this was what Willem wanted, he could have it, and he would never turn him away. Willem had sacrificed so much to be with him, and had brought him such peace, that he was determined to try to thank him however he could. Second, he would try—as Brother Luke had once asked him—to show a little life, a little enthusiasm.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Brother Luke

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 546-547

Explanation and Analysis

Jude and Willem are now in a relationship, and after nearly a year together, they've finally become physically intimate. Jude has never felt comfortable with this (childhood sexual abuse makes intimacy difficult for him), but he tries to suppress his discomfort, fearing that Willem will leave him if he has to wait for Jude any longer. In this passage, Jude meditates on the "rules" he has set for himself concerning his and Willem's sex life.

Finally, in Willem, Jude has found real love and companionship. Yet Jude's belief that all love is conditional—that he must earn it, usually with his body—leaves him unable to have an enjoyable and healthy relationship with Willem. Jude misconstrues Willem's voluntarily choosing to be with Jude as "sacrifice[]" and so

feels he must give Willem sex, fearing that if he doesn't, Willem will think he isn't getting a fair deal and will then want to leave.

Jude's second rule is based on an order Brother Luke gave Jude when he was forcing (underage) Jude to do sex work out of motels. Luke instructed Jude "to show a little life" when Jude was with clients (and with Luke) and act like he liked things he clearly didn't. Jude applies this same advice to his relationship with Willem. This reinforces how Brother Luke's presence and teachings continue to haunt Jude and affect his actions well into adulthood. In other words, Jude's abusers continue to control him and make him miserable, even though they no longer have a hold on him physically.

●● But there was the Jude he knew in the daylight, and even in the dusk and dawn, and then there was the Jude who possessed his friend for a few hours each night, and that Jude, he sometimes feared, was the real Jude: the one who haunted their apartment alone, the one whom he had watched draw the razor so slowly down his arm, his eyes wide with agony, the one whom he could never reach, no matter how many reassurances he made, no matter how many threats he levied. It sometimes seemed as if it was that Jude who truly directed their relationship, and when he was present, no one, not even Willem, could dispel him. And still, he remained stubborn: he would banish him, through the intensity and the force and the determination of his love.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 589

Explanation and Analysis

Willem and Jude are now in a relationship. They love and care a lot about each other, but their relationship is fraught from the start: Jude's history of sexual abuse complicates their sex life, and years of keeping his traumatic past a secret has made Jude incapable of opening up to Willem the way Willem wants him to. Willem wants to help Jude and make him better, but it increasingly seems as though Jude doesn't want Willem to help him—and perhaps isn't capable of getting better, either.

In this passage, Willem considers that his hopes for Jude's recovery might themselves be overly optimistic or even



fantastical. Jude, it seems has two totally separate identities: he's one person when he's in pain, and he's another person in the rare moments he has relief from physical and emotional suffering. Willem essentially interacts with two Judes: the happy and functioning Jude, whom "he knew in the daylight, and even in the dusk and dawn," and the suffering, despondent Jude, "who possessed his friend for a few hours each night." At first, Willem believed that his love might, in time, cause the nighttime Jude to succumb to the happy daylight Jude. But over time, it's become apparent to Willem that this second Jude, the suffering and broken one who self-harms and resists all Willem's efforts to help him, might be "the real Jude." Willem is learning that love isn't enough to heal Jude—and maybe that Jude isn't capable of recovery at all.

Despite Willem's doubts and frustrations, though, he resolves to "banish" this second Jude, and fix Jude "through the intensity and the force and the determination of his love." Even if it's a foolhardy quest, Willem is determined to do everything in his power to help Jude. This will be the great conflict of their relationship, and in many ways, it's the great conflict of the book: whether love, caring, and compassion are enough to heal a person, or whether some wounds are too great to heal. And if the latter is true, the book questions whether a person has a moral obligation to at least try to help someone who is suffering, or whether the moral thing is to simply let them be.

☝ "I'm not *Hemming*, Willem," Jude hisses at him. "I'm not going to be the cripple you get to save for the one you couldn't."

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis (speaker), Willem Ragnarsson, Harold Stein, Andy Contractor, Hemming, Julia

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 599

Explanation and Analysis

Willem and Jude are at Harold and Julia's house for Thanksgiving, and things have been tense between them since they got into a major fight on the drive there. Following an awkward dinner (Harold and Julia can sense that something is wrong), Willem catches Jude cutting himself in the bathroom in the middle of the night and

physically restrains him. Then Willem, who has finally reached the end of his rope with Jude's self-destructive behavior, calls Jude "crazy" and says he needs to be institutionalized. This quote is Jude's retort to Willem: "I'm not *Hemming*, Willem," Jude snaps back. "I'm not going to be the cripple you get to save for the one you couldn't." Jude's observation is cruel—he's angry at Willem for accosting him and overstepping a boundary—but it's also probably very close to the truth. Willem lost his older brother, Hemming, to a terminal illness. Before this, he was Hemming's caregiver (Hemming had cerebral palsy, was nonverbal, used a wheelchair, and couldn't live independently). Hemming's death greatly affected Willem, and he's always seen it as a personal failure that he wasn't able to save Hemming or be there for him in the final moments of his brother's life.

Jude is suggesting that Willem's concern isn't really about Jude at all—it's about Willem needing to "save" Jude so he can stop feeling guilty about failing Hemming. Jude is suggesting that Willem's supposed concern is little more than idealism and selfishness. Willem and Jude ultimately make up, but Jude's comment sticks with Willem, forcing him to reevaluate what his fierce desire to "fix" Jude really means. Is he trying to help Jude for Jude's sake, or is he doing so to fulfill a personal moral obligation? This becomes a conflict for many of Jude's friends, including Andy and Harold. After Willem's death, Jude loses the will to live. His friends hold an intervention and force him to get help, but Harold, in particular, wonders what the point of this is: if Jude no longer thinks his life is worth living, is it not selfish to keep him alive for their sake?

Part 5: The Happy Years: Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ On these days, he succumbed to a sort of enchantment, a state in which his life seemed both unimprovable and, paradoxically, perfectly fixable: Of course Jude wouldn't get worse. Of course he could be repaired. Of course Willem would be the person to repair him. Of course this was possible; of course this was probable. Days like this seemed to have no nights, and if there were no nights, there was no cutting, there was no sadness, there was nothing to dismay.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Malcolm Irvine, Harold Stein, Hemming, Julia

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 649

Explanation and Analysis

Willem and Jude have been a couple for years now. In the time they've been together, they commission Malcolm to build them a vacation home upstate, which they call Lantern House. Julia and Harold join Willem and Jude at Lantern House one weekend; they have a pleasant weekend, and for a moment, it seems to Willem like everything will be okay—that Jude will be okay. In moments like these, it's almost possible for Willem to forget the different person Jude becomes when his dark side overpowers him and sends him into a depressive, self-destructive pit of despair.

Willem, over the entire course of their relationship, oscillates between trying to help Jude and resigning himself to the reality that he'll never be able to fully fix Jude: that Jude's past and trauma will always be a part of him, and no love and solidarity Willem can offer him will be enough to banish Jude's demons. Thus, Willem has to reconcile his desire—his need—for Jude to get better, to be able to heal Jude himself, with the reality that some of Jude's wounds might never heal. He also needs to reconcile what he believes is his moral obligation to keep Jude alive with his obligation as Jude's friend and lover to let Jude decide whether or not his life is worth living, his body worth preserving, or his painful memories worth confronting.

When Willem was in college, his older brother Hemming died of what was likely cancer. Hemming, like Jude, had chronic illness and used a wheelchair, and Willem was his protector, caregiver, and only friend. When Hemming died, Willem felt he had failed Hemming. In passages like these (there are many passages in which Willem agonizes over his drive to fix Jude and his self-preserving need to accept that Jude's problems are beyond his ability to fix) it's clear how much losing Hemming influences Willem's relationship with Jude. Part of the reason Willem never gives up on Jude's ability to heal—even when Jude gives every indication that he'll never be able to work through his trauma—is that he refuses to fail Jude like he failed Hemming. This is why Willem hangs on to this fantastical hope that he can fix Jude and that Jude will want him to fix him—because Willem believes he can't fail a second time.

Part 6: Dear Comrade: Chapter 1 Quotes

☹☹ He hadn't needed to catalog his life after all—Willem had been doing it for him all along. But why had Willem cared about him so much? Why had he wanted to spend so much time around him? He had never been able to understand this, and now he never will. *I sometimes think I care more about your being alive than you do*, he remembers Willem saying, and he takes a long, shuddering breath.

Related Characters: Willem Ragnarsson (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Harold Stein

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 731-732

Explanation and Analysis

After Willem dies, Jude goes through his office and finds an accordion file completely dedicated to him. It contains old photos, a card from Harold following Jude's adoption, and every email and letter Jude has ever sent Willem. Jude has been so secretive about his life and kept much of his past a secret from others but looking back now, he wonders if this was a mistake. He realizes that “[h]e hadn't needed to catalog his life after all—Willem had been doing it for him all along.” Jude is touched but puzzled by this realization. Even after years of him being in a relationship with Willem, it's still a mystery to Jude why Willem chose “to spend so much time around” someone as (supposedly) broken and unfixable as Jude. Jude's disbelief reaffirms the self-hatred and shame that have characterized Jude for his entire life and have rarely waned in their intensity. Author Hanya Yanagihara has stated that in Jude, she wished to write a character who doesn't get better. Passages like this one, which emphasize how little Jude's self-worth and mental wellness have changed over decades of life (despite his loved ones presenting him with abundant evidence that he's loved and appreciated) show that she has accomplished this feat.

The shrine to Jude's history, as Jude notes, reaffirms a sentiment Willem once expressed—“*I sometimes think I care more about your being alive than you do!*” Willem's observation, in fact, foreshadows Jude's eventual death by suicide: with Willem gone, Jude no longer has anybody who cares about Jude being alive. So though Jude's death by suicide not long after Willem's death is a tragic end to a tragic life, it's not altogether unexpected.

Part 6: Dear Comrade: Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ He stopped. What he wanted to say—but what he didn't think he could get through—was what he had overheard Malcolm say as Willem was complaining about hefting the bookcase back into place and he was in the bathroom gathering the brushes and paint from beneath the sink.

"If I had left it like it was, he could've tripped against it and fallen, Willem," Malcolm had whispered. "Would you want that?"

"No," Willem had said, after a pause, sounding ashamed. "No, of course not. You're right, Mal."

Malcolm, he realized, had been the first among them to recognize that he was disabled; Malcolm had known this even before he did. He had always been conscious of it, but he had never made him feel self-conscious. Malcolm had sought, only, to make his life easier, and he had once resented him for this.

Related Characters: Willem Ragnarsson, Malcolm Irvine (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Jean Baptiste "JB" Marion, Richard

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 748-749

Explanation and Analysis

Jude, JB, and Richard attend a small memorial dinner at the Irvine residence. At the dinner table, everyone takes turns sharing a fond memory of JB. When it's Jude's turn, he recalls a time when Malcolm, despite everyone's protests, remade a bookcase in Jude and Willem's old Lispenard Street apartment after he'd mistakenly made it too large the first time (the edge of the bookcase stuck out further than intended). In his telling, Jude frames the story as an example of how much Malcolm cared about his friends and his art. This passage describes what Jude wants to (but can't) also say: that he overheard Malcolm and Willem discussing Malcolm's real reason for fixing the bookcase: he was afraid that Jude would trip on it and injure himself if he didn't. (Jude has chronic pain and mobility issues from an accident that happened when he was a teenager, and an injury would be very bad for him.)

Throughout the novel, Jude has been so resistant to his friends' efforts to accommodate his disability and help him. He hates being different from other people. When he was a child, the monks who raised him abused him and convinced him that he was a monster, and so much of his adult life is spent trying to convince others (and himself) that this is not true—that he's as normal as anyone else. His disability is a physical difference he can't hide though, and so he resents it

and anyone who openly acknowledges it.

When Malcolm was alive, Jude might not have been so willing to be grateful to Malcolm's thoughtful gesture, but now that Malcolm is dead, Jude regrets how "resent[ful]" he'd been of Malcolm's efforts to help him. He realizes now that Malcolm "had always been conscious of [Jude's disability], but he had never made him feel self-conscious." Jude wishes he could've appreciated this more when Malcolm was still alive. The novel's central idea is that pain and suffering are a fundamental part of human life and never go away. Now that Malcolm is dead, Jude's agonizing resentment is replaced with agonizing regret, and Jude's suffering remains as palpable as ever.

☛ He hopes for infection, something swift and fatal, something that will kill him and leave him blameless. But there is no infection. Since his amputations, there have been no wounds. He is still in pain, but no more—less, actually—than he had been in before. He is cured, or at least as cured as he will ever be.

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 754

Explanation and Analysis

Cruelly, in the years following Willem's death, Jude's physical health has never been better, and his pain never less intrusive. So many years of their relationship—first as friends, then as life partners—were soured by Jude's physical and psychological health setbacks; now, though, when there is no longer any more physical pain to come between them, Willem is no longer alive to enjoy this respite with Jude. *A Little Life* proposes that suffering is a fundamental and inescapable part of human life. So, it supports this idea that once Jude's physical pain leaves, it's replaced by a much greater suffering: the suffering of grieving for Willem, the person in life he was closest to. And though Jude longs for illness to come along to take him out of his misery, he's given an even greater misery than death: staying alive to feel the full extent and depth of his grief. The final line aptly summarizes Jude's state: "He is cured, or at least as cured as he will ever be." Time and again, the novel proposes that in life, suffering is unavoidable, and pain and cruelty are fundamental parts of existence. And some pain is too great to heal, so "as cured as he will ever be" is the closest to relief that Jude can wish for. That is, Jude's suffering has been replaced by slightly less suffering, but it's

still suffering, nonetheless.


acknowledge that perhaps, he's not doing the most humane thing by insisting Jude stay alive.

Part 6: Dear Comrade: Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Finally he lifts his head and sees Harold staring at him, sees that Harold is actually crying, silently, looking and looking at him. "Harold," he says, although Andy is still talking, "release me. Release me from my promise to you. Don't make me do this anymore. Don't make me go on."

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis (speaker), Willem Ragnarsson, Harold Stein, Andy Contractor

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 787

Explanation and Analysis

Jude's mental health declines following Willem's death in a car accident. He nearly starves himself to death, and as a result, his friends, including Harold and Andy, hold an intervention and have him institutionalized. This passage comes from the intervention scene; Jude's friends hold him down and prepare to deliver him to the hospital. Meanwhile, Jude looks up, sees Harold, and pleads, "release me. Release me from my promise to you. Don't make me do this anymore. Don't make me go on." Many years ago, before Jude's first suicide attempt, Harold made him promise not to do it ever again, and Jude agreed. Now, since life has become unbearable without Willem and Jude has regressed to the wretched shell of a human he (believes he) was before he met Willem, Jude begs Harold to let him go back on his promise. Harold, though, says nothing.

This passage neatly summarizes a major conflict at the center of Harold and Jude's friendship, particularly near the end of Jude's life. After Willem dies, Jude loses the will to live, and so every day that he does live, he suffers. Meanwhile, Harold believes that life is fundamentally worth living, even if suffering is inevitable, and feels a moral (and selfish) obligation to keep Jude alive. Still, he sees how Jude's life—and now Harold himself, by asking Jude to promise to stay alive—causes Jude such misery and suffering. And so, Harold now interrogates his motivations for wanting Jude alive, all the while questioning why he hasn't been able not only to keep Jude alive, but to heal his psychological wounds so that he can be alive and happy. This represents something of a turning point in how Harold looks at Jude, as this is the first time Harold seems to

☞ "Jude," Harold says to him, quietly. "My poor Jude. My poor sweetheart." And with that, he starts to cry, for no one has ever called him sweetheart, not since Brother Luke. Sometimes Willem would try[...] and he would make him stop; the endearment was filthy to him [...]. "My sweetheart," Harold says again, and he wants him to stop; he wants him to never stop. "My baby." And he cries and cries, [...] for the shame and joy of finally getting to be a child, with all of a child's whims and wants and insecurities, for the privilege of behaving badly and being forgiven, for the luxury of tendernesses, of fondnesses, of being served a meal and being made to eat it, for the ability, at last, at last, of believing a parent's reassurances, of believing that to someone he is special despite all his mistakes and hatefulness, *because* of all his mistakes and hatefulness.

Related Characters: Harold Stein (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Julia

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 792-793

Explanation and Analysis

Jude has been in a deep depression ever since Willem's death, but things are worse once he leaves the hospital after being committed. His friends monitor him around the clock, meanwhile Jude has no desire to live. He starts to resent everyone who insists on keeping him alive when all he wants is to do is die. While at Harold and Julia house for dinner one night (though he has no desire even to eat), Jude goes into a rage, insults Harold and Julia, and throws his plate at the wall. He wants and expects Harold to hate and hit him, as Jude believes he deserves, but instead Harold wraps him in a hug, soothes him, and says, "My poor Jude. My poor sweetheart." The term "sweetheart" triggers Jude; Brother Luke, the monk who abused and human trafficked Jude when Jude was a child, was the only person who ever called Jude that, and so now whenever anyone else says it, Jude has to make them stop, for he feels "filthy," and memories of Brother Luke consume and overpower him.

This time, though, is different: Jude doesn't make Harold stop. Harold continues to soothe him, and Jude lets himself be soothed. He lets himself imagine how differently things might have turned out for him, had he had parents who loved him—had he let Harold love him unconditionally, as Harold (Jude's adoptive father) has been trying to do for

years now, though Jude has never let him. The memories of Brother Luke don't take over like they usually do, and Jude comes down from his rage, soothed. This passage happens near the end of the novel, and the fact that Jude has finally allowed himself to accept Harold's love suggests that Jude might finally be ready to move past his trauma, recover, and enjoy life. It's a major shock, then, when Jude dies by suicide not long after. Ultimately, the novel suggests that while Jude's friends—and even Jude himself, at times—have tried tirelessly to alleviate Jude's suffering and restore his will to live, some wounds are too deep to heal, and human suffering can be unpredictable and impossible to rationalize.

☝ “Jude,” says Dr. Loehmann. “You’ve come back.”
He takes a breath. “Yes,” he says. “I’ve decided to stay.”

Related Characters: Jude St. Francis, Dr. Loehmann (speaker), Willem Ragnarsson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 794

Explanation and Analysis

Jude has finally decided to take therapy seriously, and as he tries to tell Dr. Loehmann the story of his life, he thinks of Willem (the only person he's been able to tell his story to), becomes overwhelmed, and flees Dr. Loehmann's office. Jude considers leaving the building but heads back at the last minute, explaining to Loehmann, “I've decided to stay.” Taken literally, Jude's words express that he has decided to persevere through his sadness about Willem and finish his therapy session. Taken figuratively, his words suggest that he's decided not to attempt suicide again, and that he has decided life, however full of suffering it may be, is worth living.

These are the words the reader hears Jude speak, though—indeed, not long after this therapy session, Jude dies by suicide, a revelation that Harold conveys in the next (and final) chapter, which Harold narrates. The juxtaposition of hope with hopelessness puts the reader in the shoes of Jude's closest friends who have been by his side as he oscillates between agony and relief, optimism and despair, and recovery and decline. Just when it seems that Jude has finally had a revelation that might, at last, be the key to his recovery, he's overcome with self-doubt, pain episodes, a health scare, or hopelessness, and he's right back where he started. This back-and-forth motion between hope and

hopelessness, recovery and decline, has dominated the entire book, yet it is shocking nevertheless that Jude should make one final switch to abandon hope and leave not so long after he'd “decided to stay.” The shock of Jude's suicide underscores the unpredictable and cruelly indifferent nature of human suffering.

Part 7: Lisenard Street Quotes

☝☝ When Jacob was a baby, I would find myself feeling more assured with each month he lived, as if the longer he stayed in this world, the more deeply he would become anchored to it[...]. It was a preposterous notion, of course, and it was proven wrong in the most horrible way. But I couldn't stop thinking this: that life tethered life. And yet at some point in his life—after Caleb, if I had to date it—I had the sense that he was in a hot-air balloon, one that was staked to the earth with a long twisted rope, but each year the balloon strained and strained against its cords, [...]. And down below, there was a knot of us trying to pull the balloon back to the ground, back to safety. And so I was always frightened for him, and I was always frightened of him, as well.

Related Characters: Harold Stein (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson, Jean Baptiste “JB” Marion, Caleb Porter, Jacob

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 800

Explanation and Analysis

Harold narrates this final chapter. By the end of the book (but not quite yet), it's revealed that these first-person sections are Harold addressing the portrait of Willem that JB painted, *Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story*, which hangs on Harold's wall, following Willem's and Jude's deaths. In these sections, Harold laments the complexities and frustrations of his friendship with Jude—the regrets Harold has regarding his inability to keep Jude alive.

In this passage, Harold describes his theory that Jude, after Caleb's abuse, was no longer “tethered” to life. This disproves a theory Harold once had that a person finds more reason to live the longer they are on earth. But Jude, after Caleb, proved this assertion wrong: after Caleb, it was as though Jude were a hot-air balloon determined to soar higher into the air, even as his many friends on earth “tri[ed] to pull the balloon back to the ground, back to safety.”


This passage also sheds light on Harold's philosophy of

misery and suffering. Harold seems to want there to be a logic attached to life and death, suffering and happiness. He wants a traceable equation: the longer a person spends on earth, the more they are “tethered [to] life.” Or, the more help a person receives—the more people they have trying to hold down the balloon—the more likely it is that they’ll recover. Jude’s life (and death) challenges Harold’s stance on suffering, reaffirming the hard truth that Harold learned after the death of his first son, Jacob: there’s no logical way to explain why some people get better and others don’t. Neither Jude nor Jacob deserved to die, yet both did.

“It’s such a beautiful house,” I said, as I always did, and as I always did, I hoped he was hearing me say that I was proud of him: for the house he built, and for the life he had built within it.

Related Characters: Harold Stein (speaker), Jude St. Francis, Willem Ragnarsson

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 806

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the novel’s final section, which Harold narrates. In the end, it’s revealed that the first-person sections that Harold narrates (there are three in

total throughout the novel) are Harold addressing a portrait JB painted of Willem, which Harold hangs on his wall following Willem’s (and Jude’s) death. In this passage, Harold recalls a remark he made to Jude during a walk they took on Jude and Willem’s property upstate following Willem’s death. Gazing back at Lantern House, the vacation home Willem and Jude commissioned Malcolm to design many years ago, Willem remarks on what a “beautiful house” Lantern House is. Harold “always” says this on his walks with Jude, wanting Jude to know how “proud of him” he is and everything he’s done with his life. Jude’s life has consisted of struggle after struggle, and Harold wants Jude to know that he has created a beautiful and meaningful life despite all the pain and suffering he has endured over the decades.

This passage is important because it aptly illustrates how houses function as one of the book’s key symbols. Harold essentially spells out what houses symbolize in the book: security, protection, and self-invention. Harold sees Lantern House as a manifestation of all Jude has accomplished in his life, and all the adversity he has overcome. Lantern House, specifically, was a symbol of the life that Jude built with Willem. So in this remark, Harold is also reminding Jude that Jude started out in life as a person who felt he was unworthy of love, respect, and happiness, and ended up building a beautiful life with someone who loved and cared about him. Harold’s ability to see this beauty reflects his basic idea about life and identity: Harold believes a person can grow and change throughout their life and overcome struggle. He sees Lantern House as evidence of all the horrors of the past Jude has shed and overcome.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PART 1: LISPENARD STREET: CHAPTER 1

Willem and Jude examine the **apartment**. It's small, but they don't have much to put in it. They tell the apartment's agent that they'll take it. But when they return to the agent's office, the agent tells them they won't be able to rent the apartment after all: they don't make enough money, and they don't have anything in savings. The agent asks if their parents would co-sign the lease for them. Willem immediately replies that their parents are dead.

When Willem and Jude relay this story to JB and Malcolm over dinner in Chinatown, they comically bend the truth, claiming that the place was full of mouse droppings, and the agent got mad at them because Willem wouldn't return her flirtations. Malcolm asks why Willem and Jude don't just stay where they are now. Willem reminds Malcolm that Merritt's boyfriend is moving in, so he has to move out. And Jude can't stay with Malcolm's parents forever, even though they really like Jude.

JB offers to let Willem and Jude live with him, but he knows they'd hate it—JB lives with other struggling artists in Ezra's loft. Ezra is a horrible artist, but he's exorbitantly wealthy and throws big parties with lots of free food, booze, and drugs. Just then, JB remembers that one of his coworkers at the magazine is trying to help her aunt find tenants for an apartment she owns near Chinatown. JB can introduce her to Jude and Willem. Willem agrees to stop by JB's office tomorrow around lunch.

The next day, Willem meets JB at the arts magazine in SoHo, where JB works as a receptionist. JB took the job because he planned to befriend one of the magazine's editors and then convince them to feature him in the magazine. This was three months ago, and nothing's happened yet—and JB can't believe that nobody has recognized his obvious talent. He's not good at his job and hardly ever answers the ringing phones—he's too preoccupied with the garbage bag of hair he keeps beneath his desk. Lately, JB has been making sculptures out of Black hair that he's collected from barbers and beauty shops throughout the city. The project involves braiding the accumulated hair into one giant braid. Last week, he duped his friends into helping him braid, promising them beer and pizza; everyone left once it became clear that JB had no plans to order food or drink.

From the start, readers see that struggle is the foundation of Willem's and Jude's lives: they struggle financially to the point that they cannot to rent a small apartment (albeit a small Manhattan apartment), and both their parents are dead.



Jude and Willem bend the truth to make light of their failure to secure an apartment. Not only is this a way to respond to hardship, but it also introduces the idea that people are the authors of their lives. That is, one's identity and the cumulative meaning of one's life isn't an essential thing, but rather something a person constructs, consciously and continuously.



That JB is living in some awful warehouse with other struggling artists who lack the funds to secure apartments of their own shows that JB, like Willem and Jude, is struggling. This sets the tone for the novel to be a story of young, ambitious hopefuls who arrive in the city determined to claw their way to the top and become successful—a conventional bildungsroman, or coming-of-age story.



The reader gets a good sense of JB's character from this scene alone. He shamelessly tries to ingratiate himself with magazine staff to try to get them to publish his work in the magazine and kick off his career. Meanwhile, he has no qualms about doing an objectively subpar job with his receptionist responsibilities. And while it's one thing to underperform at a job he's likely being underpaid to do, JB approaches his friends with no more integrity, duping them into helping him and then failing to come through with the compensation of beer and pizza he promised them. JB, it's clear, will abandon all personal morals to get ahead.



Jude is the only one of JB's friends who thinks the hair pieces could be great one day. JB gave Jude a hair-covered hairbrush as thanks, but he'd taken it back when Ezra's father, who is very wealthy, seemed interested in buying it. The second time JB tricked his friends into helping him, Malcolm mentioned that the hair stank, and Jude accused him of being "a self-hating Negro and an Uncle Tom." Malcolm usually doesn't take criticisms like this too badly, but that night, he dumped his wine into one of the bags of hair and stormed out.

Now, JB leaves the ringing phone behind, and he and Willem head out to meet up with Annika. As they walk JB complains about Dean, the pretentious senior editor he's been trying to win over. But it's been weeks now, and Dean hasn't warmed to JB. Lately, JB has started to complain that his time at the magazine has been a waste, and everything else—graduate school, moving to New York, and sometimes, life itself—has been for nothing, too.

JB and Willem reach **Lispensard Street**, which neither of them has heard of. At the office, Annika is normally very intimidating, but around Willem, she becomes "nervous and girlish" and can't even bring herself to look at him. Willem seems unaware of the effect he has on her—and on most women. Jude once suggested that Willem sensed women's attention but ignored it to be nonthreatening to other men. Willem asks Annika if the building's elevator works well—his friend, he explains, has trouble with stairs. Annika blushes and says the elevator works fine.

They enter the apartment, and it's not great: the place is comically tiny and dilapidated. There are two twin beds in the small bedroom. Willem asks JB how he likes the place. Inwardly, JB thinks the place is "a shithole." Though Ezra's place isn't great either, JB is only living there because the rent is free. He also knows his family would help him out before they'd let him stay in a place like this. Still, he knows that Willem and Jude are on their own, so to JB tells Willem the place is great, and Willem tells Annika they'll take it. After they leave, JB asks Willem to treat him to lunch.

Jude shows that he's either more appreciative of art than his friends, or perhaps just more appreciate of JB's feelings, when he argues that JB's hair pieces have something to them. But then, JB thanks Jude for his kindness and/or recognition by taking the hairbrush from him without a second thought, since he's so enamored with the idea of earning some extra cash from Ezra's wealthy father. Once more, the novel shows that there's really no limit to how low JB will go to get ahead. So far, he's clearly the friend who's willing to sell their soul if it means they can make their dreams a reality. Jude, meanwhile, cuts a sharp contrast to JB: he's sensitive, observant, and thoughtful.



JB leaving behind a ringing phone (which is clearly his job to answer) adds a note of comedy. For all the infamy this book has received for being excruciatingly depressing, it is peppered with brief moments of comedy like this one. JB's complaints that all of life is worthless (while he's yet to reach 30 years of age) is also played for comedic effect, but it also reinforces how laser-focused JB is on success.



This scene gives the reader their first real sense of Willem's personality. He's highly attractive yet not the type to make a big deal about it. He's humble—though at this point it's unclear if this is out of ignorance, or, as Jude once suggested, if it's a thoughtful gesture meant to show other men that Willem isn't a threat. Willem's remark about his friend (Jude) having trouble with stairs suggests, perhaps, that Jude experiences some degree of limited mobility, and this introduces the book's key theme of pain and suffering's role in human existence.



Again, JB shows that he's willing to compromise some moral integrity and use people to get ahead. Still, JB's shameless (albeit comical) hint that he'd like Willem to buy him lunch—a hint he drops immediately after meditating on how much financial security he has relative to Willem—reaffirms his selfishness and/or lack of introspection.



On Sunday, JB rides the train to JB's mother's **house** and thinks about how grateful he is for his family. JB's father, an immigrant from Haiti, died when JB was only three. After JB's father's death, JB's mother, a second-generation Haitian American woman, earned her doctorate in education. She sent JB to a private school on scholarship. Later, she went on to become the principal of a magnet program in Manhattan and an adjunct professor at Brooklyn College. His grandmother cooked for him and sang to him in French, and his mother's sister, a detective, and her partner didn't have any children and thought of him as their own. His aunt loved art and once took him to the Museum of Modern Art, where was blown away by Jackson Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950*.

Though JB's homelife was harmonious and supportive, he lied about his life to make his white schoolfriends uncomfortable, insinuating that he was just "another fatherless black boy." He told them his mother had finished school after he was born, not specifying that it was graduate school; and he said his aunt "walked the streets," not clarifying that she did so as a detective, not a sex worker.

JB's family has always had faith that his art will be appreciated one day. And some days he lets himself believe them. Other days, he wonders if they must be crazy or have bad taste. But regardless, he looks forward to these secret Sunday visits, especially when he thinks of his friends' parents: Malcolm's father is highly intelligent and critical, and Malcolm's mother is somewhat spacey. Willem's parents are dead and Jude's parents are "nonexistent"; his childhood was apparently too horrific for him to speak of. Willem once said, "We don't get the families we deserve," and JB had agreed, outwardly. Inside, though, he knows he deserves his family. They think he's "wonderful," and JB believes he is wonderful.

The elevator breaks the day Willem and Jude move into their new apartment. Willem is upset, but nobody minds that much; it's a late fall day, and the air is cold and dry. And they have plenty of people to help them: Jude and Malcolm and JB's friend Richard, and two friends they all have in common, both named Henry Young (they call one Black Henry Young and the other Asian Henry Young). Seeing Jude struggling with the stairs, Willem asks him quietly if he needs help. "No," Jude replies curtly.

Readers don't know much about Jude's or Willem's parents other than that they're dead, but even with this minimal information, it's clear that JB has a more reliable support system than his friends—emotionally and financially. Perhaps this helps explain some of the entitled or selfish behavior he's demonstrated thus far: his family has helped him to believe that he deserves the best, and so that's what he strives for.



JB lies to his white school friends to pretend that his life conforms to the racial stereotypes they might have had about his family life and economic status—even though JB's stable home life doesn't conform to these stereotypes. This scene demonstrates the role that others' opinions and society at large play in shaping a person's constructed outer persona, and even the way they think of themselves.



JB is aware of how fortunate he is relative to his friends. Jude and Willem lack emotional and financial support. And though Malcolm has had the privilege to come from a wealthy family, his father, JB seems to suggest, doesn't lift Malcolm up in the way JB's family does for JB. JB's meditations here emphasize just how important it is to have a support system. It's a tough world out there, and it's nice to have people with whom to seek shelter from the storm. Willem's remark about not "get[ting] the families we deserve" reinforces the novel's grim tone. It's rare to have the support and protection JB has. Life is hard, and nobody is guaranteed love, safety, protection, and happiness.



Willem's frustration at the elevator breaking down suggests that he cares about Jude a lot and is even rather protective of him. Recall how Willem made sure to confirm with Annika that the elevator worked when she showed them the apartment in the earlier scene: it's clear that Willem is attuned to Jude's needs and wellbeing—even if Jude rejects or resents Willem's concern, as his curt response to Willem in this scene suggests.



Eventually, everyone else leaves, and Jude and Willem are alone together in their new **apartment**. The apartment isn't much, but to Jude and Willem, it's enough. As they talk, Willem can see Jude's eyes closed and twitching, and by the way he holds his legs rigidly before him, he knows Jude is in pain. But Willem also knows that there's nothing he can do about it. If he offers Jude aspirin, Jude will decline it. And if he suggests that he lie down, Jude will tell him he's fine. Willem gets up and walks to the bathroom.

Willem loves Jude, but he also worries about him and feels like his protector. All of Jude's friends know that his legs pain him. He used a cane in college, and he had leg braces with external pins that were drilled right into his bones. But he never complained about his legs, nor did he begrudge others for their suffering.

During their sophomore year, for example, JB broke his wrist slipping on some ice. He made such a big deal about it and received so many visitors at the school hospital that the school paper published a story about him. Jude visited JB with Willem and Malcolm and always gave JB the sympathy he craved.

One night, not long after JB was released from the hospital after breaking his wrist, Willem woke up and found their place empty. It wasn't unusual for Malcolm, JB, and Willem to be gone overnight, but Jude never went out—he'd never had a girlfriend or boyfriend and always spent nights in his and Willem's room. That night, Willem felt compelled to check on Jude. And when he did, Jude was gone and his crutch was missing.

Willem found Jude in a bathroom stall in the communal bathroom down the hall. Jude had vomited, and he was on the floor and in unbearable pain. Eventually, Willem and Jude were able to return to their room, and Jude explained that he would just have to wait until the pain passed. He asked Willem to stay with him, though, and Willem slept by Jude's side all night. In the morning, Willem awoke to find bruises on his hand where Jude had squeezed it. He walked into the common area and found Jude sitting at his desk. Jude apologized to Willem, and he made Willem promise not to tell the others.

Unlike JB and Malcolm, Jude and Willem don't have a family to turn to for help or support, so Lispenard Street, even if it's not much, is a big deal to them because it fulfills this empty space in their lives. It's a place to call home, and a place where they can seek shelter from the cruel and unforgiving outside world. This scene also offers additional insight into Jude as a character. It's clear he has some kind of disability—and that he doesn't like others to see it.



Jude goes out of his way to underplay his chronic pain and physical disability. It's not clear why. He could be ashamed of it (though he needn't be, of course), or he could simply not want to be defined by his disability. At any rate, Jude's legs lend another air of mystery to an already enigmatic character.



This scene further develops JB as a comically dramatic and un-self-aware character. Jude is the opposite of this: he tries to hide his pain and seems to want to be as invisible as possible. Again, why Jude is so reserved and withholding remains unclear to the reader (and to Jude's friends).



That Jude has never had a romantic relationship further illustrates his mysterious, withholding personality. It builds on his reticence to accept help from Willem or even to overtly acknowledge his chronic pain. For reasons that remain unclear, Jude is clearly not comfortable showing vulnerability to others.



Jude seems to have gone to the bathroom to hide—he didn't want his friends to see him in such a vulnerable and helpless condition, otherwise he would have stayed in the apartment. Given Jude's extreme privacy, it speaks both to the degree of pain he's in and to his trust in Willem that he asks Willem to stay with him now.



Now, as Willem stands in the bathroom while his good friend deals with his pain alone, he looks at his reflection in the mirror and thinks, “You’re a coward.”

Willem thinks he’s a coward for not doing more to help Jude. He sees it as a personal failure on his part that Jude won’t accept his help.



Malcolm heads home after helping with the move. JB, after he first visited **Lispensard Street**, warned Malcolm that Willem and Jude’s new place was awful, and he is right. Even so, Malcolm feels depressed when he returns to his own dwelling on the fourth floor of his parents’ house. He knows it doesn’t make sense to move—he doesn’t make a lot of money, he works long hours, and his parents’ house is so big he rarely has to see them. But he does still feel ashamed that he’s 27 and still living at home.

Malcolm’s relative wealth and support doesn’t make him immune to feelings of dissatisfaction and self-hatred. This suggests that while a person’s privilege can help them survive on a basic level, it doesn’t make them immune to the self-doubt, anxieties, and fears that are all part of being human.



Malcolm’s arrangement would be better if his parents respected his privacy—they expect him to eat breakfast with them in the morning and brunch on Sunday, and they barge in on him without knocking all the time. His parents had stopped by unannounced on Jude when Jude lived there, too. His father likes Jude—he thinks that of all Malcolm’s friends, Jude is the only one with “intellectual heft and depth.” It doesn’t hurt that Jude graduated from the same law school as Malcolm’s father, and that Malcolm’s father had worked as an assistant prosecutor with the U.S. Attorney’s Office, which is where Jude works now.

Having a family gives Malcolm a place to stay, but it doesn’t seem to give him the emotional support and validation he needs. In this scene, Malcolm’s father praises Jude for his “intellectual heft and depth” but says nothing about Malcolm. And the fact that Jude graduated from the same law school as Malcolm’s father and has landed the same job makes it seem as though Jude is following in Malcolm’s father’s footsteps—while Malcolm clearly has not.



Malcolm’s situation would also be better if his sister Flora were still here. Flora didn’t seem to mind all the attention their parents required, which gave Malcolm more freedom to retreat to his room. As a child, Malcolm’s father’s clear preference for Flora hurt him—and it still does. Malcolm worries that it’s silly for him to be sulking over his father at this age.

Malcolm’s father’s preference for Flora leaves Malcolm feeling hurt and inadequate. Maybe this explains why Malcolm has such strong ties to his three close friends: they give him the support and reassurance he doesn’t get from his family.



The next morning, Malcolm wakes up and decides that he’s finally ready to announce that he’s moving out. But he finds his mother in the kitchen making him breakfast. When she asks him how many days he’d like to join the family for their annual vacation to St. Barts (his parents still pay for his vacations), he decides to stay. When he walks out the front door, he is in “the world in which no one kn[o]w[s] him, and in which he c[an] be anyone.”

Malcolm wants to have two identities: the dependent and weak person he feels like when he’s at home, and the independent, ambitious person he has the power to become when he is out in the world. This highlights how a person’s circumstances shape their identity and self-image.



PART 1: LISPENARD STREET: CHAPTER 2

JB takes the subway to his studio in Long Island City. He loves taking the train in on the weekends, since he can watch the shifting ethnicities of people enter and exist—Polish, Korean, and Pakistani people. Seeing these immigrants makes JB feel grateful for his life and sentimental about New York. When he sees Haitian people on the train and hears them speaking Creole, he wants to speak to them in their language, but the opportunity never presents itself. And they never recognize him as one of their own, either—he knows he has more in common with his American friends than with these people. “Real” Haitian people would never think to leave their rent-free apartment and use 30 minutes of their precious time to travel to a dirty studio. Such reasoning requires “an American mind.”

The studio is a loft on the third floor of a run-down building. It has a common area with a large table in the center, which any of the studio artists can use for larger-scale projects. The space is divided into four quadrants with blue electrical tape. JB shares the studio with Asian Henry Young, who told him about it; with Richard, who tends bar at night and is mostly here in the morning; and with Ali, a photographer. JB’s been coming here for five months, and he loves it. The light is amazing, and it’s so much better than working at Ezra’s place. There, the artists treat art as “an accessory to a lifestyle,” much like the ironic cheap beers they drink and the hand-rolled cigarettes they smoke. But JB and the artists who work here live and breathe art.

All the artists here work with different mediums, so nobody feels that they’re competing with anybody else. Ali is working on a series called “The History of Asians in America,” for which he creates a photograph to represent each decade of Asian American life since 1890. For each photograph, Ali creates a diorama that represents a significant moment in Asian American history.

But it’s Richard’s work that truly captivates JB. He’s a sculptor, but he only works with ephemeral materials. He sketches out complex forms, and then he creates them with things like chocolate, butter, or ice. Then he films the sculptures as they disintegrate. Last month, JB watched as Richard filmed an eight-foot-tall sculpture made from frozen grape juice melt into nothing. The experience made JB want to cry.

JB’s meditations reinforce how strongly a person’s surroundings—and in this case, their ethnic roots and community—shape their identity. JB seems a bit lost in life because he’s too Americanized and privileged to relate to these Haitian immigrants, who haven’t had all the advantages he’s had. So, not only is JB struggling to find success in his professional and artistic pursuits, but he’s also struggling to find who he is. Maybe this is why he is so determined to make a name for himself as an artist: because he thinks this will give him a clearer sense of who he is as a person, too.



JB’s critique of the artists who live at Ezra’s reaffirms JB’s belief that his professional life and inner life are interconnected: he doesn’t want his art to be a superficial “accessory to a lifestyle.” He wants it to be his life itself: the thing that defines him. And so it follows that if JB can make a name for himself in the art world, then he (and the rest of the world) can know who he is as a person, too. JB thinks that professional success will give his life meaning and resolve all the insecurities and confusion he’s struggling with right now.



The ironically neutral title of Ali’s series, “The History of Asians in America,” presents the history of the oppression of Asian people in America, and this reinforces one of the novel’s most important themes: that pain and suffering are a fundamental part of the human experience.



Another of the book’s main arguments is that not all problems have solutions, and that some wounds (physical or psychological) are too deep to heal. Richard’s sculptures embody this conflict visually. In making art of the act of destruction, Richard places suffering and dying on a pedestal, as though arguing that people must confront these hard aspects of human existence instead of suppressing or trying to fix/heal them.



JB is the only classicist in the studio—he’s a figurative painter, which has been out of fashion since the 1950s. Though he secretly feels that there’s something “girlish” and uncool about figurative painting, he’s come to accept that it’s simply who he is. There are artists with a better sense of color and better discipline than JB, certainly, but they lack ideas. And he didn’t have any ideas of his own for a long time.

But this changed one day, when JB’s family was away on a tacky cruise he refused to go on, and so he went to Jude and Willem’s place to force them to make him dinner. He had his sketch pad with him, as he always did, and before he knew what he was doing, he was sketching Jude as he sat at the table chopping onions. And then he sketched Willem tenderizing a piece of butterflied chicken with the bottom of a pan.

The next week, while attending a party on Centre Street, JB followed his friends from room to room, photographing them from a distance. He had more fun at this party than ever before. The next day, he connected the camera to his computer. The photos he took weren’t great—they were yellowy and unfocused—but these flaws made his friends appear compellingly “soft-edged” and golden. And JB was fascinated and touched by the candid images of his friends. He got to work, sketching the photos, and then eventually painting them in acrylics.

JB took these photos four months ago, and now, he’s nearly finished his 11th painting. The scenes include Willem waiting to audition, Jude watching a play, and Malcolm sitting stiffly beside his father on the couch. Each painting captures the fuzzy quality of the photo it was based on. Sometimes JB misses being a part of these scenes of his friends’ lives. But he also “enjoy[s] the godlike role he play[s]” in being the person who captures these moments.

JB’s insecurities about being a figurative painter seem to mirror the insecurities he has about himself in general. He wants to have a defined, stable identity, and he wants to have the approval of others—but right now, he has neither. This, again, reinforces how strongly JB links success with fulfillment. He makes no distinction between his identity and his work: one reflects the other.



The novel has already established that JB is a rude and self-absorbed character, so it comes as no surprise that he would invite himself over to Jude and Willem’s place and then force them to cook him dinner, though it’s still amusing. But JB is also using his friends in another way, too: to inspire his art.



JB finds inspiration for his art in his friends and the relationships they have with one another. And since the novel has already shown that JB defines himself through his art, this passage is also suggesting that JB defines himself—knows himself—through his relationships with his friends. In other words, his identity does not exist in a vacuum: it is a culmination of the people he interacts with and the relationship he’s built with them over the years.



There’s something a little morally prickly about the pleasure JB takes in “the godlike role he play[s]” when he paints his friends. It suggests a distinction between paying homage to them and their friendship—and using them to advance his career. JB undoubtedly cares for his friends, but this doesn’t change the fact that he’s exploiting them, in some sense, for personal gain.



When JB was a month into the project, he knew this was what he wanted to do. And he also knew he'd have to explain to his friends what he was doing. One night, over dinner at a Vietnamese noodle shop, he nervously explained the project to his friends. When he finished, everyone looked expectantly at Jude. JB knew that everyone had to agree to the project for it to work, and he also knew that Jude would be the most difficult to convince, since he's incredibly self-conscious; in fact, he has a troubling habit of covering his mouth whenever he smiles and laughs. Jude was predictably skeptical of the project. After dinner, JB promised Jude that he'd let Jude veto any photos he didn't want the world to see. JB immediately regretted his offer, though, since Jude is his favorite friend to paint—he is the most beautiful, the most interesting, and the shyest.

The next Sunday, when JB was home for one of his family dinners, he searched for and found an old photo of Jude. The photo depicts Jude standing in their suite's living room. He's partially facing the camera, and you could see "a starburst-shaped **scar**" on his hand. He's wearing a striped shirt that's too big for him. He's very small and thin and has long hair that he hides behind. He looks tired and sad, and the photo has always made JB feel "empty." The photo is "a love letter" and "a documentation," and "it['s] his." It's this photo that JB is painting now, and he knows it's great. He also knows he'll never show the painting to Jude until it's hanging in a gallery somewhere, since he knows Jude will hate how "fragile" he looks.

The narrative switches to Willem's perspective as he rides the subway to work. Willem is tired, and his shift hasn't even begun; he knows he shouldn't have agreed to go out with JB in Brooklyn last night. They saw a "hard-core" band that one of JB's friends is in. The band was awful, but Willem had fun moshing with JB. Willem likes that he can be silly with JB; his other friends are so serious.

Jude's habit of covering his mouth when he smiles is indeed troubling; for one reason or another, he feels self-conscious about his body and/or his happiness. Right now, neither the reader nor Jude's friends know anything about his past (this scene also underscores Jude's characteristic secrecy), so it's within the realm of possibility that he picked up this habit years back, perhaps in childhood. Regardless, at some point in time, something or someone taught Jude to hide himself from the world. Things get morally pricklier in this scene, too. JB has promised to get Jude's consent before painting him—yet, in the novel's present, he's 11 paintings in already. Has JB gone back on his promise? It's within the realm of possibility, given how selfish and driven by ambition JB is.



Everything about Jude in the picture describes a person who wants to disappear: his too-large clothing that hides his body, his long hair that covers his face, his face partially turned from the camera. And yet, JB has already seemed to decide that this is the painting that is going to make him famous, and that this is reason enough to go back on his promise to Jude and to publicly display this image of a person who wants to be invisible to the world. JB's selfishness explicitly shows that he has no qualms about betraying his friends for the sake of his career. Finally, the "sunburst-shaped scar" on Jude's hand is curious. It implies that Jude endured some pain from the injury that left this scar behind, and it also adds to Jude's mystery. How did he get this scar?



JB might be selfish and self-absorbed, but he knows how to have a good time, and his friends enjoy his company, so there's something to be said for that. Silliness and friendship can be much-needed distractions from the misery (or at least, the mundanity) of everyday life.



But this morning was brutal—he'd woken up on JB's unmade mattress and couldn't remember how they returned to Manhattan. Willem quickly returned to **Lispenard Street** and took a nap, waking up with just enough time to make it to his shift at Ortolan, an upscale restaurant. Willem has been a waiter at Ortolan for two years now. It's rare to find a place with such flexible hours, and working at an upscale restaurant pays well. Not everyone at Ortolan is an actor—some people are waiters who used to be actors. You can tell which are which because the career waiters are usually older, and they're usually stricter about enforcing the boss, Findlay's, many rules. It's a known fact that an actor-waiter doesn't ask a career waiter to attend their performances—they only ask their fellow actor-waiters. And you don't talk about auditions or agents with them, either.

Findlay used to be an actor, too, and Willem wonders when Findlay had decided to give up acting. Did he just grow too old one day? (He's in his mid-40s now.) And how does a person know when to quit—when to give up and get a real job? In today's culture of "self-fulfillment," it's weak and sad to settle for less than one's dreams. Willem wonders if he'll give up acting one day, too.

JB thinks that Willem's good looks have made him expect that good things will simply come to him and that he shouldn't have to work for them. But in New York, where everybody is good looking, Willem's looks do him little good. Willem thinks this is rather hypocritical of JB, who is spoiled by his family's constant praise. Then Willem thinks about what drives each of his friends. JB is driven by lust, while Jude is driven by fear. Once, on a drunken night, JB had said "Ambition is my only religion." Willem felt the line was rehearsed and insincere—something JB dreamed of saying to an interviewer one day.

New York has always made Willem feel inadequate, uncultured, and dumb. Last year, Willem and his former roommate Merritt were up for one of the lead roles in an off-Broadway revival of *True West*, but the director had selected Merritt, not Willem. Willem's friends had expressed outrage on his behalf. But while JB has blamed Willem for his failures, Jude never has. And though his friends' outrage comforted Willem, he knows that Merritt doesn't deserve their criticism, either. He's not a bad actor. JB thinks Willem is too kind to make anything of himself.

Now the novel turns to Willem's quest to find success and personal fulfillment. Willem, like JB, is struggling. This passage shows that defining oneself by one's career and one's success isn't unique to JB. The employees at Ortolan are sorted into two categories: actor-waiters (those who are still pursuing their dreams) and career waiters (those who have failed, abandoned their dreams, and settled).



In equating pragmatism with weakness, today's culture of "self-fulfillment" almost suggests that being unsuccessful is a moral failing as well as a personal one. In this light, the novel suggests readers feel a little more sympathy for JB's shameless ambition: he's been brought up in a culture that lauds success and condemns mediocrity.



JB's dramatic proclamation, "Ambition is my only religion," is a spot-on observation. Thus far, he's shown that he's willing to betray Jude's trust (by painting images of Jude without Jude's consent) to advance his career. At the same time, the obviously rehearsed quality of his comment reinforces the idea that identity is something people construct, not something they fundamentally are.



Willem is humble and supportive of others, while JB's fierce ambition makes him see everyone else as a threat. Is JB's position correct? Does a person's success always have to come at the expense of others? Does ambition have to make a person selfish? At this point, hyper-competitive, selfish JB is no more successful than kind and selfless Willem, so JB's point isn't all that convincing.



Willem has always been kind, and everyone knows it. Willem's teachers were always shocked when they met his parents and saw how aloof and unkind they were. Growing up, Willem's father, a ranch hand, taught him to be humble and know his place. So, Willem has always known who and what he is—a ranch hand's son from western Wyoming. Moving to New York hasn't changed that.

Place and circumstance can influence who a person is and how they behave, but there are limitations to this. Being raised by a humble ranch hand has made Willem humble and unassuming, and moving to Manhattan hasn't changed this. Willem's childhood has significantly—and perhaps even permanently—shaped the person he has become as an adult.



Willem was his parents' fourth child, and he's the only one who's still living. The oldest, Britte, died of leukemia in Sweden when she was two. His father, an Icelandic man, had been working on a fish farm in Sweden when he met Willem's mother, a Danish woman. They had a second child, Hemming, after they moved to America. Hemming was born with cerebral palsy. Three years later, Aksel, their second son, died in his sleep when he was still an infant.

That Willem's parents lost three of their four children reinforces the novel's stance that pain and suffering are fundamental aspects of the human experience. Readers also gain a better sense for why Willem is so different from JB. JB has been raised in a family where success and upward mobility are important. Willem grew up in an environment clouded by grief, and where humility was more important than success or ambition.



The narrative flashes back to Willem's memory of growing up with his brother. Hemming is eight years older than Willem. Though Hemming can't talk or speak, he can smile, and Willem loves him. As Willem learns to crawl and walk, Hemming remains in his chair, and Willem likes to push him around the property, down the hill on which their **house** rests to the stables where their parents work all day. Willem is Hemming's main caretaker and friend. After school, he waits at the side of the road for the van that returns Hemming from the assisted-living facility where he spends his days.

Willem's loving and protective relationship with Hemming mirrors the friendship he will later have with Jude. Knowing that Willem served as his brother's friend, caregiver, and protector helps explain why it's so important to Willem to look after Jude.



When Willem has to stay after school or work an evening shift at the grocery store, their mother feeds Hemming his porridge for dinner and changes his diaper and puts him to bed. But she doesn't read to him or take him for walks the way Willem does. Willem hates watching his parents take care of Hemming, because he can tell that they feel responsible for Hemming but don't love him.

Willem doesn't think that Hemming's disability makes him any less lovable or any less worthy of dignity or empathy. Willem's mother regards Hemming as a chore—she is obligated to keep him alive, but she is not obligated to ensure that he lives a fulfilled and enriching life. Giving Willem's mother the benefit of the doubt, though, one can also speculate that experiencing the deaths of two children has hardened her and made her wary about getting too attached to either of her children—she doesn't seem to give able-bodied Willem much more affection than she gives Hemming, after all.



Hemming has to have an emergency appendectomy Willem's second year of college. Their mother calls Willem to tell him the news, which she conveys in an emotionless tone. Hemming's caregiver noticed him touching his stomach and moaning. At the hospital, doctors x-rayed the lump in his abdomen and found growths had spread from his large intestine. Willem's mother says he shouldn't come home—she'll let him know if it turns out to be something serious. But Willem remembers when Hemming was 21 and had to have a hernia removed, how he'd cried until Willem held his hand, and Willem knows he has to be there for his brother. But flights are expensive. Malcolm lends Willem the money and refuses to let Willem pay him back (though afterward, Willem will secretly put cash from his paychecks into Malcolm's wallet).

Willem returns to Wyoming. He and his parents take turns sitting beside Hemming's hospital bed. Willem reads to Hemming as Hemming stares at the ceiling. At home, he and his parents eat in silence. One night, Willem's father stops Willem on Willem's way to visit Hemming; he says there's no point in visiting, since Hemming won't know Willem is there. Willem swears at his father for the first time: "I know you don't fucking care about him, [...] but I do."

Willem returns to the city. Three months later, in late May, his mother calls to say that Hemming is on life support. She begs Willem not to come back. He obeys but struggles to focus on his schoolwork. Every day, Willem calls the hospital and asks the nurses to put the phone to Hemming's ear, though he probably can't hear anything. A week later, Willem's mother calls to say that Hemming has died. Willem is unable say anything to his mother, knowing that she'll have nothing to say back. He feels a searing anger at his parents for remaining so composed through it all.

Willem doesn't tell his friends about Hemming's death, and they all take the trip to Malcolm's parents' house on Martha's Vineyard that they'd planned earlier that year. When Willem returns to the city, he starts his summer job as a teaching assistant for a class with people with disabilities. He thought it might be painful to work with people who remind him of Hemming, but he finds the experience restorative.

Before segueing into this memory, Willem noted that three of his parents' four children have died, so the reader can make an educated guess that things won't end well for Hemming. His suffering is exacerbated by the fact that he is nonverbal and can't communicate what's ailing him. The emotionless tone with which Willem's mother delivers news of Hemming's illness shows how her past struggles have hardened her and accustomed her to pain and suffering.



Willem is angry at his father's callous indifference to Hemming's feelings. Maybe Hemming won't know Willem is there—but maybe he will. Willem gives his dying brother the same respect and dignity he's given Hemming for the duration of Hemming's life. This scene shows the depth of Willem's love for his brother.



Realistically, Willem did all he could for Hemming, but this only makes his death more painful for Willem to endure and accept. Willem's anger at his parents' composure seems to stem, in part, from their acceptance of Hemming's suffering and death. Willem seems almost to have convinced himself that if he loved his brother deeply enough, he could have saved him.



Working with people with disabilities allows Willem to help others where he hadn't been able to help Hemming. That Willem finds this experience restorative reflects, perhaps, his unwillingness to accept the arbitrary and unavoidable existence of pain and suffering in the world. It's as though he's trying to make up for failing Hemming, when in reality, there will always be suffering in the world, some of which cannot be relieved.



The summer is good, in some ways. Willem and Jude housesit for Jude's math professor while he's working abroad. But it's also during that summer when Willem decides he'll never go home again. Since Hemming's death, Willem and his parents have spoken to each other occasionally, and they've been distant as usual; when Willem tells them not to bother coming out for his graduation, they don't fight him. Malcolm insists that you can't stop talking to your parents. But Willem can, and he does. When Willem is in graduate school, his parents die within a year of each other.

Willem goes home to settle his parents' affairs. They left everything to him, though there isn't much left by the time he pays off Hemming's medical bills. After his parents die, Willem remembers that he had loved his parents. He also realized that they'd never acted as though he owed them anything—"not success, or fealty, or affection, or even loyalty."

Willem enters adulthood feeling aimless and uncertain. But he doesn't feel sorry for himself. Even after a week of rehearsing for a play that pays him hardly anything, returning to **Lispenard Street** still feels like an accomplishment. Willem's life might not be one that his parents and brother would consider to be a life, but it's his, and "he g[ets] to dream it for himself every day."

But this optimism falters when Willem struggles to find work, and he sometimes thinks his dreams are lofty and arrogant. And in these moments, he wishes he could be back in Wyoming, waiting for the van that would bring Hemming back to him.

The narrative switches to Malcolm's perspective as he describes his office, which features a big open room full of desks. Malcolm's desk is one of 40. Rausch's glass-walled office is on one end, and Thomasson's is on the other. During work hours, Malcolm and the others do whatever Rausch and Thomasson tell them to do; they work in silence and don't socialize. But once their pretentious bosses leave, they turn on music, bring out take-out menus, and abandon the day's work. Everyone talks about what little money they make and what they would've become if they hadn't gotten stuck working here.

Again, Willem's decision to stop talking to his parents suggests an effort to restore balance to his universe: to avenge Hemming by punishing his parents who did not, to Willem's mind, do enough to alleviate Hemming's suffering. Malcolm's and Willem's different views on family reflect their different upbringings.



Willem handles his parents' deaths much in the same way his parents handled Hemming's. He realizes that he and his parents had loved each other, and yet he doesn't lose himself to grief and remorse over not having spoken to them in their last years. He accepts their deaths and allows himself to realize that he did love them, and then he moves on. His grief for Hemming has taught him that life is cruel but indifferent, and sometimes bad things just happen.



Willem's view of life is strikingly different from JB's. Simply having and making a life for himself is enough for Willem—he doesn't measure his fulfillment according to his success. Lispenard Street, then, becomes a symbol for this life that Willem has built for himself—for the life "he g[ets] to dream [...] for himself every day," just by being alive.



Willem's nostalgia for Wyoming even suggests that ambition has made his life worse and less fulfilling: his quest for fame and fortune have taken him away from the person who mattered most to him, who made his life good.



Malcolm, like his friends, also isn't happy with where he is in life. He works for a big, impersonal corporation where he's little more than a cog in a machine. His colleagues' complaints evoke the sentiments of today's culture of success, which Willem earlier complained about; they feel that they could've—and should've—strived for much more. Still, that they're able to commiserate about their common struggle lightens the load a bit.



Tonight, Malcolm leaves work by himself. Even if he were with people, he couldn't take the train with them, since most of his coworkers live downtown or in Brooklyn and he lives uptown. But this is good, since nobody can see him getting into a cab. He's not the only person at the office with rich parents, but he's the only person who *lives* with his rich parents. When the cab driver is Black, Malcolm directs them to Seventy-first and Lexington. But when they aren't Black, he's more specific—closer to Park than Lexington. JB thinks this is ridiculous—will the driver really think Malcolm is “more gangster” because he lives closer to Lexington than to Park?

This squabble is one of many fights about race Malcolm had with JB over the years. A different one occurred in college, during his and JB's first meeting with their school's Black Students' Union. Malcolm claimed that he never has an issue finding a cab in New York, and that those who claimed they did were exaggerating. He knew it was a mistake the minute he said it. Another student angrily said that Malcolm, as a biracial man, was hardly Black and couldn't understand what “real” Black people go through. Malcolm has always had feelings of self-hatred when it comes to race, and his sophomore year, he'd even begun to identify as “post-black,” though nobody found the idea particularly compelling, least of all JB.

JB found a way to be “Blacker” than Malcolm later that year, too, when he took on a performance art project in which he “boycotted” (stopped talking to) white people. He talked to Malcolm only half as much; to Willem, not at all; and, because Jude's ethnicity was unknown, he continued speaking to him—but only in riddles. Malcolm could tell that Jude and Willem were amused by the project, and he tried to tell himself that he should be glad to have a break from JB.

Back then, Malcolm thought that his racial discomfort was just a phase—he'd never felt proud of being Black, or particularly connected to his Blackness. Blackness was a big part of his family's personal narrative: Malcolm's father had been one of the first Black CFOs of a major bank. Still, other parts of their identity were more distinct than Blackness—Malcolm's mother's importance in the New York literary scene, for instance, or Malcolm's father's wealth. So, Malcolm had grown up with wealth shielding him from everything it could—including racism.

Malcolm, like JB, struggles with his Black identity. He feels uncomfortable telling a Black driver where he lives because it betrays his family's immense wealth—he seems to feel some shame and guilt over the way his wealth protects him against the racism he might otherwise experience. He feels embarrassed that his struggle is not on par with the Black driver's.



Malcolm's ideas about race—and the way he draws from these ideas to form his racial identity—are a product of his personal experiences. Malcolm and JB are at odds about racial identity, but Malcolm's self-hatred stems from an inner conflict that's similar to JB's feeling alienated from the Haitian immigrants he sees on the subway. Malcolm, like JB, has had privileges (like his wealth and his lighter skin) that set him apart from other people in the Black community. His self-hatred and rejection of Blackness only reinforces the racial prejudice he claims doesn't exist though. Wanting to distance himself from his Black identity has come from living in a world that makes this identity undesirable.



JB's competitive nature comes out in his personal life, too. His boycott, while it draws attention to a legitimate social issue, seems more geared toward showing up Malcolm than anything else. Once more, JB chooses image and recognition over friendship.



Malcolm's contemplations further explore all the external elements that contribute to a person's notion of identity. Here, Malcolm shows how his father's Blackness and notable achievements, the family's wealth, and his mother's status in the literary scene come together to form the Irvine family's legacy.



To this day, Malcolm can't wrap his head around the abject poverty in which Jude grew up—how the backpack Jude brought to college contained all of his earthly possessions. After college, race became less important to Malcolm, and he thought that people who used race to define themselves were immature and childish. Malcolm is also lagging behind in the other areas people supposedly find their identities: sexuality, professional success, and money.

Malcolm can ignore money for now—his family is very wealthy. But sex is a problem. Malcolm knows he should have figured out his sexuality in college, and since then, he's experimented a bit. To Malcolm, the thought of being gay "[i]s attractive mostly for its accompanying accessories, its collection of political opinions and causes and its embrace of aesthetics."

In the past, Malcolm has thought he's loved Willem and Jude. Once, when he was assembling a bookcase at Willem and Jude's place, Willem had leaned over Malcolm to grab the measuring tape, and the closeness of Willem's body stirred something inside of Malcolm—and the shock of this made him run off without explanation.

And then there's Malcolm's unfulfilling professional life. He'd had the option to start a firm with two of his friends from architecture school, Jason and Sonal, but he'd turned them down to work at Ratstar. Jason was furious when he found out, and Malcolm heard himself make excuses like "it's a great name to have on my résumé," but he knew that he'd picked Ratstar because he wanted to impress his parents.

Now, Jason and Sonal have had projects featured in *New York* and *The New York Times*. Meanwhile, Malcolm is still doing the kind of work he'd been doing his first year of school. The reason Malcolm went to architecture school in the first place was because he liked buildings. He thinks buildings can say all the things he couldn't say on his own. And this is what he's most ashamed of today: not his financial situation, nor his lacking sex life. But that he "ha[s] lost the ability to imagine anything."

Knowing that Jude grew up in poverty helps the reader to understand why Lispenard Street feels like such an accomplishment for him. He's so accustomed to having nothing, and now he finally has a place he can call his own. Malcolm's continued contemplation about all the aspects in which he's behind in life reaffirms all the elements that factor into a person's identity.



That Malcolm feels that he's missed some imaginary deadline to figure out his sexual orientation speaks to the immense pressure society places on people to have a defined sense of self. On the other hand, Malcolm's rather cynical attitude toward identity—thinking of one's sexual orientation as an assembly of "accompany accessories, [a] collection of political opinions and causes," reaffirms the book's stance that identity isn't a fundamental thing, but something that a person constructs themselves. Per the book, it's something they can change as readily as they switch out their accessories or modify their political stances.



It's unclear why Malcolm runs when he feels aroused by Willem's touch. He's so confused about and unfulfilled by so many aspects of his life, and his friends seem to be his only source of stability and satisfaction, that it's possible he doesn't want to mess that up too.



Malcolm prioritizes success (at least, in his parents' eyes) over creativity, and his personal happiness suffers for it. Malcolm's decision also shows just how important it is for him to have his family's support and approval—how deeply his father's indifference toward him affects him to this day. He's willing to compromise his happiness and creative ambition to satisfy them.



That Malcom is most ashamed to have "lost the ability to imagine anything" reinforces the book's main idea that a person's ability to express themselves (and their ambitions) form their identity. Malcolm hates that he can no longer imagine structures because he thinks it mirrors his uninspired, vacant inner life. Lacking outward success and inner inspiration, he feels like a shell of a person with nothing to show for his life.



PART 1: LISPENARD STREET: CHAPTER 3

Over the Christmas holiday, JB decides that Willem and Jude should host a New Year's Eve party. They always spend Christmas together, and four years ago, they added a Thanksgiving celebration at Jude's friends Harold and Julia's **house** in Cambridge. New Years, though, has never had an assigned host. Last year was the first post-college New Year's they spent apart, and everyone hated it.

Willem returns home the night before the party and smells the rich scent of cheese and butter and dough. He feels sad looking at all the exquisite shortbreads and pastries Jude has labored over. He knows their guests will knock them back with swigs of beer, not appreciating Jude's hard work. When Willem retires to the bedroom, Jude is there, already sleeping.

No sooner has Willem fallen asleep than he wakes up to Jude calling his name. "Willem, I'm sorry," Jude says. Then he calmly explains that he accidentally **cut** himself, and he asks Willem to take him to Andy's. Willem is still half asleep, but he agrees. They walk outside and Willem heads toward the subway. But Jude explains that they'll probably need a cab. Willem asks about the towel Jude has wrapped around his arm, but Jude only shrugs. Willem is concerned when he notices that Jude's lips have grown pale.

They reach Andy's office on Seventy-eighth and Park. Andy is eight years older than Willem and Willem has known him since his sophomore year, when Jude had a pain episode so sustained that he'd decided to take Jude to the university-affiliated hospital. Andy was the resident on call. He's been the only doctor Jude has agreed to see. Though Andy is an orthopedic surgeon, he treats Jude for all kinds of maladies.

Once inside, Willem can see that blood has soaked through Jude's shirt and through the towel. "I'm sorry," Jude says to Andy, who unwraps the towel to reveal—to Willem's horror—a gaping **wound** in Jude's arm that looks like a mouth "vomiting blood from it." Willem sits in the waiting room while Andy tends to Jude. After an hour or so, Andy calls Willem's name, and Willem heads to the examination room. Blood is everywhere.

By this point, readers know JB well enough to see his demand that Willem and Jude go through the effort of throwing a party is characteristic of his rude, un-self-conscious personality. That characters have all these traditions of travelling to different locations to celebrate the holidays emphasizes the importance of companionship and community. It also further develops houses, apartments, and other dwelling places as symbols of community and togetherness.



Jude's apparent knack for baking adds another layer of mystery to this character the reader still knows practically nothing about. But the care Jude takes in preparing for the party shows that he cares about impressing or taking care of others.



If Jude really has had an accident, it's totally unnecessary for him to apologize to Willem—it was just that, an accident. Also, he and Willem are friends, and friends help each other out. So there seems to be something else going on here. Jude's instinct to apologize also gives more insight into his personality: he seems self-conscious about putting people out or asking too much of others.



That Jude has known his doctor for years—and is on a first-name basis with him—shows how serious and chronic his medical condition is. Also curious is the fact that Jude won't see any doctor besides Andy—perhaps he has reasons not to trust or feel comfortable with others. Readers already know that Jude is reserved and secretive around the people he's closest to, so it would make sense that he'd be equally as withholding around his doctors.



Again, Jude apologizes to Andy, his doctor—a friend he's known for nearly a decade and, not to mention, whose job it is to help him. So it's becoming clearer that Jude is very uncomfortable asking others for help, and that he maybe even thinks he doesn't deserve others' help or kindness. The gaping wound is another shocking detail to emerge in this scene, and the novel reveals it with graphic detail that holds nothing back. It's a curious rhetorical decision, and one that reinforces the novel's focus on exploring pain and suffering.



Andy tells Willem he can take Jude home now, but he's clearly angry. He orders Jude to leave the room, and Jude exits obediently. Then, Andy turns to Willem and asks if Jude has seemed depressed lately, which catches Willem by surprise. He *thinks* Jude's been normal; wouldn't he have noticed if Jude wasn't normal? Andy tells Willem that Jude **cuts** himself, which shocks Willem. Andy makes Willem promise to call him if Jude starts acting strangely in the future, and Willem agrees.

Andy's anger is really just concern. Given the amount of blood in the examination room, it's clear that Jude—whether intentionally or by accident—injured himself very badly, and Willem obviously hasn't known to look out for Jude's self-harm. The self-harm further builds tension around the mysterious Jude. He's clearly suffering in some way if he feels he needs to harm himself, but why he feels this way, and if there's some circumstantial element that set him off this time, remains unknown at this point.



Willem and Jude take a cab back to **Lispenard Street**. When they arrive, Willem can see that Jude is about to clean up the bathroom. Willem orders Jude to go to bed, and for once, Jude obeys. He falls asleep instantly. Willem sits on his bed and stares at Jude. He calls out to him. When Jude doesn't stir, Willem nudges him. Then he pushes up one of Jude's sleeves to reveal rows of white **scars**, thick and raised, going all up his arm. Jude's other arm is bandaged, but Willem knows he'll find more scars there, too.

Jude's instinct to clean the bathroom the minute he gets home sheds more light on his personality. He's just been through a majorly traumatic incident, and his primary focus is to erase all evidence of the event. Symbolically, this reflects how Jude deals with his inner suffering, perhaps: he erases all evidence of it, maybe out of shame—and he doesn't confront it or talk about it with anyone.



A while back, Malcolm had asked if the others noticed that Jude always wore long sleeves. Willem had, of course, but he forbade himself from wondering why. Malcolm explained that one of Flora's friends would wear long sleeves all the time because she used to cut herself. Willem was quiet. He knew they all had an unspoken agreement that he'd be the friend responsible for Jude, so it was clear that Malcolm's observation was his way of telling Willem be alert.

This memory helps explain why Willem, in the earlier scene at Lispenard Street, called himself a coward: he knows he should be on high alert about Jude's self-harm, yet he can't bring himself to deal with the social anxiety of bringing up a topic Jude is clearly too upset (or maybe even ashamed) to talk about. It's clear that Flora's friend and Jude do all they can to hide their self-harm from others, maybe because of the social stigma that still surrounds mental illness.



Willem avoided Jude for the next few days. Then one day, when Malcolm and JB left to pick up some lobsters for dinner, Willem asked Jude if he'd like to borrow one of Willem's shirts since it was so hot out. Jude smiled "faintly, warningly," at Willem and told him that it would be cold soon. Willem tried again, but Jude grew angry and refused to answer any of Willem's questions. Jude started to ask a question, but Malcolm and JB returned before he could finish. Willem knew their return was a fortunate thing; he was sure that Jude was about to ask, "Why are you asking me this," since Willem has always made a point of not prying into Jude's secrets.

Willem tries to indirectly bring up the subject of Jude's cutting here, attempting to get Jude to confess to his self-harm on his own by nagging him about his long-sleeved shirt. Willem means well here—he wants Jude to open up on his own, rather than have Willem accuse him of something—but his approach comes off as a bit passive-aggressive and manipulative, even. Still, Willem isn't a medical professional, so it's difficult for him to know how to approach a problem as serious as the one he suspects that Jude is dealing with.



Four years ago, Willem and JB were sharing an apartment as they attended graduate school. Jude had stayed behind in Boston for law school, but he came to New York to visit. One day, Willem noticed that the bathroom door was locked and frantically started pounding on it. Jude opened the door and asked, annoyed, “What, Willem?” Willem knew something was wrong—the bathroom smelled “tannic”—but he couldn’t bring himself to ask. And he still can’t.

Back in the present, as he observes Jude, Willem wonders if tonight would have happened if he’d said or done something all those times in the past. He resolves to say something this time. The next morning, Willem wakes up and finds Jude in the kitchen, calmly molding pastries. Willem asks what Jude’s doing, and Jude replies, calmly, that he’s redoing the gougères. Willem says nobody will know the difference, then he asks Jude what he was doing yesterday. Jude quietly apologizes and pleads with Willem not to be mad at him.

Years later, Willem will wonder how things would have been if he’d asked Jude, point blank, “Jude, are you trying to kill yourself?” Would it have helped Jude to heal? But today, Willem doesn’t ask Jude anything. Instead, he assures Jude that he’s not mad, but he says they have to cancel the party. When Jude insists that they still hold the party, Willem gives in to him, which is what he always does.

Malcolm and JB show up at eight, and the kitchen fills with pastry smells as though Jude’s “accident” never happened. Willem isn’t in the mood to socialize, but he sulkily attends the party. JB makes the four of them go to the roof for some fresh air and a smoke, though it’s horribly cold outside. The cold air and glimmering lights of the city below them reminds Willem of the drives back from Hemming’s hospital bed, and he calls to the others to go back inside. But when Willem tries to open the door that leads to the stairwell, he finds that it’s locked. Nobody has a phone, and Jude doesn’t have his key. Instantly, Willem blames Jude for their current predicament, though he knows this is unfair.

Jude, Malcolm, JB, and Willem call and scream for help, but nobody hears them. Then Jude has an idea: his friends can lower him down to the fire escape, and he can break in through the bedroom window. The idea is too stupid for Willem to respond to it, but JB announces that it’s a great idea. Willem tries to convince Jude to let him do it, but the locking mechanism on the doors is broken, and only Jude knows how to open them. Jude insists that he be the one they lower to the window.

Willem’s recollections show that there were countless clues that Jude habitually hurt himself. Still, it’s hard to confront somebody about something they clearly have trouble talking about and accepting in themself. Willem must grapple with two highly undesirable options: betray Jude’s trust by not respecting his privacy, or let it go and risk Jude really hurting himself someday—and, in the novel’s present, the latter has just come true.



Willem feels responsible for Jude’s supposed “accident.” But this position assumes that Willem’s interference would have cured Jude of his self-harm—or at least, led Jude to cut himself less frequently. It’s understandable for Willem to feel guilt, but ultimately, Jude’s mental wellness is likely more deep-seated and complex than Willem thinks. Further, it’s impossible to say whether Willem’s interference on its own would have been enough to alleviate Jude’s pain enough to get him to stop his self-harm.



Again, Willem could have been more direct in his efforts to confront Jude about his self-harm. But it’s not fair for him to see Jude’s episode as the direct result of Willem’s failure to confront him the right way. In the end, Jude’s mental wellness is far more complicated than this.



The mere air temperature reminds Willem of watching Hemming die—and of being unable to help him or alleviate his suffering. This shows how haunted Willem is by what Willem perceives of as a personal failure on his part. Thus far, the novel has focused on Jude as the character haunted by a traumatic past, but readers see how Willem, too, can’t escape his own personal demons.



Jude’s idea would be extremely dangerous under normal circumstances, but Willem is especially cautious in light of Jude’s accident last night—could Jude be using the fire escape plan as a front to actually throw himself from the roof? And, in expressing heightened concern, Willem is also showing that he’s recommitted himself to his role of being Jude’s keeper.



JB, Malcolm, and Willem lower Jude as far as they can, and then Jude pushes himself off the ledge. They hear a loud thud, and then Jude calls out to them that he's okay—he's landed on the fire escape. Willem orders the others to lower him, too, and they do. Willem drops down to the fire escape, and the fall is harder and scarier than he'd thought. Willem and Jude navigate through the window together. When at least they make it inside, the warmth is intoxicating. Then Willem looks down at Jude's bandage and sees that it's bloodstained. Jude insists that Willem leave to retrieve the others. Willem wants to cry and tries to stay with Jude, but Jude insists that Willem leave. Willem obeys.

When Willem leaves Jude to get the others, it reflects his acceptance that there are limitations to how much he can help Jude. At the end of the day, Willem can't force the issue, and Jude's struggles might be too severe for Willem—or anyone, even—to heal. And this is kind of what Jude is implicitly telling Willem in this moment, when he gives Willem permission to leave. He's saying that it's not Willem's responsibility to fix him.



PART 2: THE POSTMAN: CHAPTER 1

Jude likes to walk on Sundays. The tradition began five years ago, when he was new to the city and needed to orient himself. Now, he rarely misses a walk. Andy takes issue with this habit—it's great Jude wants to exercise, he reasons, but swimming would be easier on Jude's legs. Willem sometimes joins Jude on his walks; they meet up outside the theater's stage-door after Willem's afternoon performance, have a meal or drink, and part ways before the evening show.

If Jude's doctor (Andy) thinks walking is too much for Jude, it's probably a sign he shouldn't be doing it. Yet Jude walks anyway—perhaps to deny (or at least minimize) the reality of his disability. In addition, that Jude makes a point to see Willem on his walks reaffirms their closeness. Years have passed, and yet the friends continue to go out of their way to spend time with each other.



They still live at **Lispenard Street**, though both of them are now able to afford a better place. Other than the times they meet up outside the stage-door, Jude hardly sees Willem these days. Three years ago, on Willem's 29th birthday, he learned that he'd won a part in a successful play. The play allowed him to quit working as a waiter just over a year later. Jude went to see the play, *The Malamud Theorem*, five times.

Willem's ambition has paid off, and he has found success in his career, thus fulfilling a typical genre convention of the bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel. Still the fact that Willem and Jude continue to live together despite being able to afford separate apartments—and the fact that Jude has seen Willem's play five times—is evidence of what good friends they are.



As Jude nears 30, he feels no pressure to become something, even as his friends lament the many things they haven't done and the things they've failed to become. But Jude likes the idea of being 30—it makes him feel like a real adult. When he was at the monastery as a kid, Brother Michael would tell stories about all his travels. Jude, then a young boy, asked Brother Michael when he'd be allowed to travel, and the monk had replied, "When you're older. [...] When you're thirty." And in a few weeks, Jude finally will be 30.

This passage offers additional insight into Jude's still-mysterious past. The novel has already revealed that Jude is orphaned, but now the reader also knows that Jude grew up in a monastery. In addition, Jude's question of when he'd be allowed to travel is a little odd—was Jude not allowed to leave the monastery? This raises the question of the type of environment in which Jude grew up. Was it a negative and controlling environment, perhaps?



Sometimes, as Jude stands alone in the apartment preparing to go on his Sunday walk, he marvels at the fact that he has his own place. The first year there, he'd been embarrassed about his responsible habits—more characteristic of an older person than someone fresh out of college—and he hid the back-up stashes of paper towels under his bed. Willem discovered the hidden essentials one day and wondered why Jude was so embarrassed. Still, Jude felt vulnerable that he couldn't maintain the charade of the person he wanted himself to be. Jude has been taught that it's bad to share the things that make a person different from others, unlike his friends.

Jude's impulse to stock up on essentials is another hint about his past. Maybe he didn't have much growing up, and so now he feels a compulsion to hoard the things he wasn't fortunate enough to have as a child. It's also important to note how ashamed Jude is of this habit, and how it makes him different from others. At some point in his life, people—the monks, perhaps—taught Jude that being different is bad. And that Jude carries this lesson with him years later, as an adult, shows how these early experiences have continued to affect him throughout his life.



Today, Jude plans to walk to the Upper East Side and meet Willem outside the theater. He hasn't done this in nearly a year, since he's been spending Saturdays in the Upper East Side tutoring a 12-year-old boy named Felix. Jude found the job through Malcolm's father. But it's spring break for Felix, who is on vacation with his family, so there's no way Jude will run into them.

Jude's reasons for not wanting to run into his employers are unclear, but it further reinforces his secrecy and impulse to keep his private life from others.



Jude tutors Felix in Latin, math, German, and piano. He feels bad for Felix—he's clearly bright enough, but he lacks focus, passion, and confidence. Felix is only 12, but it seems, to Jude, that he's already completely disillusioned with life. And he doesn't have any friends.

Felix's early disillusionment with life, on the one hand, is rather stereotypical of your average moody, pubescent pre-teen. It also reinforces the book's overall pessimistic attitude toward life, which holds that human suffering (of which loneliness is one example) is the default state.



After one tutoring session, Mr. Baker (Felix's father) confronts Jude privately to ask him what he thinks is "wrong with Felix." Jude starts to say that Felix's problem is that he's unhappy, but he realizes that happiness is "an extravagance, an impossible state to maintain." Instead, Jude tells Mr. Baker that Felix is simply "shy."

Jude sees happiness as rare and fleeting, and unhappiness as the default state. This reinforces the book's broader insistence that human suffering is a fundamental aspect of life.



The next week, Felix doesn't want to play the piano, so Jude plays something for Felix instead—Haydn's Sonata No. 50, a happy piece and one of Jude's favorites.

Jude continues to reveal more aspects of his character. In addition to being intelligent and ambitious and orphaned, he's also apparently an accomplished musician. It's curious that someone with so any talents and accomplishments should be so private and seemingly self-effacing. Jude is impressive, but he seems not to know it—or, perhaps, he's ashamed of the aspects of his personality that mark him as exceptional or different than most people.



When Jude finishes playing, Felix bursts into tears. Jude is instantly ashamed of himself for showing off. Then Felix confides in Jude that he doesn't have any friends. Until now, Jude has only sympathized with Felix in an abstract, theoretical way. But now, he feels for the suffering child. Jude will go out with people he loves and cares about—and who (probably) love and care about him back. Meanwhile, Felix will be here, totally alone. Jude promises Felix that he'll make friends soon, though he has no way of knowing this. As Jude leaves the Bakers' house that day, he realizes why Felix is always so pale and forlorn: he's already realized that love and companionship are arbitrary and not guaranteed.

Jude can speak French and German, he's a math whiz, and he knows a lot of the Bible by memory. He also knows how to birth a calf, unclog a drain, and how to identify poisonous mushrooms. But Jude thinks that most of his knowledge is useless. And there's so much he doesn't know—for example, he doesn't get most pop culture references, and he hasn't tried a lot of foods. For this reason, he's always felt most confident and protected in the classroom. But he could never ask others for help or answers, since this "would be an admission of extreme otherness," and it would make him feel "exposed."

In college, Jude would feel left out when his friends would reminisce about their childhoods. He knew nothing of their "curfews, and rebellions, and punishments," and their conventional lives fascinated him. Jude never talked about his past, and his silence was both "a necessity and a protection." It also made him seem "more mysterious and more interesting," though neither of these things are true.

But not everybody accepted Jude's silence. In fact, it even earned him his nickname. Around the time that Malcolm got into postmodernism and decided that he was "post-black," JB was criticizing Malcolm, claiming that he would've needed to actually *be* Black in the first place to move beyond it. And Malcolm would have to be so "uncategorizable" that nobody could put him in a box for conventional identity to not apply to him. JB turned to Jude as an example: Jude, JB claims, has no discernable race, sexuality, or past. Jude is post everything: he's "Jude the Postman." Though the nickname didn't stick, Jude thinks about it often—it reminds him of all the ways he's unlike others.

Jude's pessimistic take on friendship gets at the arbitrary and often cruel nature of life. Jude believes everything that happens in life is totally random: good things sometimes happen to bad people, and tragedies sometimes strike good people. Jude's contemplations further hint at an unhappy childhood that has enlightened him to the depressing realities of life's fundamental unfairness.



Jude has a lot of practical and applied knowledge, but he considers much of it useless because it doesn't help him connect with his peers. This shows how Jude desperately wants to fit in and find acceptance. This backs up his earlier comment about being taught to look down on characteristics that make him different from others. It also suggests a deep-seated self-hatred. This is concerning and, once more, suggests that Jude's still-mysterious past was likely not so happy.



This passage offers further evidence of Jude's self-hatred. It's also curious that Jude considers it "a necessity and a protection" not to discuss his past with others. Perhaps there is something traumatic that occurred in his past that he is repressing, or perhaps he feels ashamed of his past—or maybe both are true.



Jude doesn't like being "post" everything because it just confirms his fear that he exists totally outside of any community. It alienates him from others and leaves him feeling lost in the world. Despite all Jude's professional and personal successes—his promising law career, his clear mastery of many practical and applied skills, his handful of lifelong, very close friends—he's totally unsatisfied with life and self-hating.



If Jude were to tell the truth to anyone, though, that person would be Willem, the friend Jude trusts most. Lately, Jude has become convinced that Willem knows something about his past, but he always convinces himself that he's only projecting this onto Willem because he *wants* to confide in Willem. He's long known that his childhood wasn't normal, but it took getting to college to understand just how abnormal it really was.

By their third year of college, Jude, Willem, JB, and Malcolm were an established clique. They lived in a building called Hood Hall, and everybody called them "The Boys in the Hood." One night, they order pizza and smoke some weed. Malcolm and JB are debating the nature of evil (Malcolm attacks JB for not having read Plato) when suddenly, JB interrupts the argument to ask Jude what happened to his legs. They've all been friends for so long, and JB thinks it's odd that Jude hasn't told him. Willem, protective of Jude, warns JB to shut up. But Malcolm sides with JB, insisting that it hurts their feelings to think that Jude doesn't trust them.

Jude feels embarrassed that Willem always has to defend him, and so he tells a version of the truth. He explains that he was in a car accident when he was 15. The room is silent. Malcolm asks if Jude could walk before the accident, and Jude explains that he used to run cross-country. JB says he's sorry. Only Willem says nothing in response. Soon, word spreads across campus, and eventually the story becomes that Jude was the victim of a drunk driving incident. Jude is conflicted. The story gives him "an opportunity for reinvention" that he's always craved. But he can't accept this reinvention in his own mind, because what happened to him wasn't an accident.

Another moment that sticks out is when Jude had a severe episode at the end of his shift at the library. Willem and the librarian, a kind woman named Mrs. Eakeley, moved Jude to the break room to recover. Mrs. Eakeley asked Jude why he needed his braces, and Willem replied, "A car injury." Later, Jude realized that Willem said "injury," not "accident," and he wondered if this word choice was intentional.

That Willem is the friend Jude trusts most reaffirms their close friendship. They have a special bond Jude doesn't have with the others. That Jude only trusts one person—and can't even bring himself to confide in that person—further supports the idea that Jude's past was far from ideal, and, perhaps, that something sinister happened to him long ago. He must have some reason to consider himself abnormal.



JB's frank question about Jude's legs shows that he's always been a little rude and unfiltered. In this way, he's quite unlike Jude, who is almost pathologically secretive and careful about what he shares with and asks of others. This scene also shows why Jude is closest to Willem: because Willem respects Jude's boundaries, understanding that Jude's past is only their business if Jude decides it's their business.



Jude's embarrassment here shows how uncomfortable he is accepting others' support and comfort. This suggests, perhaps, that he's been raised to feel that he is undeserving of respect or compassion. Willem's silence suggests that he suspects there's more to Jude's story than Jude has just revealed—but that he's accepted that Jude has no obligation to tell them anything he'd rather keep secret. Finally, that Jude craves "an opportunity for reinvention" adds additional fuel to the theory that Jude has had a bad (and maybe even traumatic) past that he wishes he could escape from. The very fact that what happened to his legs wasn't an accident—that he or someone else hurt him in such an extreme way—reaffirms this theory.



By referring to whatever caused Jude's physical disability as an "injury" rather than an "accident," as Jude had told his friends, Willem reveals his suspicion that what happened to Jude when he was 15 was no accident. Again, it's clear that Willem is more attuned to or respectful of Jude's feelings than the others.



It was Ana, Jude's only social worker and the only person who didn't betray him, who convinced him to go to college. He remembers sitting on the porch in Ana's backyard, eating banana bread Ana's girlfriend Leslie had made. Ana's face was the first face he saw when he woke up in the hospital that day, and she was by his side even when he wasn't awake. They didn't talk about much then. She'd ask him about his pain, and if he needed anything. The doctor told Jude he would likely never fully recover from his injuries. Ana helped him through those early days of pain. When an episode ended, she'd give him water and promise him that things would be better someday.

The narrative flashes back to Jude's time at the hospital. In the weeks after he first wakes up, Ana brings him books. Jude knows Ana is a social worker the court has assigned to him. But weeks pass before she asks him about the accident. Jude claims he doesn't remember, and she patiently tells him that it's okay if he can't talk for now—they know the basic facts of the story—but some day, he'll have to open up to her about it. Apparently, shortly after he first woke from his surgery, he'd told Ana everything. But he doesn't remember doing this, and he wonders how much he told her. Ana tells Jude that his confession made her believe that the men who did this to him deserve to go to hell.

Ana facilitates Jude's transfer into a home with the Douglasses, an evangelical Lutheran family that fosters two other kids—Rosie, an eight-year-old girl with Down syndrome; and Agnes, a nine-year-old girl with spina bifida. There are ramps for Agnes and Jude to use. Though Jude eats and sleeps at the Douglasses' house, it's Ana who cares for him. She takes him to his doctor's appointments and watches him as he relearns how to walk. It's Ana who gets him to write down what happened between him and Dr. Traylor. She also prevents Jude from having to testify in court—even without Jude's testimony, they had plenty of evidence to put away Dr. Traylor for a long time.

When the doctors tell Jude that he isn't strong enough to go to school yet, Ana finds him a tutor. She also makes him consider going to college. His teachers in Montana have raved about him, and even though his education hasn't been "traditional," his test scores are fantastic and he knows more than most (if not all) of his peers. Ana cautiously says that, perhaps, Jude "may ha[ve] something to thank Brother Luke for after all." And so, Ana helps him apply to college, and she even pays his application fee.

That Jude had a social worker involved in his childhood is further evidence of a childhood rife with turmoil or, at least, instability. The fact that Ana is the only person Jude feels hasn't betrayed him helps explain the secretive, discerning persona he's adopted as an adult. He doesn't open up to a lot of people because he's learned, over time, that he cannot trust anyone. Though Jude's injuries were severe, he grew up with people telling him that his life would improve—even if his condition never fully returned to what it was before his injury. But has Jude's life met these optimistic expectations? He still seems to be in a lot of pain, and he still seems highly reluctant to trust anybody.



This passage presents more clues about Jude's mysterious past. Ana angrily decides that the men who injured Jude should go to hell, and this suggests that there are specific people responsible for the chronic pain he still deals with as an adult. Finally, Ana's insistence that Jude learn to talk about what happened to him underscores how important confronting one's traumas are to healing. Yet, as an adult, Jude remains secretive about his past, and this suggests that he has yet to work through his childhood trauma—and as a result, this trauma continues to haunt him as an adult.



In this scene, the novel finally reveals the name of the person who's (possibly) responsible for Jude's injuries: Dr. Traylor. The novel doesn't specify whether Dr. Traylor is a medical doctor or a professor of some kind, but if he's a medical doctor, this helps explain why, as an adult, Jude isn't able to trust anyone besides his close friend, Andy, to treat his many ills. This scene also helps establish what an important presence Ana was in Jude's life, as well as the essential role she played in his recovery. At one point in his life, at least, Jude was able to be honest with someone and let her help him. This leaves readers to wonder what happened after Jude's time with Ana that caused him to become so guarded.



The novel reveals another name of one of Jude's possible aggressors here—Brother Luke. It also seems that for all Brother Luke did to hurt Jude, he also ensured that he received a good education. The possibility that someone from Jude's past simultaneously helped and hurt him helps explain some of the trust issues Jude seems to have as an adult. He's learned to be wary around people who claim to be his friend or protector, since he's seen how those people are also capable of betraying him.



When Jude learns that he's been accepted on a full scholarship, he tells Ana it's all because of her. "Bullshit," she replies. But by now, Ana is very sick and can only whisper. Later, Jude will realize that he was too "self-absorb[ed]" to catch the many signs of Ana's worsening illness—"her weight loss, her yellowing eyes, her fatigue." He's always told her she shouldn't smoke, and she always laughs and tells him she knows this.

Jude is, to some degree, being kind to Ana when he attributes his college acceptance to her. But this passage also provides additional evidence of Jude's inability to take credit for his accomplishments and recognize his good qualities. Ana's declining health and the detail that she used to smoke suggests that she's ill with something serious, perhaps lung cancer. Jude, in Ana, has finally found some happiness and support after (what seems like) a childhood filled with unhappiness and instability. And now Ana is gravely ill. Jude just can't catch a break.



Ana continues to urge Jude to talk about what happened to him—it's an important step in his healing process, and it will only get harder to discuss as more time passes. But Jude can't. By June, Ana is bedridden and hospitalized. One day, she tells him that Leslie will take him shopping for the things he'll need for school. She promises him that he'll do great in college. But she also tells him that the kids there will ask him about his past, and where he grew up. What will he tell them? "I don't know," says Jude. Ana looks at him. One day, she assures him, he'll figure out how to talk about what happened to him.

Ana's continual efforts to urge Jude to talk about his past underscores how vital confronting the things that happened to him are to his recovery and mental wellness. And again, the fact that Jude clearly hasn't found a way to talk about the past, combined with his well-established habit of self-harm, suggests that he hasn't worked through his past and is still hurting because of it.



Ana dies two weeks later, on July 3rd. Not long after, the Douglasses move to San Jose. They take Agnes with them, and Rosie is reassigned to a new family. The Douglasses tell Jude to stay in touch, but he already knows that he won't. He's too desperate to move forward and reinvent himself. He's placed in an emergency shelter, which is a sad, gray dormitory full of boys whose pasts and behavioral issues make them difficult to place in conventional foster homes. When it's time for Jude to leave for college, the dormitory gives him money to pay for school supplies. Leslie takes him shopping. Jude's grief for Ana is so painful that he sometimes thinks it would've been better if he'd never met her in the first place. And then it's time to take the bus north to school. Leslie comes to the station to say goodbye. Everything he owns fits in one backpack.

In Jude's failure to stay in touch with the Douglasses, readers can already see the major effect Ana's death has had on him. Jude finally found someone who cared about him, and whom he felt comfortable enough to confide in—and then, in dying, she abandoned him. Perhaps this difficult experience taught Jude not to rely on others for support, and that learning this lesson has contributed to his secrecy and unwillingness to confide in even his closest friends.



At school, Jude is the first of his suitemates to arrive. Malcolm, his parents, and all his things arrive next. Seeing all the fancy things Malcolm has, Jude feels momentarily angry with Ana—how could she have thought he'd fit in here? Months pass, and Jude feels a little more at home. But the feeling that he's different never leaves him. And he also realizes that Ana will be the only person he won't have to explain everything to. She would never ask him prying questions about why he only wears long sleeves or doesn't like to be touched. Jude receives a Christmas letter from Leslie that first year. It's his last connection to Ana, but he throws it out, determined to leave the past behind.

In throwing away Leslie's letter, Jude symbolically does the exact opposite of what Ana had advised him to do: he attempts to cope with his past by rejecting it rather than confronting it. And as the secrecy and self-harm Jude exhibits as an adult suggests, this decision has been majorly destructive to his mental wellness. Ana wanted Jude to confront his past and begin to heal, and he's done neither of these things. And as a result, his adulthood is filled with suffering and strife.



Jude starts clerking for Judge Sullivan during his third year in law school. Judge Sullivan would always say that there are two kinds of people in the world: people who believe, and people who don't. In his courtroom, belief is important. After Judge Sullivan leaves for the day, Jude grins across the room at Thomas. Thomas is a conservative too, but he's "a *thinking* conservative." Jude and Thomas began clerking for Judge Sullivan the same year. Jude's law professor Harold encouraged him to apply—the judge was known to always hire one clerk whose political beliefs differ greatly from his own. And, Harold told Jude, Jude was one of the best students he's ever had. The compliment embarrasses Jude.

Jude interviews with Judge Sullivan in Washington the following year. Sullivan mentions that he's heard that Jude can sing and asks if he can sing something now—something that says something about his character. The comment catches Jude off guard, since he's never mentioned this hobby to anyone. Had Harold overheard him singing late one night when Jude thought he was alone? Jude sings Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen." He translates the first line as "I have become lost to the world." For Jude, the song is about loss and about "escape and discovery." When Jude finishes, Judge Sullivan applauds and asks Jude where he learned to sing so well. "The brothers," replies Jude, explaining that he was raised Catholic—but isn't Catholic anymore. Sullivan thanks Jude for coming by and tells him he'll reach out later.

Jude returns to Cambridge. He thinks he totally botched the interview, but a week later, Sullivan calls and tells Jude he's won the position. When Jude arrives at Harold's office for his shift the next day, Harold tells him that he needs Jude to run errands with him instead. They leave and go to an expensive men's store, and Harold buys Jude two suits for his new job with Sullivan. Jude tries to protest, but Harold tells Jude he deserves this. Then Harold leaves. Marco, the salesman, starts to measure Jude, but Jude "flinche[s] reflexively." Jude apologizes. When Marco finishes, Jude examines himself in the mirror. His new suit disguises and protects him—and it hides his scars.

Later, back at his modest apartment, Jude thinks about Harold's gift. The suits were generous, but they also made him feel uncomfortable. He's known for a while that Harold respects him as a student, but the gift suggests that Harold likes Jude as an actual friend. So why should Jude feel as self-conscious as he does? It's taken him so long already to feel comfortable around Harold. For most of Jude's life, adult men have been interested in him for one reason. Though Harold doesn't seem like one of those men, Brother Luke hadn't, either.

The novel has previously mentioned Harold in passing as a friend with whom Jude typically spends Thanksgivings. Here it reveals the origins of that friendship: Harold was Jude's law professor. Apparently, Harold liked Jude enough to recommend him for an important clerkship, and also to continue their relationship even after Jude graduated from law school. This flashback also reinforces just how drastically Jude's accomplishments and likability clash with his low self-esteem. Jude continues to succeed and find people who think he's great, yet he fails to think positively about himself. He can't even accept Harold's compliment.



Jude's translation of the Mahler lied (song) is important. The usual translation of this line is "I am lost to the world." In translating the line to read "I have become" lost to the world, Jude implicitly calls on the ways his childhood trauma have caused him to "become lost to the world" and has otherwise harmed him. Singing the song before Sullivan allows Jude to confront the ways his past has harmed him—even if Sullivan remains unaware of the subliminal meaning behind Jude's words. This scene suggests, perhaps, that Jude is making some headway in confronting his childhood trauma and learning to heal.



Harold's affection for Jude shines through in this generous action. It's almost like he's trying to act as orphaned Jude's parent, performing a ceremonial ritual of taking him shopping for his first big job. It's curious—and concerning—that Marco's touch causes Jude to "flinch[]" reflexively." Jude's reaction suggests, perhaps, that he has some experience with physical or sexual abuse. This would certainly fit with what little readers know of Jude's unstable, troubled, and traumatic past.



Jude wants to trust that Harold's friendly and caring gestures are genuine, yet whatever happened between Jude and Brother Jude has left Jude wary of people who seem, on the surface, to care about him. It's clear that Jude has been let down—if not outright physically or emotionally harmed—by enough people to condition him not to trust anyone. Jude's upsetting remark about grown men only wanting him for one reason further supports the idea that Jude was sexually abused as a child.



Jude can't remember much about his first year knowing Harold. He thinks back to his first lecture. Harold congratulated Jude and the other One Ls. Some new students, Harold says, are here because they want to get money from people. Others want to change the world. In this class, they'll learn that not all contracts are fair. But the class will teach them what fairness looks like—and to know the difference “between what is fair and what is necessary.” The speech moves Jude.

The idea that there's a difference “between what is fair and what is necessary” resonates with the book's view of suffering. The book asserts that suffering is a fundamental part of human life, and that everyone suffers—even people who don't “deserve” it, such as Jude. Maybe this is why Harold's speech moves him—because he's experienced, firsthand, just how unfair life can be.



Jude starts to work for Harold several days each week. He also works at the library, and at a bakery called Batter. He's worked at Batter since his undergraduate years, and the owner, Allison, trusts him with the most complicated orders. One day, she gives him a particularly tricky order, placed by a customer (the customer is Harold, whom Jude didn't yet know that well) for his microbiologist wife, to construct sugar cookies decorated to look like bacteria. Jude comes through. The next week, Harold, not knowing that it was Jude who made the cookies, raves about how much Julia's lab liked them. Jude takes pride in Harold's praise, but he keeps it to himself.

Jude, once more, demonstrates his inability to own his skills and accept praise. As new details about Jude's childhood come to light, it becomes increasingly clear that Jude was raised by people who abused him and taught him to hate and be ashamed of himself. And Jude's failure to tell Harold that it was he who executed the flawlessly decorated bacteria cookies is yet another example of the minute ways that he has carried the side effects of this abuse into his adult life.



One night in March, Harold invites Jude to have dinner at his **house**. When Harold opens the door to greet Jude, Jude can smell pasta cooking in the kitchen. Julia, a tall woman with short brown hair, greets Jude warmly. Over dinner, Jude learns about Julia, who was raised in Oxford and moved to America to attend graduate school at Stanford. But soon, the focus shifts to Jude. Julia asks him where he grew up. “South Dakota and Montana, mostly,” replies Jude. Harold asks if Jude's parents were ranchers. Jude answers that lots of people out west are ranchers and then remarks on the beautiful landscape of the west. Harold calls out Jude for avoiding Julia's question, but Julia says to leave him alone.

This passage offers an additional clue into Jude's childhood: he grew up in South Dakota and Montana. Of course, given how secretive Jude is about his past, the reader should take even this vague detail with a grain of salt. When Harold calls Jude out on changing the subject, his behavior mirrors JB's and Malcolm's in Jude's memory from his college days, where JB asked Jude to come clean about his injury, and Malcolm told Jude it was hurtful not to share personal details with them. This reveals how Jude's secrecy—a side effect of the likely abuse he endured as a child—affects not only his self-esteem, but also his friendships.



Jude wants to grow closer to Harold, but this requires him to open up to him, and Jude isn't ready for this. And Harold is so persistent: he's constantly finding ways to shift the focus of their conversations to Jude's past. Once, when Harold offers Jude a paper bag of cookies, he asks Jude if his parents baked for him when he was a child. “No,” says Jude. Finally, Jude outright tells Harold that his parents are dead. Harold says he's sorry—his own parents recently died, though of course, he's much older than Jude. Jude tells Harold he wasn't close with his parents. When Jude grows frustrated and snaps at Harold for being nosy, Harold tells Jude that it's what friends do.

What Jude sees as nosiness, Harold sees as a totally normal part of friendship. Harold's repeated attempts to pry into Jude's past reveal a bit about Harold's philosophy of friendship: he feels that as friends become closer, they naturally become more willing to confide in each other. Essentially, Harold proposes that time and effort can lessen the distance that separates one person from another. Harold believes in a narrative of healing. He doesn't even entertain the idea that he is incapable of healing Jude—that Jude might never become comfortable enough with Harold to divulge all the details of his past.



During one dinner at Harold's **house**, Jude meets Harold's best friend, Laurence, an appellate court judge in Boston; and Laurence's wife Gillian, an English professor. They ask him about the pure math degree he's getting from MIT. Jude tells them he likes pure math because it's "essentially a conversation between truths and falsehoods." You write a formula to test if something is real. "*Video, ergo est*," Laurence observes. ("*I see it, therefore it is.*") Yes, Jude smiles, but that's more what applied math is about. Pure math, by contrast, is "*Imagino, ergo est.*" (*I imagine it, therefore it is.*)

Harold interjects, jokingly asking Jude how he ended up in law school. Jude laughs, but this is a difficult question—one whose answer he changes depending on his audience. The real reason—that he wants to protect himself and be untouchable—isn't something he feels he can say aloud. Tonight, he offers that the law isn't so different from pure math. It can be stretched and interpreted to answer any question. The main difference is that whereas the law is about governance, pure math is about the truth.

Jude cites Fermat's last theorem as an aggressively rambling and ugly—and therefore disappointing—mathematical proof. Beautiful proofs are "succinct, like a beautiful ruling." Jude realizes he's been rambling on about math and beauty for quite some time, and he apologizes. But Laurence orders him not to apologize—he's giving them probably the most riveting conversation they've had at Harold's **house**. Jude spots Harold mouthing to Laurence, "See?" Laurence nods affirmatively. Jude wonders if the dinner tonight was a test he hadn't known about, and if so, he's glad he's apparently passed.

Late one night, during Jude's second year at law school, Jude is at Harold's **house** when a snowstorm hits. Jude is about to call a cab, but Harold insists that Jude stay over. As he lies in bed that night, Jude pretends that Harold and Julia are his parents, and that he's come home from law school to visit them.

Pure math offers the opportunity to construct truth and reality, something Jude wants to do in his own life but cannot. He cannot erase his traumatic past from his history—it's always there, and he's constantly finding new ways that it negatively affects his present life, and the person he's become.



Not only does Jude's traumatic past affect him emotionally, but it also influences more practical aspects of his life. His pathological need to protect himself (though from what remains unclear at this point in the novel) influences his career choices. He might have become a musician, perhaps, but Jude's need to protect himself—legally and financially—prevents him from pursuing things he's passionate about in favor of things that will help him.



These scene offers additional evidence of the last effects of Jude's childhood trauma. He seems constantly afraid that people are testing him—that he must prove his worth. Jude's childhood trauma seems to have taught him that he has to earn people's love and respect—that it's not something he's automatically given. Jude's interest in "succinct" and simple proofs perhaps reflects the way he wishes his life could be: he wants his life to be as logical and clear-cut as "a beautiful ruling," but it's really been as rambling and ugly as Fermat's last theorem.



Jude resists Harold and Julia's efforts to get closer to him, but it's not because he doesn't want to be close to him. Jude's fantasy where Harold and Julia are his parents reveals that Jude craves a loving, familial relationship with Harold and Julia—he just doesn't know how to make himself vulnerable in front of them (or anyone, for that matter).



The next summer, Harold invites Jude to his and Julia's beach **house** in Truro, on Cape Cod. He also invites Jude's friends to join them, so Jude brings along JB, Malcolm, and Willem. He admires the ease with which his friends open up to Harold, answering all his questions about their pasts. And then, summer ends, and the fall semester begins. One of Jude's friends must have mentioned something to Harold in Truro, because Harold stops asking prying questions.

Jude's childhood trauma taught him that it's bad to be different, but it's this same trauma that has made him different in the first place. Seeing how effortlessly his friends connect with Harold only magnifies Jude's own sense of self-hatred and inadequacy. It's unclear which of Jude's friends told Harold to stop asking so many questions, but Willem seems a possible candidate, given his history of looking after Jude and being especially sensitive to Jude's needs and comfort level.



When Jude moves to Washington, D.C. for his clerkship, and then to New York to work for the U.S. Attorney's Office, he assumes that Harold and Julia will forget about him, but they stay in touch and visit often. Harold calls Jude every Saturday to ask about his boss, Marshall—the deputy U.S. Attorney. The U.S. Attorney's office reminds Jude a bit of “the home.” It's male-dominated and full of “hostility” from so many competitive people existing in such close quarters. Jude works with a team on securities fraud cases. Everyone on Jude's team tries to have something—an accomplishment or a quirk—that sets himself apart from the others. Jude has his math degree from MIT; Citizen, with whom Jude is friendliest, graduated from Cambridge; and Rhodes was a Fulbright Scholar in Argentina.

In Harold and Julia, Jude has found friends who refuse to abandon him. Perhaps this positive friendship will teach Jude that he is worthy: that he doesn't have to prove his worth, and that people will remain in his life simply because they love and care about him. Jude hasn't said much about “the home” he was sent to live in the summer before college, but if it was full of “hostility,” it seems likely that living there wasn't much better than any of his previous living arrangements. At Jude's new job, it's advantageous to have something that sets oneself apart from the others. Yet, this hasn't made Jude of the novel's present feel any better about the ways his life has been so different from others' lives. Jude's repeated failure to see himself in a positive light shows just how intensely his childhood trauma continues to haunt his adult life.



On the rare occasion that the U.S. Attorney himself comes into the office, Citizen jokes, “Time to whip out the credentials.” And then all the assistant prosecutors swarm around the U.S. Attorney and try to get him to notice them. But Jude never mentions his one connection: Harold is good friends with Adam, the U.S. Attorney. Harold asked if he could put in a good word for Jude, but Jude declined—officially, so that he could prove that he could do things on his own, but also, because he doesn't want Harold to ever “regret his association with him.”

Jude's fear that Harold will no longer want to associate with him if he finds out about Jude's past adds another layer of mystery to this already mysterious protagonist. Is Jude's self-hatred unfairly influencing his logic? Or did he really do something so shameful that others would want to distance themselves from him if they knew about it? For now, this question remains unanswered.



The Thanksgiving after Jude moves to New York, Harold sees one of Jude's episodes. The pain is so bad that Jude has to curl up inside the pantry until it passes. The next time Jude is at Harold's place, they've rearranged the **house** and put the guest bedroom on the ground floor.

Harold and Julia's thoughtful gesture to relocate the guest bedroom downstairs shows that Jude has no shortage of friends willing to accommodate his disability—and to do so discreetly, so Jude doesn't feel uncomfortable about needing extra help. And yet, Jude remains self-conscious about his disability into the present. This suggests that friendship and solidarity aren't enough to make Jude accept his disability.



One day, while they're cleaning Harold's **house** in preparation for a party for Julia's 51st birthday, Jude finds a book of Laurence's. Jude jokingly threatens to tell Laurence. Harold leaps toward Jude, playfully pretending to attack him. But Jude "recoil[s] violently" to avoid Harold's body, and the force of it thrusts Jude back into the bookcase, breaking a ceramic mug Harold's son, Jacob, had made for him.

This passage mirrors Jude's negative reaction to being touched by the man during his suit fitting years before. It's becoming increasingly likely that Jude was physically or sexually abused as a child, and this is why he recoiled from the customer service employee then, and from Harold's touch now. This scene also offers some insight into Harold's past. He has a son, Jacob, but Jacob hasn't appeared or been mentioned before now. This might imply that Jacob is no longer in Harold's life—perhaps he is estranged or even deceased.



Harold is silent. Jude apologizes profusely, again and again. He offers to leave. Harold quietly tells Jude it's okay—it was an accident, and he's not angry. Jude wants to cry. After all Harold has given him, he's "destroy[ed] something precious created by someone who had been most precious." Harold goes upstairs after this. Julia returns, and Jude expects Harold to have told her how careless Jude has been, but Harold hasn't. Later, Jude writes Harold a letter to apologize some more. He receives a letter from Harold a few days later—and he keeps it for the rest of his life. In the letter, Harold tells Jude that he loved the mug, but he loves Jude more. He also says that sometimes, in life, "things get broken," and even when they can't be repaired, "life arranges itself to compensate for your loss, sometimes wonderfully."

Jude is sorry about everything, but he seems especially sorry about breaking the mug. This serves as additional evidence that something happened to Harold's son—perhaps he has died. Harold's kind note to Jude shows how deeply Harold cares about Jude. It also shows that his affection is unconditional. Jude needn't prove himself to Harold, nor should he worry that Harold will abandon him if Jude disappoints him. He loves Jude for who he is—not for what Jude can do for him. Harold's sweet suggestion that "life arranges itself to compensate for your loss" imagines a world where misfortune and fortune balance each other out. But in Jude's own life, this has hardly been the case: misfortune has followed misfortune, with very few breaks in between. Jude's life now seems to be on the upswing, but, given his history, who knows how long this will last.



For years, Jude hopes that his legs and spine might one day heal. But Andy tells Jude that his injuries will never heal—and they'll only get worse as Jude ages. To this day, Andy is the only person who has seen Jude fully naked. Though he's an orthopedic surgeon, Andy treats Jude for all kinds of maladies.

Symbolically, Andy's bad news about Jude's injury dispels the notion that all ailments—whether psychological or physical—are fixable if one only tries hard enough. Jude's injury proves that some wounds cut too deeply to recover from, and some people remain broken (in Jude's mind—people with disabilities are not broken), and that suffering is inevitable.



For as much as Andy knows about Jude, Jude knows very little about Andy. He knows that Andy is from Ohio, that his father is Gujarati, and his mother is Welsh. When Andy gets married at his in-laws' house on the Upper West Side, Andy's new wife, Jane, runs to Jude, embraces him, and says, "I've heard so much about you!" Andy gives Jude a kiss on the cheek—it's the first time he's done this, and it's awkward, but Jude appreciates this attempt at closeness. Jude also appreciates Andy's "unflappability." In college, he'd pound on Jude's door when Jude missed a follow-up appointment. When Andy asks for Jude's history in their appointments, he writes it down without comment.

Jude appreciates Andy's "unflappability" because it minimizes the severity of Jude's injuries—the parts of himself that he hates for making him so noticeably different from the rest of the world. Andy doesn't sugarcoat Jude's condition, nor is he annoyingly curious about it. He simply accepts Jude—imperfect and differently abled as he is. And Andy's status as a doctor also allows him to do things that would've infuriated Jude if his other friends had done them (pounding on Jude's door when Jude misses an appointment), since Andy does these things out of a professional, rather than a personal, obligation.



It's less than four years before the novel's present day (when Jude is nearly 30) that Andy explicitly brings up Jude's childhood. And it's on this occasion that they have their first real fight. The fight begins with Jude's "**botched suicide attempt**" right before the New Year's Eve party. The incident infuriates Andy, and at their next regular appointment, Andy angrily tells Jude he should have had him hospitalized—and the only thing that's holding him back now is that he knows Jude hadn't really been trying to kill himself. Jude claims that Andy is exaggerating.

When Andy says he's going to have Jude committed if Jude hurts himself again, Jude angrily threatens to sue Andy. Jude's implication that Andy cares about money more than he cares about Jude offends Andy. Andy tells Jude that his unwillingness to take care of himself is hurting everyone around him—and if he keeps it up, Andy won't be his doctor anymore.

The argument makes Jude reflect on his relationship to his past. He's rarely angry about it, since he thinks that he deserves everything that has happened to him. He knows that Andy finds his avoidance "illogical," but as a doctor, Andy is supposed to "make people better," and so Andy believes anyone can be healed.

Days go by after the big fight, and still, Andy and Jude don't call each other. Jude bangs his **injured wrist** against his desk as he reads at night, a bad tic he'd developed many years ago. Then, a week later, on Sunday, Andy shows up at **Lispenard Street**. He apologizes, and Jude apologizes, too. Still, Andy's stance hasn't shifted—he still thinks Jude should see someone. Jude knows this, but he doesn't promise to see anyone. From then on, Andy examines Jude's arms at every appointment to check for new cuts.

Then, two years later, one of Jude's leg **wounds** opens, and the injury (which is not self-inflicted) pushes his cutting to the back burner. The Philadelphia surgeon who'd first treated him warned Jude that his injury affected his whole body, and so he should expect injuries like this one to recur. This is the 11th time Jude has had this kind of injury. It's never clear what causes it, and the skin on his legs is so delicate that it could be something as inconsequential as a bug bite or brushing against the edge of a filing cabinet. It's like something out of a horror movie—a wound that won't close on its own.

Andy and Jude get into a fight now because so much of the comfort Jude found in their relationship rested on the reassurance that Andy wouldn't pry into Jude's past. And now that Andy has pried, Jude feels as though yet another person he thought he could trust has betrayed him. This incident likely contributed to Jude's lingering trust issues—not that it's unreasonable of Andy to express concern following Jude's "botched suicide attempt" the evening before the Lispenard Street party.



As a doctor, Andy has an obligation to ensure that he acts on any suspicion that Jude will harm himself. But Andy is talking to Jude as his friend now, not as his doctor, and he's warning Jude that it's Jude's secrecy and inability to trust others that will drive people away—not the underlying, unresolved issues that have caused Jude to act this way in the first place.



Jude is well aware of the fact that his situation eludes Andy's (and many people's, for the matter) assumption that people can and should eliminate all suffering. Also note that Jude explicitly states his belief that he deserved all the bad things that happened to him. If Jude was a victim of child abuse, this, of course, couldn't be further from the truth. But the reader should be mindful of interpreting Jude's memories of his past through his biased lens.



In addition to trust issues and cutting, Jude has also developed another negative coping mechanism (hitting himself) to deal with his unresolved trauma. It's become gradually clearer just how greatly Jude's past negatively affects his quality of life in the present and prevents him from healing.



In comparing Jude's leg wounds to something out of a horror movie, the narrative emphasizes how Jude's injuries—self-inflicted and otherwise—make him feel alienated and different from everyone else. He sees himself as a monster or a mutant, rather than a normal person who just unfairly happened to become the victim of unspeakable violence and (likely) abuse.



Jude starts seeing Andy every Friday night so that Andy can clean and remove dead tissue from the **wound**. It's incredibly painful, but Andy reminds him that it's a good thing if he can feel pain in his legs—it means the nerves are still alive.

Now (in the novel's present, when Jude is taking his Sunday walk), Jude recalls the “damp and gummy” sensation he felt on his leg earlier. He knew the **wound** (which has been splitting and only partially healing for the past 20 months) has split. Eventually, the pain becomes so unbearable that he has to sit on a park bench. He considers going to Andy's office but thinks Andy deserves a day off. As Jude sits and tries to wait out the episode, he thinks about “his body's treason,” how he must “keep maintaining it” when it does nothing but “betray[]” him over and over again. He should have died, but he didn't. It seems foolish to keep “trying to repair something unfixable,” especially if it's only for the sake of “[h]is mind.”

Finally, the pain improves enough for Jude to walk back to his **apartment**. He can wait until tomorrow to call Andy. Jude thinks about the New Year's Eve incident. He still doesn't know what made him get Willem and go to Andy to save him—letting the accident kill him would have been the easier option. And yet, that night, as it became clear that he had made the decision to live, he couldn't help but long to return to the year just after the injury, when everything had seemed so full of promise.

The narrative segues into Jude's memory of growing up in a monastery in South Dakota. Brother Peter teaches him math and always reminds him that he's lucky to be there; as an infant, Jude had been abandoned next to a trash bin behind a drugstore. Whenever Jude asks about how he came to live at the monastery, Brother Peter reminds him to focus on the future instead of dwelling on the past, which the monks “had created [...] for him.”

Note that this guide is comparatively sparing in its description of Jude's various injuries. The book, by contrast, doesn't hold back in its descriptions of Jude's injuries, scars, and the violence he inflicts upon himself. Readers may find it almost painful to read about all that Jude goes through. But the effect of this is that the reader can put themselves in Jude's shoes and better comprehend all the suffering that Jude endures throughout his life.



The novel jumps backward and forward in time, and yet the one element that remains constant across all these timelines is Jude's suffering. Whether he's an adolescent, a college student, or a successful lawyer, Jude's injuries and chronic pain affect his life in uncontrollable and intense ways. Perhaps some of Jude's trust issues stem from the reality that he can't even trust his own body not to “betray[]” him. This troubling scene also illuminates Jude's stance on the worthiness of his life. The novel has already established that Jude has extremely low self-esteem, but here, in suggesting that it's not worth it to continue “to repair something unfixable,” he seems to imply that he believes that his life is not worth living.



Jude recognizes that his decision to run to Willem for help instead of waiting to succumb to his injuries means something; at least on a subconscious level, Jude feels that life is worth living, and that there's still hope his circumstances may improve, however awful things are now. Jude's longing to return to the time just after his injury (so, when he was 16 and about to start college) suggests that, for at least the past decade, Jude's condition—physical and emotional—hasn't much improved.



In describing how the monks “had created [Jude's past] for [Jude,]” the narrative shows the degree to which Jude's history, identity, and self-worth have been shaped by others rather than by himself. This further expounds on the reality that all of Jude's self-hatred, shame and negative feelings about himself are the consequence of his unresolved childhood trauma.



Many of Jude's questions about his past go unanswered. The monks have conflicting "theories" about how Jude came to be there. Brother Peter claims that the monks took Jude in after the state couldn't get anyone else to take him, since too many things about him—his ethnic background and his health, for instance—were unknown. Brother Michael thinks nobody would take him because he was from a poor town. Father Gabriel suggests that it was God's will for Jude to end up there. When Jude would misbehave, practically all of the priests would offer "a fourth theory," which was that Jude is bad and always has been, and so he must have done something to make his parents abandon him. Over time, Jude learns not to ask questions about his past.

The monks also teach Jude to rid himself of his "possessiveness." They tell him that nobody at the monastery owns anything—though Jude knows that Brother Peter has a tortoiseshell comb. And Brother Luke, Jude's favorite monk, who is very quiet and doesn't yell at Jude, has his own bird.

Brother Luke runs the monastery's garden and **greenhouse**. From others' gossip, Jude learns that Brother Luke had been a rich man before he moved to the monastery, but he somehow lost all his money. Brother Luke also paid for the greenhouse. Not long after Brother Peter accuses Jude of stealing his comb (which Jude didn't do), Jude actually steals something: a package of crackers, which he takes from the kitchen when nobody is looking. After this, Jude starts stealing more and more. He takes things he wants, but he steals for the sake of stealing.

The monks all offer competing "theories" of how Jude came to live at the monastery, but what they all have in common is that it's his own fault: that it had to do with him being deficient in some way, whether it be his unknown ethnicity or health, or his being unwanted, or his being fundamentally bad. This shows the reader how Jude came to think so poorly of himself: he was taught from a young age to see himself as worthless and burdensome.



Not only does Jude learn from a young age that he is worthless, but he also learns that he isn't entitled to have things the way other people are. The novel also shows how, in time, this lesson teaches Jude not to feel entitled to less tangible things, too, like happiness or friendship.



Houses, apartments, and other dwellings symbolize Jude's desire for comfort and security. Throughout his life, Jude will come to see the places he lives as offering him the stability he can't get from the people in his life. So, knowing this, it seems likely that the greenhouse might become an important and comforting place for Jude. It should certainly raise a red flag that Brother Luke lost all his money in some mysterious way. Was he, perhaps, involved in some kind of illegal activity? Readers already know that Brother Luke, despite being young Jude's favorite monk, turns out to hurt Jude in some way, so suspicion is warranted. Finally, Jude's stealing shows how destructive trauma and abuse (and, at the very least, negligence) can be when a person doesn't have the means to work through these harmful issues. Jude steals, perhaps, because he lacks any other way to process his dire circumstances.



Jude is finally caught the day he takes Father Gabriel's silver lighter off his desk. Jude shoves the lighter down his pants and leaves the classroom. But he runs into Brother Pavel outside, and the lighter falls out of his pants and clatters against the floor. The monks have beaten and shouted at him before, but what happens next is far worse. Father Gabriel takes Jude into his office. Then he soaks the edge of a handkerchief in olive oil, rubs the cloth on the back of Jude's hand, and sets the hand on fire. Jude screams and passes out. When he wakes up, he's back in his bed. All his stolen things are missing. From then on, he's made to go to Father Gabriel's office every night and remove his clothes, so that Father Gabriel can "examine inside him for any contraband."

Not long after, Jude starts to have midday "examinations" with Brother Peter. Around this time, he starts to have tantrums where he bangs his hand against the corners of wooden dinner tables. His "rages" control him, and he starts to feel like he's living in a fog. The brothers respond by hitting Jude, sometimes so hard he loses consciousness. But he likes this "blackness," where he can't know what's being done to him. He starts wetting his bed, which leads to more "examinations." The more examinations he has, the more frequently he wets the bed. The brothers make him sleep in his soiled clothing and wear it to class the next day.

One day, Jude is in his room with Father Gabriel and Brother Peter. He's trying to be as quiet as possible, since he's learned that they stop sooner if he cooperates. He sees Brother Luke passing by outside the doorframe and feels ashamed, so he goes to Brother Luke's garden the next day and snaps off the heads of all Brother Luke's daffodils, placing them in a pile at the door of the garden shed.

Jude's inability to say exactly what Father Gabriel did to him—he says the monk "examine[d] inside him for any contraband," which suggests that the monk touched Jude inappropriately—shows how traumatic the experience was for Jude. Note too how Father Gabriel justifies abusing Jude by framing sexual abuse as a search for contraband—this justification may contribute to Jude's belief that he deserves the bad things that happen to him. This section of the book is Jude's memory of his childhood. So, the narrative comes from Jude's adult perspective. For Jude to remain unable to explicitly reflect on his sexual abuse so many years later shows that not only is Jude unable to discuss his past with others, but he's also unable to think about it himself. In addition, this scene seems to reveal, finally, how Jude got the starburst-shaped scar JB describes in the photo of Jude he wishes to paint: it's from Father Gabriel's punishment.



Jude earlier mentioned having acquired a "tic" of hitting himself years before, and now we see how this "tic" came to be. The self-harm itself seems to be a coping mechanism Jude develops in response to the priests' "examinations," or sexual abuse. Inflicting pain upon himself allows Jude to regain some of the agency that the priests' abuse has taken from him.



Already, it's clear that the monks' sexual abuse has had devastating consequences on Jude's sense of self-worth. He feels ashamed that Brother Luke has seen him enduring the sexual abuse, which implies that Jude feels he is responsible for the abuse, a sentiment he carries into adulthood. Destroying Brother Luke's daffodils further proves how ill-equipped Jude is to process his abuse on his own. He destroys the daffodils for the same reason he harms himself, perhaps: he has no control over the shame he feels about the monks' abuse, so he destroys the flowers in order to have an active hand in his feelings of shame.



At dinner that night, Jude is terrified and can't stop thinking about how he'll be punished for the daffodils. He scans the room for Brother Luke but can't find him. Distracted, he drops the pitcher of milk he's carrying. Brother Pavel throws Jude to the ground and sends him to his room.

Jude seems to want to be punished—or at least, to be able to identify a clear cause (cutting the daffodils) for his punishment. Again, acting out gives Jude some semblance of agency: he'll be beaten regardless, but when he misbehaves, he at least knows that he's brought it upon himself. There's a clearer cause-effect relationship, his misery seems more deserved, and his life seems fairer.



Jude runs to his room, which is really only a closet, and finds that the door is closed. Cautiously, Jude opens the door. Sitting in the corner is a bouquet of daffodils. Jude touches the flowers and feels immensely sad for what he did to Brother Luke. He wonders why he did it—after all, Brother Luke is the only brother who's nice to him.

Brother Luke's action totally upends Jude's expectations. He expected the monk to punish him, and yet Brother Luke has responded to Jude with kindness and compassion. But Jude's internalized shame and self-hatred are so great, even at this young age, that he responds to the merciful gesture not with gratitude, but with feelings of shame and unworthiness.



The next day, Jude goes to the **greenhouse** after he's finished with class—he's decided to apologize to Brother Luke. But when Jude sees Brother Luke, he doesn't know what to say and starts to cry. Brother Luke comforts him. Then he tells Jude he has something to show him. Brother Luke leads Jude toward the greenhouse. As an adult, Jude will identify this as the moment everything went wrong.

Jude so often deals with the hurt and abuse his young mind can't begin to process through misbehavior and self-harm. But with Brother Luke, now, he expresses his emotions in a genuine and unfiltered manner, crying all the sadness and suffering he typically keeps bottled up inside. Though this seems like a positive thing on the surface, adult Jude's ominous remark about everything going wrong from this point forward suggests otherwise.



Back in the present, Jude struggles to fit the key into the front door at **Lispenard Street**. He finally gets inside and sits down, and then he blacks out. When he wakes up, he will be alone (Willem will be out with a girlfriend), and the pus from his **wound** will have soaked through the bandage. He'll reach out to Andy, shower, and remove the bandage (and the dead flesh and clotted blood attached to it). He'll try not to shout from the pain. As he waits for the pain to pass, he'll remember how "trapped he is" in his body that doesn't work and that he "hates." Though he'll want to cry, he won't—and he hasn't. Not since what happened with Brother Luke.

Jude's inability to cry as an adult shows how whatever happened between him and Brother Luke had a lasting impact on his psychological health. As a child, Jude cried in front of someone he trusted—and this was met only with disappointment and, perhaps, betrayal. So, this helps explain how as an adult, Jude refrains from crying or showing too much vulnerability around others. Even in his apartment, which should be a safe refuge for him, he cannot bring himself to appear vulnerable.



PART 2: THE POSTMAN: CHAPTER 2

An unnamed narrator (Harold) speaks or writes to an unknown person, addressing them as “you.” Harold describes the moment this person asked when the narrator “knew that he was right for [the narrator’s audience.]” Harold made something up because it sounded poetic—like something a person might say in a movie—but it wasn’t true. “You” had asked the question in the hospital; you’d come in from Colombo, travelling across cities and countries to be there. Now, Harold wants to be truthful.

It’s hard to know where to begin. Harold says that he liked the person he is addressing from the start. Back then, Harold was 47, and the person he is addressing was 24. Harold recalls the summer “the group of you” visited his vacation home. Harold saw in the group what Jacob might have become, and this was hard for him.

But what stuck out to Harold most is a moment when he and Julia were walking together, and “you and he” were walking together. Harold describes watching “you” tenderly “retie[] one of his shoelaces that had come undone” before stepping back into rhythm with Harold and Julia. In this moment, “he” looked at Harold, an expression on his face that conveyed the luck and “impossibility of finding someone to do such a thing for another person, so unthinkingly, so gracefully!” It was then that Harold learned what it meant “that something could break your heart.”

Harold, speaking from the first-person perspective, addresses an unknown audience. It’s unclear when this address is happening, but Harold’s remark about wanting to be truthful now suggests, perhaps, that some significant event has happened to prompt him to speak more honestly. The detail about Harold’s audience having travelled from Colombo suggests that this person is successful—either they have a job for which they travel, or a job that allows them to afford to travel for leisure. And this person’s question of when Harold “knew that he was right for [Harold’s addressee]” suggests that Harold is talking to this person about their romance with another person.



Based on the age difference between Harold and his audience, and the detail about “the group of you” visiting Harold’s vacation home, it seems likely that Harold’s audience is Jude or one of Jude’s friends. In addition, Harold’s mention of Jacob in the past tense offers further evidence that Jacob is no longer living.



With this detail about Harold’s audience tenderly “ret[ying] one of his shoelaces that had come undone,” the audience is likely not Jude, since it’s most likely Jude whose shoelace the addressee tied. So, putting together the context clues Harold has offered thus far, Harold is perhaps talking about a romance between Jude and some other person. Willem is the person Jude trusts most, and they’ve long had a very close and even intimate connection, so it makes sense to assume that Harold is addressing Willem in this chapter. However, through what medium Harold is addressing Willem (a letter, perhaps?), whether the address is actually happening or is hypothetical, and at what point in time Harold is making this address remain unknown at this point. Finally, Harold’s remark about this moment of intimacy between (likely) Willem and Jude “break[ing his] heart” suggests that even life’s happiest, most tender moments contain a kernel of sadness, perhaps because those moments are so fleeting.



Harold never planned on becoming a parent. His mother died when he was young, and it was just Harold and Harold's father after that. Harold's father, a doctor, loved him very much and called him "darling." He married his office manager, Adele, when Harold was eight, and she became a mother to him. When Harold asked her if she wished she could have children of her own, she told him that he was her child, and so he never questioned her love.

Harold's first wife, Liesl, was a composed and practical woman. Harold recalls one of their first dates, when they were out walking and a stranger vomited all over her sweater. Liesl closed her eyes and shuddered, and then she was ready to move on. Harold and Liesl met in New York when Harold was a law student. They moved to Boston for Harold to start a clerkship and Liesl, who was training to be an oncologist, to start her internship. Harold and Liesl never really saw themselves having a child, but then one day, when they were both in their early 30s, Liesl announced that she was pregnant. They decided to go through with the pregnancy and eventually had a boy, Jacob. They loved Jacob dearly. But love for one's child is unlike any other kind of love: it's a love rooted in fear.

Having Jacob taught Harold that when your child dies, you feel all the things people say you'll experience in grief. It comes in waves, and things feel strange, and nothing makes sense. What nobody tells you is that you also feel relief. Because now the worst thing—the thing that has grounded the fear-love—has happened.

Harold shifts his focus to Jude. He always knew Jude would make a brilliant lawyer, but Jude hid his greatness behind humility. Jude could understand a case, but he couldn't separate the mechanics of it from the morality of it. And what's "right" and "wrong" often has little to do with the law. Harold describes a hypothetical case he proposes to new students. In it, the parents of student athletes who die when a van drives off the road successfully sue the van's owner—even though she wasn't the driver. Many students think this outcome is unfair. Jude, though, had little interest in fairness—fairness is for naïve, "happy people," whose lives have always been fair. Jude understood the difference between "right" and "fair," and this was where he ran into issues. He understood the law instinctively, yet he never failed to introduce a moral argument into it.

Just as Jude has started to think of Harold and Julia as family (recall his fantasy about the couple being his parents in an earlier chapter), Harold easily shifts to thinking of Adele as his mother. The novel has already stressed the importance of friendship, and here, it makes a case for the importance of having loving people in one's life, even if those people aren't family. Any connection can become meaningful and offer a person support and refuge from life's inherent cruelty.



When Harold describes his love for Jacob as being rooted in fear, he's alluding to the way a parent's love for their child is clouded by their fear that something—whether that something is an outside threat, a natural disaster, or an illness, perhaps—will harm their child, and they won't be able to protect them. The novel's view of life is that every aspect of the human experience is underpinned by the looming threat of suffering and misfortune, and this stance comes through in Harold's thoughts on parenthood.



Harold now explicitly confirms that Jacob has died, it's not yet clear how he died. Harold's remark about feeling a sort of relief in the aftermath of Jacob's death is curious. In a way, it complicates the typical understanding that bad things bring suffering and good things bring pleasure. In Harold's case, Jacob's death brings him relief, which many would consider a positive feeling. This is yet another way that the book complicates the relationship between the conventionally opposing forces of suffering and happiness, fortune and misfortune, and deserving and undeserving.



To call Jude's self-effacing personality humility is to put a decidedly positive spin on the unresolved trauma that has caused Jude to pathologically undermine his positive traits and downplay his accomplishments. And this should make the reader wonder: does Harold, at this point in time, know the extent of Jude's suffering? Or has Jude continued to keep all these things from Harold? Jude's fixation on morality could come, in part, from his desire to impose moral justice onto his legal cases in a way he wasn't able to do in his own life, which has been so filled with injustice and suffering.



Jude became a successful lawyer, but Harold has always felt bad about this. He wishes he could've convinced Jude to pursue something else—something that allowed him to take full advantage of his mind and to be creative and moral. Harold feels guilty—he didn't drive the van off the road, but he opened the door and let Jude inside, and then he drove Jude somewhere cold and awful and left him there.

Harold's hypothetical case involving the van raises the issue of whether suffering is ever fair or unfair, or right or wrong—that a person's actions bring about corresponding good or bad consequences. Harold feels guilty for not pushing Jude to pursue something creative, as though doing so would have made Jude's life better. But Harold's logic assumes that whatever misfortunes befell Jude were consequences that one can connect back to direct causes. In reality, life is not so logical, and suffering happens totally arbitrarily and independently of any person's efforts to control it. It's not clear when this section takes place, but the way Harold expresses regret over Jude suggests that he's speaking from some point in the future, after which something bad has happened to Jude—something for which Harold feels responsible.



PART 2: THE POSTMAN: CHAPTER 3

A few weeks before he's supposed to go to Boston for Thanksgiving, Jude receives a big wooden box in the mail at work. It's from JB—an apology. Jude calls Willem, who is on his way home from the theater. Willem guesses what's inside the box: the painting. He knows because he spoke to JB and told him to make amends.

It seems that JB has gone through with his unwise plan to paint the photograph of Jude without asking Jude's permission—and now he's trying to right his wrong by giving Jude the painting as a peace offering. JB's (likely) breach of Jude's trust shows how low he's willing to sink to achieve success.



The narrative flashes back to 18 months ago. A gallery on the Lower East Side offers to represent JB, and he has his first solo show, "The Boys," that spring. The show features two dozen paintings based on the photos he's taken of Malcolm, Jude, and Willem. JB had promised to run any photos of Jude by Jude first, but JB wasn't interested in the photos Jude approved. They'd fought, and JB angrily told Jude that he doesn't owe him anything—he could paint and display whatever he wanted. Jude could've retorted that JB did owe him—as a friend—but over time, Jude has realized that JB's ideas about friendship differ greatly from his own.

On the one hand, JB has dedicated an entire gallery show to his friends, which shows how much they mean to him. On the other hand, though, in painting them, he's using them and exploiting their likenesses to advance his career. So, to JB, his friends are simultaneously people he cherishes for their companionship—and people he values, selfishly, for what they can give him. This latter point is, perhaps, but what Jude is alluding to when he remarks that his views of friendship are different from JB's, since readers know that Jude (to a fault) expects nothing of his friends and loves them for themselves.

Ultimately, though, JB conceded to Jude, though in the months leading up to his show, he grumbled about the so-called "lost paintings" he could have painted had Jude been more reasonable. JB's show opens on a Thursday in April; he's just turned 30. Inside the gallery, Jude meets Black Henry Young and other people he knows from college and parties. He sees JB's family and Malcolm's family. Jude has always known that JB has talent, even if his personality sometimes leaves something to be desired. His paintings reveal what of him is hidden beneath his exterior "pettiness and ill-temper." Jude looks admiringly at a painting called *Willem and the Girl*. He sees JB elsewhere in the gallery and mouths, "Genius," at him, and JB smiles back, thanking him.

The betrayal Jude is likely about to stumble upon (in the form of a painting of him he didn't give JB his consent to paint) is made even more brutal by the kindness and support Jude shows for JB in this scene. Jude seems genuinely to appreciate JB's artistry, seeing JB's paintings as a portal into the goodness of JB's soul that is so often obscured by JB's outward "pettiness and ill-temper." This scene effectively introduces yet another instance in Jude's life where he trusts somebody and gives them the benefit of the doubt—only for them to immediately betray him. Jude, it's now clear, is a seriously troubled person, but there are valid reasons for him to be this way. It's a learned mode of being.



But no sooner has Jude complimented JB than he walks toward another edge of the gallery and sees two painting of himself—neither of which he gave JB permission to show. In fact, Jude doesn't even remember JB taking these photos of him. One shows him very young, holding a cigarette. In the other, he's sitting on the edge of the bed, his forehead leaning against the wall—it's the position he always assumes when he's coming out of an episode. Jude understands that the point of this photo is that he wasn't supposed to know it existed.

The photo of Jude holding the cigarette is the photo JB mentioned in the earlier chapter. The second photo, though, is an even bigger betrayal. Jude is incredibly private about his injuries and his pain, and now JB has put all that on display for the world to see. When JB hangs this painting depicting Jude in pain—pain that is, symbolically, a souvenir from a traumatic period in Jude's life—it's as though he's rubbing it in Jude's face that he'll always be this damaged, traumatized person, no matter how hard he tries to make a new life for himself and leave the past behind.



Jude survives JB's post-opening dinner. Willem is acting in a show, and Jude misses him. He feels lucky that JB has been preoccupied with others—that he hasn't had to speak with him. But when he returns to [Lispenard Street](#) later that evening, he finally expresses his fury and betrayal to Willem. Willem is immediately on Jude's side. This initiates a second fight between JB and Jude, which begins at a café near JB's apartment. JB refuses to apologize, instead raving about how amazing his paintings turned out, and that someday, Jude will get over his personal issues and learn to appreciate them. When Jude gets up to leave, JB makes no attempt to stop him. After this Jude stops speaking to JB. Willem, still enraged, insists that JB still owes Jude an apology.

In the previous chapter, which Harold narrates, he seems to suggest that Willem and Jude end up together romantically. This scene supports this theory, since it portrays yet another instance in which Willem acts as Jude's advocate and protector when nobody else will. This scene certainly doesn't paint JB in a positive light. He's completely ignorant to the severity of Jude's unresolved trauma, insinuating that it would be easier for Jude to get over everything that happened to him than it would be for JB to apologize to Jude for betraying Jude's trust. The novel portrays friendship as a way people can find comfort in the face of adversity and suffering, yet this scene with JB shows that friends (and relationships in general) can also be the source of additional adversity and pain.



JB's show is immensely successful and sells out. *Jude, After Sickness*—the painting Jude is most upset about, especially after he learns of the title—is sold to a collector who exclusively buys from artists' debut shows, and every artist he's bought from has gone on to have a successful career. *Jude with Cigarette*, “the show's centerpiece,” is sold to the Museum of Modern Art. Willem thinks JB should get the painting back from the gallery and give it to Jude. Malcolm claims this is impossible—it's MoMA, after all. Willem insists, though, that JB has to choose between the painting and Jude's friendship. Malcolm reluctantly passes the message along, and JB accuses Willem of betraying *him*.

JB must choose between professional achievement and friendship, and he's chosen professional achievement. In this way, the novel implies that success doesn't just not guarantee happiness and fulfillment, but it in fact can be an obstacle to achieving happiness and fulfillment. In the world of the novel, happiness and success are mutually exclusive. Also pretty egregious here is the way that JB has exploited Jude's disability and physical suffering for success.



That summer, Jude and Willem go to Truro without JB and Malcolm, and then to Croatia and Turkey. In the fall, Willem and JB meet for a second time. Willem has just gotten his first film role—he's playing a king in *The Girl with the Silver Hands* and will start shooting next year in Sofia. Meanwhile, Jude has had to use a [wheelchair](#) more often than not, and Willem is now dating a costume designer named Philippa. Harold tells Jude that he and Julia have something important to ask Jude at Thanksgiving.

This fight with JB marks a turning point in the four central characters' friendship. Remember that this is a flashback to events that begin 18 months before the novel's present, so readers know that JB makes an effort, finally, to apologize to Jude. But for now, it seems that their longtime friendship might really be in jeopardy, and it's also not clear if Jude (in the present day) will even accept JB's apology.



Back in the present, as Jude receives the painting in the mail, JB and Jude's fight seems to be over. Willem comes over to Jude's office, and they unwrap the painting and stare at it. Jude can't make himself relate to the scared, feeble creature the painting depicts—he wants to think he left this person behind. Willem suggests they give the painting to Harold, who would love it. Willem leaves. Jude leaves a voicemail for JB, thanking him.

In retrospect, this moment will look like “a sort of fulcrum,” in which Jude's friendships with JB and Willem both changed. In his 20s, he'd felt so fulfilled by his friendships. Now, he realizes that the friends he has slowly and difficultly learned to trust are capable of betraying him. But he also realizes that he has one friend who never would.

Every year, Harold plans out elaborate Thanksgiving meals—and every year, he fails miserably. One year, Harold proclaims that he's going to make *duck à l'orange*. But when Jude arrives that day, cake in hand, Julia ushers him inside and, in a whisper, urges him not to bring up the duck. This year, Harold's big new plan is to make a stuffed trout. Jude wonders why Harold tries so hard when he doesn't have great taste in food or drink. Willem suggests that the elaborate meals are really Harold showing Jude that “he cares about [him] enough to try to impress [him].” Jude thinks this is laughable.

There are eight dinner guests this year: Harold and Julia, Laurence and Gillian, some of Julia's friends, and Willem and Jude. As expected, Harold's trout falls through, and they're eating turkey once again. Jude feels comfortable, and he wonders when this happened. At dinner, Harold turns to Jude and Willem and asks, “when are you two ever going to settle down?” Willem guffaws; he's only 32. Jude tries to enjoy the evening, but inside, he anguishes over Julia and Harold's mysterious big news. He wonders if Harold is tired of him and wants him out of his life. Willem leaves early the next day—he has a show in New York—but makes Jude promise to tell him the minute he finds out.

Jude seems willing to take the high road and forgive JB for betraying him—because what else is he to do? Jude has lived a hard life full of trauma, abuse, and betrayal, and it seems to have desensitized him to hurt, to some degree. It also has taught him that friends can offer a person support against the world's cruelties, even if doing so requires a person to make compromises.



This passage reaffirms the novel's core thesis that suffering is a fundamental part of life and pervades all human experience. In retrospect, Jude sees this moment as reaffirming Willem's loyalty to him (Willem is the friend Jude has realized will never betray him) but this tender, positive realization comes with the corresponding realization that others (like JB) can and will betray him.



That Jude thinks it's ridiculous to think that Harold is trying to impress him with these elaborate Thanksgiving meals reaffirms his low self-esteem and his inability to grasp the depth of Harold's commitment to their friendship. Willem is likely a more objective judge of the situation, so it's fair to assume that his guess is close to the truth: that Harold wants to impress Jude and make the holiday a special time for him—even if he fails miserably at this task. Again, though, note that despite the building evidence that Jude has no shortage of kind, caring people in his life, he remains unhappy and unwell.



Jude feels comfortable at the dinner table tonight, which comes as a shock to himself—and should come as a shock to the reader, too. Maybe things are finally getting better for him. Maybe he's finally realized that people care about him and that he has a place where he belongs—where people accept him despite the emotional baggage he carries with him. Still, this feeling of comfort is undercut by Jude's looming anxieties about Julia and Harold's big news. To the reader, Jude's fears might seem totally off-base: Julia and Harold do nothing but support and care for Jude, and they've given no indication that they plan to stop. Yet Jude worries about this nonetheless, a side effect, no doubt, of the many times people have let him down in the past.



Jude spends the next day obsessively cleaning. Finally, he, Harold, and Julia sit down for an early dinner, and Harold suggests they have their talk. Harold nervously begins his speech. He's known Jude for over a decade now, he explains, and he and Julia think so much of Jude. They want to ask Jude if they can adopt him as their legal son. Jude is too stunned to respond. Harold can't read his expression, and he backtracks, insisting that Jude can say no if he wants. And he can have some time to think about it.

Finally, Jude regains composure and addresses Harold and Julia. He doesn't need time to think about it, he tells them—this is all he's wanted his entire life. Julia gets up to grab some celebratory champagne. Alone, Harold confirms that Jude is sure about his decision. "You realize you're going to be bound to us for life," Harold says to Jude, smiling as he rests his hand on Jude's shoulder.

Jude returns to his bed later that night. He lies down and feels the mattress beneath him, and he needs this familiar sensation to remind himself that this is all real. He thinks back to when he was little, when he'd asked Brother Peter if he'd ever be adopted, and Brother Peter had said, "no." Willem calls Jude after his performance and is over the moon when Jude tells him the news. But Jude only confesses that he's afraid he's going to mess everything up. Willem has to get back to his performance, but before hanging up, he assures Jude, "No one deserves it more."

This is a huge moment for Jude. Harold and Julia are offering him the chance to have the support and stability of a family—something that, as far as readers know, Jude has never had. And for Harold, this relationship offers something big too: it offers him the chance to raise a second son in the aftermath of Jacob's death. At this point, it's yet unknown how and when Jacob died, but the novel has implied that it was a traumatic and horrible experience for Harold. So, it says something about his comfort with vulnerability that he would invite a second son into his life and risk enduring future suffering and heartbreak (recall how Harold described the love for one's child as a love saturated with fear).



Harold has experienced trauma and suffering, yet he has managed to rebound and take on a positive outlook on life. "You realize you're going to be bound to us for life," he tells Jude, discounting how this same sentiment turned out not to be true for his first son, Jacob. Harold seems to have worked through his past trauma. He's healed from it to the point that he can invite love—and the unavoidable possibility of heartbreak—into his life once more.



Jude's life has been so predominately filled with pain and suffering that Harold and Julia's positive announcement seems surreal to him. And Jude can't feel Willem's enthusiasm and joy over the news, since past experiences, like this one he recalls involving Brother Peter, have taught him to believe that good things will never happen to him. Finally, Willem's promise that "No one deserves [to be adopted] more" broaches one of the novels' core ideas, which is this idea of whether people deserve the bad or good things that happen to them. Willem seems to believe that Jude deserves to have Harold and Julia as his parents because he's been orphaned all his life and is a good person worthy of love. But is this true? Was Jude any more or less deserving of the misfortunes that have befallen him his entire life? Or is it really the case that everything in life—whether good or bad—is only arbitrary?



When Jude returns to the apartment the next day, there's a note from Willem telling him to wait up. A while later, Willem arrives, ice cream and carrot cake in hand, and they eat it together. Over the next few weeks, Jude works through the formal adoption process and tells all his closest friends. But then December passes, and it's January. Willem goes to Bulgaria to film, and all of Jude's anxieties and fears return. He and Harold have a court date in February to sign the necessary legal documents. Too afraid that he's going to mess everything up, Jude begins to avoid Harold and Julia. When they come to New York to see a play in January, he pretends that he's out of town. They call him, but he doesn't open up to them. He's afraid of saying something that will make Harold change his mind about the adoption.

Jude had been nearly adopted once before in Montana, when he was 13. The narrative flashes back to Jude's childhood in Montana. He and the other children are herded into a room at an adoption event to meet prospective parents. The older children know nobody will want them, so they sneak outside to smoke. The babies and toddlers need only be themselves. The kids in the in-between age plaster smiles on their faces, still hopeful that someone will want them. Jude has no strategy, though. He doesn't try to impress any prospective adopters because he's learned not to expect anything good to happen to him.

So, Jude is totally surprised when a couple—the Learys—express interest in him. He's told he will “spend a probationary weekend” with the Learys the weekend before Thanksgiving. That weekend, a counselor named Boyd drives Jude to the Leary house. Boyd warns him not to mess up since it's Jude's last chance. Then, Jude goes to meet the Learys. The Learys have two grown daughters and want someone to help around the house. They picked Jude, they explain, because he seemed calm and well-mannered. The adoption agency also told them that he was a hard worker.

Jude's unresolved trauma only exacerbates his existing suffering. He's so afraid of losing the people he has in his life that he distances himself from them. In a way, this (negative and self-destructive) coping mechanism operates much in the same way as Jude's self-harm. He removes Harold and Julia from his life to reclaim agency over his life. He feels more in control and more stable if he decides to distance himself from them. The suffering this distance creates is hurtful, but it's far less hurtful than the pain Jude would feel if Harold and Julia were to reject him and call off the adoption.



It seems that this childhood memory will contextualize some of the fears Jude is having about is adoption in the novel's present. Note that, even at age 13, Jude has learned to expect the worst. He's not even the oldest child at the adoption event (and therefore not the least desirable adoptee for prospective adoptive parents), yet he has already decided there's no point to impressing anyone or getting his hopes up.



Even in the rare moments when people show young Jude acceptance, they do not show him love or compassion. Here, for instance, the Learys cite all the practical reasons they've selected Jude: he's calm, well-mannered, and supposedly, a hard worker. With this, the Learys suggest that Jude must earn his keep. Their “devotion” to him, if one can call it this, is conditional: they want him if he can prove his usefulness to them, otherwise, they have little interest in him. Gradually, the novel reveals the many experiences that have given Jude intimacy issues and taught him to undervalue himself.



Mrs. Leary comments on Jude's "unusual name" and asks if he'd be okay with them calling him something else, like Cody. Jude doesn't care. That night, when Jude is alone, he repeats his new name in his head: Cody Leary. He dares to imagine a new life where he could leave all the shame and awfulness of the monastery behind him. The weekend passes. Jude tries to please the Learys, waking early to make them breakfast, and cleaning and fixing things around the house. The weekend passes by without incident, and before Boyd takes him away, Mrs. Leary insinuates that they're going to go through with the adoption.

But weeks pass, and the Learys don't call the boys' home. Finally, Jude asks Boyd what happened. Boyd tells him that the Learys changed their mind, and Jude should accept that he's never going to be adopted. Anyway, he'll be out of the home in three years, which isn't a long time. Jude begs Boyd to tell him "what [he] did wrong" and give him a chance to do it better, but Boyd tells him that's not how things work.

Back in the present, Jude anguishes over the upcoming adoption. Things are even harder without Willem here to calm him. He obsessively cleans the apartment to avoid **cutting** himself. Jude knows his cutting has gotten out of control. He imagines cutting himself down until only a skeleton remains. When he can't clean anymore, he spends late nights in the office. He loses his appetite. He's seeing Andy once every six weeks again, and he's put off his next appointment twice because afraid of what Andy will say about all his new cuts.

When Jude finally sees Andy, Andy asks what Jude wants to address first: his extreme weight loss, or the cuts. After a pause, Jude admits that he's afraid Harold will change his mind about the adoption. He thinks "the diseases [he] ha[s] from" the "things [he's] done" will disgust Harold. Andy tells Jude he was just a kid when those things happened—they aren't his fault. And even if he'd done these things as a consenting adult, STDs aren't shameful.

This scene, with its mention of the monastery, reminds readers that the novel still hasn't revealed information about a critical part of Jude's childhood: how he came to leave the monastery. At 13, he is living in a boys' home, but it's not clear how and when he got there. Perhaps this is because the circumstances of Jude's departure are too painful for him to dwell on, even in passing memory. Also note another habit from the past that Jude has carried into the present: his willingness to adopt a new identity (i.e., becoming "Cody" Leary) if it means he can leave his past behind him. What little attachment Jude has to his name symbolically suggests that Jude's many childhood traumas have potentially caused his identity to splinter.



The Learys reject Jude, despite only giving indications that they were ready to adopt him. Boyd, cruelly, explains that their rejection is Jude's fault. Both of these details help to contextualize and explain Jude's present apprehension over Harold and Julia's offer to adopt him. Though they do nothing but reassure him that they love him and want him to be part of their family, Jude's experience with the Learys taught him that what people say often differs from what they do.



Jude's seemingly counterintuitive reaction to Harold and Julia's good news underscores the novel's insistence that suffering is inevitable. Jude's life has been so rife with pain, suffering, and disappointment, that he's unable to enjoy the rare moment when something good does come his way. Instead, he anguishes over the real possibility that it'll be taken away from him. Also note how Jude's descent into acute despair corresponds with Willem's absence. Willem's friendship is one of Jude's few sources of support and stability, and without it, he becomes unhinged and adrift.



Jude's allusion to the shameful "things [he's] done" offers more insight into his past. It's unclear if Jude's referring to sexual abuse he experienced at the monastery or something else. Either way, Andy's (correct) response that Jude was a child when these things were done to him and, therefore, that Jude is blameless, falls on deaf ears. Jude's broader position that STDs—regardless of how a person got them—are shameful suggests that Jude's history of abuse extends to his views on sex in general. The novel has already noted that none of Jude's friends have ever known him to have a romantic partner, and maybe this is because his past inhibits him from engaging in sexual intimacy.



Jude goes home and eats a banana, though it tastes horrible. Then he continues to clean obsessively, and then he **cuts** himself. The phone rings, and Jude is in so much pain from the cuts that he must crawl across the floor to retrieve it. It's Andy. He tells Jude that he's going to have him committed if Jude continues to hurt himself—and he's going to tell Harold, too. The calmness of Andy's tone triggers something in Jude, and Jude feels like he's finally capable of taking Andy's advice. He forces himself to eat, even though he doesn't want to. He takes Andy's midnight calls and takes Willem's early morning calls.

Jude sees Andy on Friday. Andy isn't happy that Jude hasn't gained any weight back, but he isn't too hard on him either. Then on Friday, Jude flies to Boston. He doesn't tell anyone he's going. He has a set of keys to Harold and Julia's that Julia gave him years ago, and he lets himself in. Harold is shocked to see him and comments on Jude's sickly appearance. Then he mentions how distant and strange Jude has been behaving lately. Jude lies about having the flu.

Later, Jude tells Harold that he's afraid Harold thinks he's a better person than he really is—he's done bad things that anyone would be ashamed of. But he doesn't elaborate. Harold promises Jude that nothing he's done could be bad enough for Harold to stop caring about him. In a way, Harold's trust in him is harder to live with than if Harold would have just called off the adoption. Jude tells Harold he has to lie down. Harold understands.

Jude goes to his room, collapses on his bed, and falls asleep. He sleeps for hours. Nothing can wake him. He dreams of a man in a field in Montana. He can't see the man's features, but he looks familiar. "Cody," Jude calls out to the man. The man turns, but he's too far away for Jude to see if the man has his face.

February 15 falls on a Friday. They make plans to have a celebratory lunch after the adoption. Harold wants to hire a caterer, but Jude says he'll cook, and he spends all of Thursday baking and cooking—crab cakes, sourdough bread, tarte tatin, all things he knows Harold and Julia like. The last few days have been really hard for him. He even accepted Andy's offer to meet up at a diner in the middle of the night. Jude has grown to enjoy his late-night phone calls with Andy, and he's even invited Andy to the adoption. Andy opens up Jude about his life. Jude likes hearing more about Andy—it makes him feel that Andy is his friend, not his doctor. And Andy has confirmed that this is true.

Jude's psychological issues are severe, but he has a strong network of professional and personal resources at his disposal to ensure that he takes care of himself and remains stable. Between Andy's midnight calls and Willem's early morning calls, Jude has people checking in on him around the clock. With this support, it seems hopeful that, against all odds, Jude might slowly start to heal from his unresolved trauma.



Jude's impulsive trip to Boston suggests some progress. He's been avoiding Harold and Julia since they first broached the subject of his adoption, but now he seems ready to bridge the distance he's put between himself and his prospective parents. Maybe the support he's gotten from Andy and Willem really has given Jude the strength to confront some of his inner demons—maybe he is beginning to heal.



Jude, for some reason, believes that he's tricked Harold into believing he's a good person when he's really a despicable person. Given what little readers know about Jude's final days in the monastery and all that happened afterward, it's possible that Jude did do something bad. But given all that readers do know about Jude's internalized sense of shame and self-hatred, it's more likely that Jude is accepting blame for traumas for which he's actually blameless.



Jude's dream is a question to himself. When he wonders if "Cody" has his face, he's wondering if he's managed to change from the person he used to be—the person the Learys rejected—or if he's that same supposedly unwanted and unlovable boy.



Andy clearly is Jude's friend, but Jude's internalized shame and self-hatred prevents him from recognizing that his and Andy's relationship goes beyond the realm of professional. Jude's offer to cook for the celebratory lunch is kind, and it's clear that he genuinely wants to show his appreciation to his soon-to-be adoptive parents. But at the same time, his extreme efforts to impress them mirror the way he tried to prove his worth to the Learys so many years before. So, it's clear that Jude is still worried that Harold and Julia will change their minds about the adoption.



All of Jude's friends will attend his adoption, minus Willem, who's in the middle of filming. When Jude arrives at Harold and Julia's **house**, they've cleaned the house until it's spotless—just for Jude. They don't realize that his constant cleaning is a coping mechanism and has nothing to do with actual cleanliness.

While Julia is upstairs getting ready for the court appearance, Harold gives Jude a present: it's his watch. Harold explains that his father gave it to him when he turned 30, and so now Harold is giving it to Jude—to his son. He's even had it engraved with Jude's initials, just beside Harold's and Harold's father's initials. Jude doesn't think he can accept such a generous gift, but Harold insists, and eventually Jude just thanks him. Then, Malcolm and JB arrive, interrupting the moment. Andy arrives next, followed by Gillian. Then the doorbell rings. Jude wonders who it could be. Then he opens the door and sees Willem standing there. He stares a moment, but before he can say anything, Willem lunges at Jude and hugs him. Jude is so happy he can't speak.

Everyone heads to the appeals court, and inside Laurence's courtroom, they make the adoption official. JB takes their picture and they return to Harold's house to celebrate. Friends and strangers reach out to hug and congratulate Jude, and he lets them. By early evening, everyone has left. It's just Jude, Harold, Julie, and Jude's friends. JB gifts Harold and Julia a painting of Jude. Everyone says it's beautiful, but Jude has a hard time separating the beautiful painting from his actual face, which he hates. Then Willem presents his gift: it's a wooden statue of a bearded man in blue hooded robes—Saint Jude, Willem explains. He got it in an antiques store in Bucharest.

That Harold and Julia mistake Jude's cleaning for something he likes to do (rather than something he needs to do to quell his anxieties) just reaffirms Jude's fear that his soon-to-be parents have no idea who he really is. So, once more, Jude's self-hatred inhibits him from being happy about a kind gesture. Instead, Harold and Julia's kindness becomes yet another source of anxiety, anguish, and self-doubt.



A watch is a traditional gift for a father to give his son. This richly symbolic gesture is made more meaningful by Harold's decision to engrave the watch with Jude's initials. Not only does Harold's gesture symbolize his dedication to Jude (and his seriousness about becoming Jude's father), but it also shows that he sees adopting Jude as a second chance at all the things he lost out on when Jacob died. The adoption also gives Jude a chance at reinvention through his connection to his new family. Meanwhile, Jude's palpable joy upon seeing Willem reaffirms their special friendship. The earlier chapter, which Harold narrates, hints that Jude and Willem's friendship will eventually blossom into a romance, and this scene adds fuel to this speculation.



When Jude lets his happy, celebrating friends hug him, it's a sign that, perhaps, things are looking up for Jude: that he has it in himself to accept people's kindnesses and heal from his past traumas. At the same time, Jude's inability to appreciate his own face in the beautiful painting JB presents to Harold shows that Jude's self-hatred runs deep and isn't something that can be fixed overnight, or through symbolic gestures like this adoption ceremony.



Harold admires the statue. He asks about the wreath of fire on Jude's head. Willem explains that it's to show that Jude—an apostle—was at Pentecost and received Christ. Julia interjects, adding that Saint Jude is "[t]he patron saint of lost causes." She thanks Willem for the gift. Jude brought a gift, a CD of himself singing classical music, but he thinks it's silly and inadequate next to the other gifts. Harold is always asking Jude to sing, but Jude is always too shy and self-conscious. He's still feeling self-conscious now, so instead of handing the CD to Harold, he secretly places it between books on Harold's bookcase, where it might not be noticed for years.

Then, it's time for bed. Willem and Jude share a room so they can catch up. When they turn off the lights to sleep, Willem mentions that their apartment is very, very clean—were things really so bad? Jude apologizes but admits that the past several weeks were hard for him. And he missed Willem horribly. Willem admits that he missed Jude, too.

The Saturday that Jude returns to New York from Boston, he goes to Felix's house for their usual tutoring sessions. Mr. Baker tells Jude that Felix will be going away for school next year, and Jude mentions this to Felix during their lesson. Felix seems indifferent about it. Then, feeling suddenly empathetic, Jude turns to Felix and tells him that he never had friends, either—but he does now. And it'll happen for Felix someday, too. The secret to friends, Jude tells Felix, is to find people who are better than him—and then to be grateful for all he learns from them. Because friends can teach you about yourself, and this is the hardest—but most rewarding—lesson a person can learn. Felix smiles. Then they begin their tutoring session.

PART 3: VANITIES: CHAPTER 1

In their second year of college, Jude, Willem, JB, and Malcolm's suitemates were three lesbians who were in a band together called Backfat. Now, 15 years after graduation, two of them, Marta and Francesca, are a couple and living together in Brooklyn. One day, JB tells everyone some exciting news: Edie, the third lesbian, a Korean American woman with a predilection for eccentric jobs, is in town, and she's transitioning. Malcolm scoffs; Edie has never shown any signs of gender dysmorphia before (a coworker of his transitioned last year, so he now considers himself an expert). JB ignores Malcolm and says that the so-called "Bitches of Bushwick" are throwing a party to celebrate. Nobody besides JB is all that enthusiastic.

Julia's remark about Saint Jude—Jude's namesake—being "[t]he patron saint of lost causes" casts an ominous tone on this otherwise joyful scene, foreshadowing, perhaps, Jude's ultimate inability to heal from his past traumas. This has been one of the novel's central questions: is Jude capable of healing and redemption, or is he beyond help—a lost cause? Can a person become so lost that they are beyond rescuing? Jude's CD leaves this an open question. On the one hand, he clearly wants to heal and grow more comfortable with Harold—if he didn't, he wouldn't have done this vulnerable thing of recording himself singing for Harold to hear. On the other hand, his decision to hide the CD shows that he still has many fears and psychological defense mechanisms that prevent him from acting on this desire to connect and recover.



Willem, unlike Harold and Julia, knows Jude well enough to recognize the clean apartment as a calling card of Jude's pathological cleaning and an indicator of Jude's emotional unrest. This scene is further evidence of Jude and Willem's special bond.



Jude's advice about friends and the way they can help a person learn more about themselves is well-intentioned but a little concerning. It reveals how Jude's friendships—the only things that keep him afloat and grounded—are inseparable from his internalized self-hatred. In so many words, he's saying that his friends keep him in check, reminding him through their goodness and generosity how undeserving Jude is. Again, Jude's friends offer him support and stability, but Jude's remarks in this passage show that this support isn't quite powerful enough to change Jude's negative perception of himself.



Jude, Willem, and Malcolm don't share JB's enthusiasm for Marta, Francesca, and Edie's party. This suggests that they've moved on with their lives and have little desire to revisit their college days, whereas JB remains nostalgic about the past. This highlights how even as JB moves up in his career, he remains unsatisfied, and he longs to return to a time in the past when he felt happy. For JB, at least, success doesn't guarantee happiness—and it might even diminish happiness.



But JB eventually wears them down, and so the next weekend, they meet at Jude's **loft** on Greene Street and then make their way to the party. They struggle to find parking, and JB whines for Jude to just use his handicapped sign so they can park wherever they want. Jude refuses, though—he hates using the sign. They eventually find a spot and head to the apartment. Inside, Jude has a horrible time. He dreaded going, not wanting to have to explain to so many people why he's using a **wheelchair**.

Meanwhile, Willem is suddenly overcome with the sudden need to leave this place. Most of the time, he enjoys seeing old college friends. But recently, his life seems so detached from his college days. He teases JB about not having graduated, but he secretly envies JB's ability to stay connected with people from the past. And all of JB's friends are artists and dancers and academics—their vision of success is so different from Willem's, which is defined by box office ratings and ticket sales. These people care about doing work they're "proud of." This isn't important to Willem—he just cares that he's done a good, honest job.

Sometimes these parties are "restorative." But other times, Willem feels "resent[ful]" of the way people here see him as the person he was in college rather than the person he's worked to become. He also sometimes feels like these old friends resent him for his success. On top of this, it's becoming more difficult for Willem to hide his success as he becomes more well-known as an actor, and he thinks that some of his old friends and acquaintances resent him for his success. He remembers a dismissive interaction he had with an old college friend named Arthur at a party in Red Hook last year. Later, Willem complained about Arthur to Jude, and Jude understood. Still, Willem himself can sometimes feel dismissive of his career. It can seem so pointless.

But Jude and Willem both know why they keep attending these parties they supposedly hate: to pretend that things haven't changed. It's also a way to pretend that their relationship with JB hasn't changed—which it certainly has. JB can be just as secretive as Jude at times. But they know he's lonely and unwilling to open up one-on-one, which is why he makes these parties happen. They go along with him to be nice—to let him recreate the college experience, with its clear, constructed, easy-to-understand hierarchies that helped JB to flourish.

The novel is largely devoid of cultural and historical reference points that would otherwise place the novel at a specific point in time. As a result, the reader must rely on other details to mark the passage of time. Here, the fact that Jude has moved into a loft on Greene Street, and the revelation that he now must (at least sometimes) use a wheelchair are two details the novel uses to show that time has passed. Just as success doesn't make JB happier, Jude's financial success (as indicated by his apparent ability to move into his own place) doesn't correspond to physical healing. In fact, Jude's physical strength has only diminished as his professional life flourishes.



An outsider might think that Willem's success as an actor has fulfilled him, yet he envies JB who, by all accounts, seems to be living in the past. Again, the novel shows how professional success and other conventional markers of progress do not necessarily make a person feel any happier or more fulfilled.



Willem's thriving career has actually caused his personal life to suffer in certain ways. Even though he's successful, he still struggles with many of the problems that plague a lot of people, like finding meaning in one's life and work. And Willem's success even alienates him from people he once would have had no trouble connecting with. Again, the novel highlights Jude and Willem's close relationship when Jude is the only one who understands Willem's feelings.



Though Jude outwardly accepted JB's apology for hanging the painting of Jude without Jude's permission, this scene makes it clear that this betrayal has seriously compromised their friendship. Willem and Jude's efforts to still reach out to JB show how much they value friendship, though—they think that friendships are (to a certain extent, at least) worth fighting and suffering for, even in the face of betrayal.



Back in the present, at Marta and Francesca's party, Willem sees that Jude has just escaped Marta and another woman who were interrogating him. He's now talking to their friend Carolina, and Willem makes his way toward them. But Francesca intercepts him and makes him talk to Rachel, a woman he worked with on a production some years back. Rachel is interesting and pretty, but Willem isn't all that interested. And midway through their conversation, he gets a text from Jude saying that he left and will see Willem at home. Willem swears and hastily excuses himself. He returns to his apartment on the corner of Perry and West Fourth. It's a nice enough place, but Willem only feels indifferent toward it.

When Willem started looking for places, it was imperative that his new building had an elevator so that Jude could visit him. Philippa, his girlfriend at the time, had suggested that was rather "codependent" of Willem. But Willem wouldn't budge. He knew that Philippa, a costume designer, didn't dislike Jude. At first, she admired how close Willem was with his old friends. But as time went by, she wanted to be the most important person in his life. Willem thought he'd done more than enough—he spent holidays with Philippa and her parents instead of with Harold, Julia, and Jude. But it wasn't enough for Philippa, so they broke up. When Mr. Irvine found out, he mentioned that it was about time the boys all branched out and started living their own lives instead of being beholden to each other.

But couplehood gives Willem pause. He recalls expressing his hesitations to Harold at Truro last summer. Harold had laughed. He, like Malcolm's dad, saw the merits of settling down with a romantic partner, but he thinks it's more important to simply be a good person and enjoy life. More recently, Willem has wondered if codependence is so bad. He loves his friends, and it's not hurting anybody else how close they are—so who cares?

Five years ago, when Willem was filming in Sofia, Andy called him and yelled at him for not being there for Jude. He told Willem about Jude's **cutting**. If Willem were a good friend, Andy snapped, he'd know that the upcoming adoption would put Jude on edge. Willem was angry and defensive—but only because he knew Andy was right. Still, he snapped that Andy was just really upset with himself for being Jude's doctor—but being unable to help him. Both men apologized to each other, and then they worked out a loose plan to better monitor Jude's mental health.

Though Willem and Jude are now able to afford to rent separate apartments, neither seems all that enthusiastic about living apart—Jude texts Willem that he'll see him at home, referring to his place as though it's Willem's, too. And Willem isn't too invested in his own apartment. Though their old Lispenard Street apartment was an awful ramshackle place, the life they built together there made it special. Again, the novel builds on how close Willem and Jude are, and how their relationship has persisted over the years.



The circumstances that led to Willem and Philippa's breakup effectively point to the notion that Willem values friendship (and specifically, his friendship with Jude) over romance. More specifically, Willem seems to realize how important it is to have and maintain close relationships, whether those relationships are romances or friendships. At the same time, that Willem prioritizes Jude over Philippa could also foreshadow a possible romance between Willem and Jude.



Mr. Irvine and Harold—and mainstream American society, more broadly—place a special emphasis on romantic relationships, but Willem rejects this idea. The bonds he's built up with his three closest friends (and with Jude, in particular) are the most important relationships he has, so why should he all of a sudden prioritize a new girlfriend he hardly knows over them?



Andy and Willem both have their own reasons for feeling obligated to help or "fix" Jude. Andy, as a doctor, has a professional obligation to heal Jude. Meanwhile, Willem might feel an extra pressure to help Jude in the way he wasn't able to help Hemming, in addition to the pressure he seems to feel to help simply because he's Jude's friend.



The monitoring worked for a while, but eventually Willem felt wrong for treating Jude as subject to be studied rather than a true friend, and so he gradually let his guard down. One day, Willem and Jude were talking on the phone while Willem was away for a shoot. In the background, Willem heard an intercom paging a doctor and knew that Jude was in the hospital. Jude brushed off Willem's concerns, claiming that it's nothing and that Andy was overreacting. Willem pressed Jude, though, and Jude reluctantly admitted that he had a blood infection. These exchanges still happen from time to time, and they're always hard on Willem. It's so hard to help someone who doesn't want to be helped.

Since buying his **apartment** last year, Willem has spent only six weeks in it—he mostly lives with Jude in Jude's Greene Street apartment. Willem claims this is because his apartment is unfurnished and because he made a promise to Andy to look after Jude, but in reality, he needs Jude. He loves telling Jude ridiculous stories about life in show business, with the many superficial people. The stories amuse Jude and lighten his days. Willem considers how much of acting is about appearances—how much time the “vanities” spend touching up Willem's hair and makeup. But all the while, all he's really thinking about are his friends. And mostly Jude.

Willem once asked Jude if he was happy, and Jude had replied that he wasn't sure he was meant to be happy. Happiness, Jude countered, was “for you, Willem.” Willem thinks about Jude's remark as the vanities get him made up for a shoot. He thinks about it until he hears the scene marker clap shut, and then he opens his eyes.

PART 3: VANITIES: CHAPTER 2

Jude wakes up on Saturday morning. He's about to turn 36, and it's a rare morning where he feels okay. These moments are rare and fleeting. But as his condition has gotten worse over time, he's learned to stop hoping that he'll heal. And he's also learned to be thankful for these small moments of respite.

Willem can't figure out which responsibility he should honor. On the one hand, he feels he has a moral obligation to help Jude stay well. But as Jude's friend, isn't it just as—if not more—important for Willem to honor Jude's wishes to be left alone? This is a conflict that many of Jude's friends and loved ones struggle with. Nobody wants Jude to suffer, but when their efforts to help Jude cause him shame and humiliation, it seems that their efforts to alleviate his suffering do just the opposite.



Society often views buying one's first home as a marker of success and prosperity. But Willem realizes that it's not the apartment that's important—it's the people who are (and aren't) in it that render it meaningful. Willem's dedication to his friendships is quickly becoming the most defining part of his personality. He's a famous actor who has a team of artists (“vanities”) at his disposal to maintain his image, and yet he can't bring himself to vainly focus on himself. Instead, all he thinks about are his friendships—and Jude. With this last detail, the novel continues to tease Willem and Jude's eventual romance.



Much earlier in the novel, Willem lamented the “culture of self-fulfillment,” which pressures people to have lofty dreams and considers it a personal failing if a person falls short of attaining them. This passage brings up a similar cultural attitude toward happiness, which holds that anybody can be happy—and if a person isn't happy, it's because they haven't tried hard enough. Jude has no such illusions, though. He just doesn't think happiness is something that's universally attainable. He believes some people, like Willem, can have it. But others, like Jude, are too broken to experience happiness.



Jude is less disillusioned than his friends are about his condition. They all believe he can get better with time if he tries hard enough. But Jude has accepted that there are limits to his body and mind's capacity to heal. And he's made peace with this, if only fleetingly.



Later, Jude meets up with Malcolm. They're going to Jude's suitmaker to have Malcolm fit for a suit for his and Sophie's wedding, though nobody is certain the wedding will happen—Malcolm and Sophie have a rocky relationship. Jude apologizes for putting off Malcolm's renovations for so long (Malcolm is supposed to renovate Jude's **apartment**)—he hasn't had the money until now because he's been paying off the apartment.

Jude considers his **apartment**. It's still crazy to him that he has money, much less a space of his own. But he does: he's a litigator at Rosen Pritchard and Klein, one of the city's most important firms. He was contacted directly by Lucien Voigt, chair of the litigation department, who had been impressed with Jude's work in securities fraud at the U.S. Attorney's Office. When Lucien offered Jude a job, Jude accepted it right away. Money is important to him. He's come to terms with the fact that he's disabled, and he needs to know that he can afford to pay someone to provide dignified care for him later in life.

Jude remembers the event that made him accept Lucien's offer: One Friday night, Jude returns to **Lispenard Street** feeling very weak and in pain, only to find that the elevator is broken. None of his friends are around to help him—Willem is currently performing in a play, *Cloud 9*. But Jude is so determined to get into his apartment that he collapses his **wheelchair** and starts to climb the stairs on foot. The pain worsens. Finally, he can't take it anymore and leaves Willem a message asking him for help. Jude makes it upstairs, though he can't remember getting there. When he wakes up the next morning, Willem is asleep on the floor beside Jude's bed and Andy is in a chair. Jude feels groggy and realizes Andy must have given him an injection; he falls back asleep.

The next time Jude wakes, Willem is gone but Andy is still there. Andy demands that Jude find a new apartment. And so, the next week, Jude accepts Lucien Voigt's job offer. When he calls to tell Harold, Harold is critical of the decision. Jude was doing good, meaningful work at the U.S. Attorney's office, and now he'll be defending white-collar criminals. Jude is silent. He knows Harold is right, and he hates that he's disappointed him. Harold tells Jude he could've been a judge someday—but now he's giving this away.

If Malcolm and Sophie have a rocky relationship already, it seems doubtful that marriage will fix that. Mr. Irvine has pressured Malcolm and his friends to settle down, and the novel has also made clear that Malcolm is obsessed with impressing his father. So, it's plausible that Malcolm is marrying Sophie not because he genuinely wants to, but because he thinks doing so will (at long last) earn him his father's approval.



In this passage, the narrative shows how Jude's injuries—the physical manifestation of his childhood trauma—affect every aspect of his life. He takes a job with Rosen Pritchard and Klein not for the prestige of holding such a position, but to ensure that he can afford care later in life as his condition worsens with age.



Traumatic experiences continue to shape Jude's life, like this time Jude's pain becomes so intense that he passes out and requires an injection. For all of Jude's efforts to conceal his disability, it ends up coming to the surface anyway, and he has to turn to his friends for help.



Note that it's not this health scare itself that convinces Jude to acknowledge his condition and get a new apartment—it's Andy's order to do so. So, though the novel offers occasional evidence that Jude is growing as a character, healing, and gradually coming to accept that he's going to live the rest of his life with chronic pain, Jude really makes little progress in any of these endeavors.



If money is the issue, Harold says, he'll give Jude money—enough to let him keep his current job. Jude is on the verge of tears as he explains that the kind of money he needs is more than Harold can give him. Harold doesn't understand what Jude could need money for besides an **apartment**. Jude doesn't say so aloud, but Harold's naivete about the world can be really frustrating sometimes. His optimism doesn't let him even consider that Jude may need money someday for hospital stays, a possible leg amputation, prostheses, and surgery.

Ultimately, Harold is right—Jude does miss the U.S. Attorney's Office. He misses being surrounded by people who care about the cases they're working. Rosen Pritchard encourages its lawyers to take on pro bono work, so Jude starts working for a nonprofit group that offers legal counsel to artists. Even if the artists aren't any good, Jude admires them for "making beautiful things" and for investing so much of themselves in their hopes and dreams. Jude's friend Richard is on the board of the organization, and they sometimes talk in between Jude's meetings with clients.

One day, Richard invites Jude back to his **apartment** for a drink. Richard lives in a narrow building with no lobby—but it does have an industrial elevator, which is bigger than the living room at Lispenard Street. They ride the elevator to the third floor and step inside Richard's apartment. Jude is in awe of the bright, open space. There are no dividing walls, and Richard's bedroom is encased inside a transparent cube of glass. It's the biggest apartment Jude has seen. Richard gives Jude a tour of the building, including his studio on the second floor.

Richard and Jude have beers in Richard's studio and chat. Richard asks if Jude has seen the paintings JB plans to show at his next show in six months. Jude hasn't, but he knows that he's in a lot of them. He changes the subject, admiring Richard's apartment. Richard admits that he in fact owns the place—his grandparents invested in several buildings many years ago and gifted them to their grandchildren. He's nearly finished clearing one of the other apartments and offers to sell one to Jude.

Jude's friends offer him comfort and support, but this scene with Harold reminds the reader of Jude's friends' limited capacity to understand exactly how his condition affects his life. Harold sees the world through the lens of his able-bodied self. He can't see how Jude's traumatic injury and resultant lifelong medical complications bleed into every facet of his life. Harold thinks (genuinely and with good intentions) that loaning Jude money will solve the worst of Jude's problems, but this is simply not the case.



Jude's admiration for the artists' ability to "mak[e] beautiful things" reflects, perhaps, a central regret of his own life. Most of his friends are artistically inclined, and Jude perhaps wishes he could express himself through art and creativity like they do. And yet his disability (in Jude's eyes) ends up ruling his life. Every decision he makes, every career he pursues, must adhere to the limitations his disability imposes on him.



Richard's wide, open apartment is a revelation to Jude: with the building's industrial elevator and lack of narrow passageways, it's (by coincidence) a space that's both accessible (Jude, by this point, must use a wheelchair from time to time) and beautiful. Jude sees a space his disability won't exclude him from inhabiting.



Jude's impulse to change the subject once Richard starts to talk about JB's new series of paintings suggests that Jude is still uncomfortable with JB featuring him in his work. Yet the fact that the show is happening at all also suggests that Jude has decided to accept JB's work despite this discomfort. Jude's willingness to forgive JB's betrayal shows how far he'll go to preserve their friendship.



“Why me?” asks Jude. Richard shrugs off Jude’s deference. He hesitates before mentioning, too, that Willem told him about the incident about the elevator breaking recently—Jude wouldn’t have to worry about things like that here. Jude immediately feels betrayed and exposed that Willem talked to Richard about the elevator. He tries to hide things from his friends because he wants them to see him as an equal.

Jude thinks back to a time when Willem was still with Philippa. They were joking about how when she and Willem were old someday, they’d move into her parents’ house in Vermont, and all their kids would move in with them. Willem **cut** in to say that Jude would be living with them, too. “Oh, will I?” Jude responded jokingly, though inside, he was happy that Willem included him in his fantasies about old age. Willem smiled at Jude, but Philippa was no longer smiling. Afterward, she stopped being friendly with him. Jude understood why she’d feel this way—Willem invited Jude everywhere they went to the point that he was a third wheel. When Willem and Philippa later broke up, Jude blamed himself.

The week after Richard asks Jude to buy the **apartment**, Richard’s father draws up a contract for Jude to sign. When Jude tells Harold about the apartment, he doesn’t tell him that he bought the place, since he doesn’t want Harold to offer to help him pay for it.

Three years later, Jude has finished paying off the **apartment**. One day, he has an appointment with Andy. Andy enters the examination room, a “grim and yet oddly triumphant” look on his face, and hands Jude an academic study about an experimental keloid-removal surgery Jude had been wanting to get. It’s really just quackery, and many of the patients have emerged from the surgery with further disfigurement. They’re also more likely to suffer from infections. Andy knows that Jude has been considering this surgery (and he has—it’s what he’s saving for now) because the doctor sent Andy a request for Jude’s files. Andy promises that Jude can attempt a treatment that’s proven to be safe, whenever that happens.

Jude’s irritation comes from him mistaking his friends’ concern for pity, and also from his failure to accept the reality of his disability. He seems to think that his friends’ mere acknowledgment of his disability means that they’re looking down on him. But the reality is that (at least outwardly) nobody has expressed that they pity or think less of Jude for his limited mobility or chronic pain—they merely acknowledge that Jude’s disability exists and want to make sure he’s taking care of himself appropriately. Jude, on the other hand, is too ashamed of his disability to even acknowledge it to himself.



This memory contextualizes Jude’s continued inability to accept his disability. Though Jude initially is happy when Willem includes him in his fantasies about old age, this happiness fades once Jude sees Philippa’s adverse reaction to Willem’s suggestion. In Jude’s mind, Philippa’s adverse reaction—and the breakup that later follows—is confirmation that most people see him (and the accommodations his disability necessitates) as a burden. Perhaps Jude fears that Willem, too, will start to see him as a burden—that the costs of being friends with him outweigh the benefits.



Jude doesn’t want Harold’s financial help because he doesn’t want Harold to see him as a burden, either. Even though Harold is now Jude’s legal adoptive father, Jude still seems convinced that Harold might reject and abandon him at the drop of a hat. Once more, Jude’s lingering trust issues demonstrate the long-term consequences of his childhood trauma.



Andy’s bad news about the experimental surgery symbolically reaffirms one of Jude’s greatest fears: that his injuries (and, by extension, his psychological wounds) will remain with him forever, no matter how successful he becomes or how hard he tries to reinvent himself as a new, recovered person. His physical scars (a keloid is a type of scar) will be with him for the foreseeable future, until medicine advances a bit further.



Jude tries not to be too disappointed by what Andy told him. Now that he knows he can't get the surgery, he can pay Malcolm to get started on the renovations. And he's excited about that. Malcolm has developed into a skilled and confident architect ever since he quit Ratstar and founded a firm with some of his old architecture school friends. Still, Jude's been arguing with Malcolm over his latest blueprints. He bristled when he saw that Malcolm had included grab bars in the bathroom. Malcolm explained that he's following ADA guidelines, but Jude snapped that he didn't want to live in "some cripple's **apartment**."

Now, Malcolm shows Jude his latest plans. This time, there are no grab bars, but there's a seat in the shower—"just in case." He makes Jude promise to think about it. Jude doesn't know it now, but many years down the line, he'll be grateful to Malcolm for putting all this thought into his future.

After their suit fitting, Malcolm and Jude have lunch. They're both excited for Malcolm to begin work on the apartment. They finish lunch early and go for a walk. Finally, Jude turns to Malcolm and asks what everyone's been thinking: is the wedding going to happen? Malcolm says he doesn't know. He lists all the pros and cons. Then he asks Jude what he thinks. Jude inwardly considers how it could be good to be more like Malcolm—to ask his friends for help, to "be vulnerable around them." He thinks about asking Willem to help massage the prescription scar cream Andy prescribed for him at his appointment earlier. But then he realizes he can never do this—he can never show Willem who he really is.

PART 3: VANITIES: CHAPTER 3

It's the Fourth of July weekend. All of JB's friends are out of town for work or pleasure, and he's stuck in New York trying to quit drugs. JB doesn't consider himself an addict. Other people he knows are addicts—Jackson, Zane, and Hera, for instance—but he hasn't yet "slipped over the edge."

Jude's condition dampens even the excitement of buying and renovating his first home. For Jude, the apartment becomes not a symbol of his successes and accomplishments, but instead, a reminder of the endless ways his chronic pain and disability rule his life. And he reacts so adversely to Malcolm's recommendation that he adhere to ADA guidelines because 1) it suggests that Malcolm can't separate Jude from his disability, and 2) these accommodations are a symbolic and visual reminder that, no matter how far Jude goes in life professionally or economically, he cannot escape his past, and he will always be "some cripple[]." He might be successful enough to afford an apartment, but his disability limits the type of apartment he can live in.



Malcolm isn't incorporating these accommodations into his blueprints because he thinks less of Jude—he's doing it because he's a thoughtful friend who cares about Jude. But Jude, at least for now, is too consumed by self-hatred and shame about his disability to realize this. As well, he also seems unable to accept, on some level, that his condition will only worsen with time.



As Malcolm frets over his upcoming wedding, Jude recognizes one way that he's different from his friends that he can control: his unwillingness to "be vulnerable around them." Yet, though Jude seems to recognize that Malcolm's vulnerability is a positive thing, he can't bring himself to apply the same logic to himself. Also note how Jude is especially worried to let Willem see his scars, believing that doing so will cause Willem to look down on Jude. This further cements Jude's scars (and injuries, in general), as a symbol of his internalized shame. Jude believes that his scars are visual evidence of the way his past has left him damaged and deformed—and letting someone see this damage and deformity up close is a degree of vulnerability Jude simply isn't yet ready to experience.



That JB is the only of his four old friends to remain in town reflects the tense state of their relationship. It seems that Jude and Willem have patched things up with JB since the painting debacle on the surface, but the fight seems also to have left behind some lasting damage. JB's drug addiction (and his fraying relationship with his old college friends) is further proof that his successful art career hasn't guaranteed him happiness or personal fulfillment. As JB becomes more successful, his personal life becomes more damaged.



JB is in his studio today. It's miserable—the building's air-conditioning unit is broken. JB picked this building, a five-story structure with 14 assigned studio rooms, because he thought it might feel like a college dorm, but it doesn't. Today, JB is alone on his floor. He uses this time to clean out his space, which is exceptionally boring work—especially when he's sober. He considers how he hasn't experienced any of the good side effects of meth use, such as losing weight, having lots of sex, and intensive cleaning. Meth allows him to work for long stretches, but he's always been that way. And he's still fat.

JB cleans for an hour until the heat becomes unbearable. He craves a smoke or drink but has neither. Then he asks himself how he's feeling—something a "shrink" he's started seeing recently, Giles, has told him to do. It wasn't JB's idea to start seeing Giles—his family, concerned about his drug use, made him. He didn't appreciate their intervention.

The problem is that Giles is inept. JB shows up and answers Giles's dumb questions ("Why do you think you're so attracted to drugs, JB? What do you feel they give you?") because JB's mom is paying for the sessions. He makes up answers he thinks Giles will like. For example, he mentions his dead father a lot. Still, JB does think about Giles's questions outside of the sessions. He's asked himself the same questions and concluded that he didn't plan to like drugs—it just happened. He's known people who started using because they thought it would make them more interesting, but that's not what happened with him.

Drugs became important to JB after his first show, when he was 32. It was the first time his art had generated any attention from critics. The show also destroyed his relationship with Jude and Willem; Willem sided with Jude on the painting of Jude JB didn't have permission to paint, and things haven't been the same since then.

JB's self-deprecating and lightly comedic remark about how his meth use hasn't even brought about any of meth's positive side effects (meth, of course, is a notoriously harmful drug) also shows that his professional success has done little to fix the self-esteem issues he dealt with even before he was successful. Fame and money might make some aspects of life easier (JB can now afford his own studio room, whereas before he had to share a space with others), but it doesn't alleviate things like self-doubt and inner suffering. Also, JB's desire to work in a space that's like college shows that he's still living in the past, suggesting that his present doesn't totally fulfill him.



Just as friendship has the power to alleviate some inner suffering, communication in general can lighten a person's mental/emotional load, as well. JB officially claims not to appreciate his family's intervention, yet the fact that he now, unprompted, asks himself some of the questions Giles has asked him shows that the therapy is at least having a noticeable effect on him and encouraging him to become more introspective.



JB puts on a show of pretending that Giles's questions are stupid and unhelpful, yet the fact that he continues to think about these questions outside of his therapy suggestions suggests that the opposite is true: that these questions are forcing him to do the inner work required to work through his struggles with addiction. In a way, JB's resistance to therapy is similar to Jude's resistance to the ADA accommodations Malcolm includes in the Greene Street renovations. Like Jude, JB doesn't want to admit that he has a problem—that he is vulnerable and struggling. He wants to be in control of his health and his image, and his drug addiction denies him that privilege.



JB's success (though really, it's JB's own selfishness) destroys his most meaningful friendships. So again, the novel suggests that a person must choose between success and happiness—they can't have both.



After that first show, JB's friends distanced themselves from him even more. He's always known he would be the first of his friends to be successful, and he always told himself that he wouldn't let his success go to his head—that he'd remember them even when he became famous. JB never considered it might be his friends who abandoned him. Last spring, Jude represented JB in a stupid legal battle with a collector who went back on their promise to buy one of his paintings. When JB mentioned that his lawyer was Jude St. Francis, the collector recognized Jude's name and spoke of Jude's intimidating reputation.

Willem's success has also shocked JB—he'd always assumed Willem would fail because he's not competitive enough. The fact is, JB's friends no longer need him to make their lives exciting and interesting. And now, too, JB realizes that "success ma[kes] people boring." All that successful people do is try to maintain their success. This is why Jude and Willem confuse JB: they're successful, yet they're still so impressed by life. JB thinks this likely stems from their miserable childhoods. After the four friends graduated college, Malcolm's family bought them all tickets to Paris, where the Irvines owned an apartment. JB had been to Paris on numerous occasions, but he hadn't truly seen the city's beauty until he watched Jude and Willem take in all its glory. JB realizes that this must be why drugs appeal to him: they make daily life seem less mundane.

JB is jealous his own childhood hadn't been more interesting—he could use it in his art. He wishes he could be mysterious and tragic like Jude. He also doesn't understand how Jude can be so self-conscious. It's a real drag, and it inhibits JB's ability to make art. JB thinks that all Jude wants to do is "play house" with Julia and Harold. Once, Jude turned down JB's invitation to hang out on one of his collector's luxury yachts—all because Jude couldn't miss Thanksgiving with Harold and Julia.

JB's inflated self-confidence makes him very different from Jude. While Jude constantly fears his friends will abandon him, the possibility has never occurred to JB, and he doesn't know how to handle their abandonment once his friends do distance themselves. With this, JB's current struggles—his feelings of alienation, his drug addiction—are caused, in part, by JB's failure to consider all the suffering and misery that can befall a person throughout their life, and all the ways people can let a person down. JB has lived a relatively happy, privileged life up to this point, and it's spoiled him and shielded him from the brutal realities of life.



JB's privileged, happy life and supportive family have shielded him from many of life's miseries. But not experiencing pain and suffering have made JB's life boring and left him feeling unfulfilled. In this way, just as success doesn't make a person happy, privilege doesn't necessarily make a person feel that their life is worth living, either. Just as the book challenges the notion that people deserve the good or bad things that happen to them—that there is some moral, organizing principle that governs human existence—the book also challenges the notion that a good life is a happy life, and a bad life is an unhappy life. JB's life has been objectively good—he has a supportive family, he has a successful career, and he has supportive friends, even if they're currently going through a rough patch. Yet these good things don't make JB happier than, say, Willem, who has endured unbearable loss and is the sole surviving member of his family.



JB continues to assess his relationships and the world around him primarily in terms of how they can advance his career. His ambition rules his life. This is why JB can't understand why Jude would rather "play house" with Julia and Harold than party on a yacht. JB thinks that being the kind of person who has professional connections to important, influential people is more important than developing and preserving actual relationships, and this is why he can't understand why Jude would rather see Harold and Julia, now his adoptive parents and the only family Jude has ever known.

JB wonders what came first: realizing his friends were boring, or becoming friends with Jackson. He met Jackson after his second show, which happened five years after his first. The show was successful, and Jackson was another artist at the gallery that put on JB's show. He's not the kind of person JB would normally hang around with—his sculptures are obvious and "stupid," and he's rich and entitled. He's also not very good-looking. None of JB's friends can stand Jackson, and they've tried to convince JB to stop hanging out with him.

It's true that Jackson is an "asshole." And JB becomes one when he's around him, too. Once, a few months back, when JB was in the process of quitting drugs and felt like dying, he called Jude. He told him where his drug stash was and begged Jude to get rid of it for him. Jude promised to do so once he was out of a meeting, and he ordered JB to leave the house with his sketchbook and get something to eat in the meantime. JB followed Jude's orders. But while he was sitting in a café, he saw Jackson pass by on the street. Jackson saw JB and smiled his sinister smile at him, as if to show JB that there was no escaping him.

When JB returned to his apartment after Jude called to say he'd gotten rid of the drugs, he arrived with Jackson. Jude pleaded with JB to come with him, knowing that JB would use drugs if he stayed behind with Jackson, but JB refused. Once Jude left JB's, Jackson and JB snorted cocaine. Then Jackson got up and performed a cruel imitation of Jude's limp, and JB was too high to tell him to knock it off.

The night after JB made Jude get rid of his stash, he made Jude come over to his place. Jude did. JB assumed Jude would lecture him, but Jude said nothing. When he begged Jude not to leave, Jude stayed there all night. The next morning, JB saw Jude asleep on the couch and made a mental promise to him that he would quit using drugs.

As JB considers whether his shifting attitude toward his friends or his new friendship with Jackson came first, he's implicitly deciding whether one caused the other—whether boredom prompted JB to pursue other friendships, or whether Jackson persuaded JB to abandon his supposedly boring friends. With this, the novel shows that JB is on the cusp of introspection and accepting the reality that his poor behavior may have driven a wedge between JB and his friends. On the other hand, his continued friendship with Jackson shows that JB continues to place higher value on his career and image (Jackson is a successful, if not very good, artist) than on his relationships.



This scene makes it clear that Jude, not Jackson, is the friend JB ought to prioritize. Jude goes out of his way to help JB, even after JB has given Jude every reason to end their friendship. The empathy Jude gives JB in this scene mirrors the empathy Jude gave JB way back when they were in college and JB was in the hospital for his sprained wrist. All the same, JB continues to take Jude's friendship for granted, gravitating toward Jackson even though JB seems to be well aware that Jackson doesn't have JB's best interests in mind.



When JB refuses to leave with Jude, he symbolically shows Jude that he has chosen a path of self-destruction and superficiality over healing and genuine connection. JB's failure to defend Jude against Jackson's cruel imitation of Jude's limp further solidifies this decision. And this scene shows what a bad decision this is: before, Jackson seemed vapid and uncaring—a bad friend who doesn't care about JB all that much, but not necessarily a horrible person. Now, with his hurtful imitation of Jude's limp and the way he mocked Jude for caring about JB's sobriety, Jackson shows his true colors: he's an overtly cruel person who goes out of his way to inflict pain and suffering onto others.



JB again turns to Jude when he needs help, and Jude is there for him—even when JB has given Jude every reason not to honor their friendship. And JB seems to realize this: it's why he makes a solemn promise (if only in his head) to quit using drugs. And, as far as the reader knows, JB has kept this promise. The question thus remains: will he continue to do so? Will he continue to focus on his recovery? Or as in Jude's case, is full recovery impossible?



Standing in his sweltering studio now, JB knows he can't keep his promise. He's craving his pipe too badly to paint. He goes home and smokes meth. When he wakes, he hears a horrible screeching noise. It takes him a while to realize that it's the buzzer. It's Malcolm, Jude, and Willem. Malcolm orders JB to let them in. JB does. He's confused, though—aren't they still supposed to be out of town? When Willem tells JB that it's July 7th, JB breaks down and cries. Jude tells JB they're going to get him help. JB becomes agitated and accuses everyone of judging and making fun of him. He snaps that Jude knows everyone else's secrets but doesn't share any of his own. Then JB imitates Jude's limp, just like Jackson had months ago. Willem lunges at JB. JB hears bones cracking, and then he passes out.

When JB wakes up, he's in restraints and at the hospital. He remembers what happened and squeezes his eyes shut. When he opens them, he notices that Jude is curled up asleep in a chair next to his hospital bed. In his head, JB tells Jude not to sleep like that—it'll hurt him. In his head, he begs for Jude's forgiveness—but he doesn't say it aloud.

It's only a few months before JB breaks his promise to Jude, suggesting that recovery, healing, and inner growth—when they are attainable at all—are complicated and not always linear. This scene also further shows how differently Jude and JB handle their suffering. Both characters struggle to accept their personal weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and both try to hide these parts of themselves from the world. But while Jude directs his hatred and cruelty inward, JB directs his outward, toward Jude. JB's imitation of Jude's limp is, arguably, his most unforgivable offense yet. That Willem, who is normally so passive and thoughtful, strikes JB in response is evidence of this.



JB is a complex character. He clearly registers that his actions are wrong and hurtful. And realizing this clearly brings him lots of inner suffering, guilt, and shame. And yet, JB can't bring himself to vocalize his shame and remorse. To a degree, JB's cruelty parallels Jude's self-harm, in that both characters resort to self-destructive behavior to regain control over their lives. Just as Jude cuts himself to feel that he has a hand in his body's destruction, JB alienates his friends to regain control over the alienation he feels as his friends drift apart from him. It's as though it's easier for JB to accept that he did something to drive everyone away, rather than the reality that his friends chose to abandon him of their own volition. Still, while Jude's self-destructive behavior hurts mainly himself, JB's self-destructive behavior inflicts significant pain onto others.



PART 4: THE AXIOM OF EQUALITY: CHAPTER 1

Dr. Li calls Jude right before he's supposed to go to a friend's wedding in Boston to tell him that Dr. Kashen has died. The next morning, Jude goes to the funeral, and then to the reception at Dr. Kashen's house. Jude pays his respects to Dr. Kashen's sister and to Leo, Dr. Kashen's son, and then he drives to Harold and Julia's house.

Jude's math professors aren't central characters in the novel, but Dr. Kashen's death adds to the backdrop of pain and suffering that sets the tone of Jude's life and the novel as a whole. In the novel, it's impossible to evade all pain, suffering, and strife, and Dr. Kashen's death is a reminder of this.



Harold greets Jude warmly and offers his condolences. When Julia returns from a meeting, Jude, Harold, and Julia have dinner together. Julia asks Jude if he has any plans for his 40th birthday, which is just three months away. Jude explains that he hasn't made any plans and has forbidden Willem from making any for him. Jude shrugs off the milestone, though inwardly, he remembers being a child and doubting he'd live until he was 40.

Jude changes the subject then and describes a eulogy that Dr. Li gave at Dr. Kashen's funeral. It was about "the axiom of zero," a mathematical concept that gets at the unprovability of nothingness. Dr. Li chose to believe that Dr. Kashen hasn't died, but rather "has proven the concept of zero."

Jude sleeps in on Saturday, and then he goes to the wedding. The grooms both lived in Hood, so Jude knows most of the guests. Willem and his girlfriend Robin are there, as well as Malcolm and Sophie, and JB and his new boyfriend. Jude knows they'll all be placed at the same table. He and Willem have decided to pretend that everything is normal between JB and themselves. But inside, Jude can't look at JB without remembering how he made fun of his limp.

Jude decided to be with JB through his recovery. JB begged Jude to forgive him. Jude saw that JB was sincere, yet he couldn't bring himself to forgive him. One February night, about seven months after they dropped JB off at the hospital, JB called Jude and asked to meet up and talk. They met at a café and talked about JB's life—he'd recently joined Crystal Meth Anonymous, and after losing the lease on his apartment, he moved back in with his mother. JB pleaded for Jude's forgiveness. Jude told JB that he'd always want the best for JB, but he just can't.

Once more, the novel contains very few cultural or historical references, so scenes like this, where characters' ages are referenced, helps gauge how much time has passed. In total, it's been around a decade and a half since Willem and Jude first moved into their Lispenard Street apartment. Jude's childhood premonition that he wouldn't live until he was 40 is concerning and makes the reader consider why young Jude thought this: did he plan to end his life before then? Was he in poor health then, too? It's hard to say, since so much of Jude's past remains unknown at this point. Regardless, it points to just how deep-seated Jude's self-doubt and dismal hopes for his recovery are. He's doubted his ability to thrive practically for as long as he can remember.

Dr. Li's eulogy uses the axiom of zero and the idea of nothingness as a source of comfort. If true nothingness exists, then so too exists the relief of suffering, and the absence of pain. The novel, thus far, rejects both these claims, suggesting instead that there is no end to the suffering and pain life forces the living to endure.



Interestingly, the central characters cycle through various romantic relationships, yet their partners remain largely nondescript and superficial. With this, the novel stresses the importance and depth of the characters' relationships with one another, in particular as it compares to the relative superficiality that dominates their romantic affairs. This upends Western society's tendency to value romantic relationships over friendships. Also note that JB's latest affront seems to have had a more lasting effect on his relationship with Jude and Willem—they'll be civil around JB, but it seems a distinct possibility that they might never recover the friendship they once had.



It says a lot that Jude seems to have reached his breaking point with JB's abuse and cruelty. He's forgiven JB many times before, for many serious acts of betrayal. But mocking Jude's limp was something Jude couldn't forgive. Jude's inability to forgive JB underscores how sensitive Jude is about his disability. He tries to hide it from his friends, not wanting to draw attention to all the ways his past has made him different (and, in Jude's mind, lesser). And in mocking the limp, JB showed Jude that Jude's efforts at concealment have been in vain: even something as simple as the way Jude walks betrays all the ways he's different and (in Jude's mind) damaged.



Jude still sees JB from time to time, mostly in group settings, like parties. They only make small talk, though, and the impersonal nature of their new relationship hurts. Willem, though, hasn't spoken to JB since the incident. He even called JB and formally announced that they would no longer be friends. This makes Jude sad, since he liked seeing Willem and JB's happy friendship.

It's curious that Willem seems to take JB's latest cruelty harder than Jude. Perhaps this can be attributed to Willem's loyalties to Jude and his late brother, Hemming, who also struggled with severe mobility issues. JB's stunt made a mockery not only of Jude's condition, but also human suffering in general, reducing the pain that Jude (and Hemming) lives with every day to a spectacle and a joke. So, not only does Willem's lasting feud with JB signal his loyalty to Jude, but it also shows how seriously Willem empathizes with people who are in pain.



The wedding reception ends, and Willem and his girlfriend return to their hotel. Willem promises to call Jude tomorrow night. Jude returns to Harold and Julia's house in Cambridge. Then he goes to the bathroom, removes a bag he's stashed away beneath a loose tile, and he **cuts** himself. Inside, he's ashamed he can't be "a better person" and forgive JB. Jude finishes cutting himself and realizes he's gone too far—he feels faint. Then he examines himself in front of the full-length mirror and realizes that the reason he can't forgive JB is because JB was right. Then he mimics his own limp, just like JB had done.

It's in keeping with Jude's self-effacing, self-hating personality that he finds a way to redirect anger at JB back toward himself. But JB's cruel stunt plays on all Jude's worst insecurities: that he is deformed and worthy of ridicule. And when JB mocked Jude's limp, it showed Jude that no matter how much inner work he does, or how successful he becomes, or how many years past, the physical markings of his childhood trauma will always be there. Symbolically, this suggests that Jude will carry his trauma with him forever—that he will never fully recover from it.



In May, Jude and Willem have what they've begun to call "the Last Supper," a farewell meal before Willem leaves to shoot a new film. They go to an expensive sushi restaurant and laugh over the outrageously high bill. It's nice outside, so after dinner, Jude asks Willem if he'd like to go for a walk. Willem lies that he's too tired—it's a new strategy he's devised to encourage Jude not to push himself too hard without having to say outright that Jude physically can't do something. Jude appreciates Willem's strategy. Willem caves and agrees to walk with Jude, if they don't go too far. Tonight is the last time they'll see each other for six months, as Willem is traveling to Cyprus to film [The Iliad](#) and [The Odyssey](#). Willem is playing Odysseus in both, and it's his biggest role yet.

With starring roles in two major films, it's clear that Willem has steadily made his way through the ranks to become a successful and sought-after actor. The "Last Supper" tradition also shows that Willem and Jude have remained close over the years despite their respective busy working lives. Another important detail in this passage is Willem's strategy to keep Jude in check—without explicitly saying so. It speaks to how well Willem knows Jude that he's devised this strategy, which spares Jude the humiliation of Willem pitying him. Willem respects Jude's boundaries, acknowledging that Jude has reasons for being touchy about his disability that Willem doesn't know about.



After Jude and Willem walk a ways, Willem pauses and tells Jude that Clara, Robin's friend, is apparently interested in Jude romantically. Jude thinks it's a joke. But Willem, serious, says it's not; why shouldn't someone be attracted to Jude? Jude still doesn't believe him, though.

Jude's amused response to Clara's apparent attraction to him reveals his extremely low self-esteem: it's literally laughable to him to think that any person in their right mind would find him attractive, because he finds himself utterly repulsive. Of course, readers know that this is objectively untrue—JB finds Jude beautiful enough to feature in many of his paintings. So, this raises the question of how Jude came to think so little of himself physically. It could have something to do with his probable childhood abuse.



Jude and Willem walk some more, and then Willem asks Jude if he ever wants to be with someone romantically—is he lonely? Jude initially refuses to answer, then, avoiding Willem’s gaze, says that he doesn’t think that he’s made for romantic relationships. Willem asks Jude what he means—is it because of his “health problems?” Jude pleads with Willem to just drop it, and for a while, Willem does. But then he confesses that when he first started dating Robin, she’d asked him if Jude was gay or straight—and Willem hadn’t known how to respond, because he genuinely had no idea. Willem pauses, then he admits that he’s afraid that Jude has convinced himself that he’s ugly or unworthy of love, but neither of those is true.

Jude announces that he’s tired and wants to call a cab. Willem pleads with Jude to talk to him, but Jude says it’s too hard. Frustrated, Willem retorts that Jude says this about everything. Willem always thinks that one day, he and Jude will “really talk”—but it still hasn’t happened. Jude feels awful for ruining what began as a fun, happy night. Jude hails a cab, and Willem opens the door for him. But before Jude climbs inside, Willem embraces him intimately, burying his face in Jude’s neck and telling Jude that he’ll miss him when he’s gone. Jude promises to take care of himself while Willem is away. Then he tells Willem that he’ll see him in November.

Jude gets home and thinks about Willem’s question—is he lonely? He is, though he’s only discovered this recently. And this loneliness is different from the loneliness he felt lying beside Brother Luke in the motel rooms, or the loneliness he felt the time he ran away from the home. He doesn’t have anything to fear anymore, and he has money. Jude was telling the truth when he told Willem that romantic relationships weren’t for him—he’s never wanted one. Once, Harold asked Jude if Jude wanted what Willem had with Robin. Jude insisted that he was fine. People are always asking him if he wants something he’s never thought to want in the first place. Yet, being single at 40 is a different thing than being single at 30. It seems “more pathetic, more inappropriate.”

These days, though, Jude doesn’t want a relationship because he wants to seem normal—he wants one because he’s so horribly lonely. But relationships are tricky. A relationship would mean Jude would have to face the reality of his body and have sex with someone, which he hasn’t done since he was 15. Jude longs to be touched, but the thought of another person touching and seeing his body also terrifies him.

Willem is so in-touch with Jude’s boundaries—he knows what subjects are off limits for Jude, and he knows enough not to broach them—and yet there’s so much Jude hides from Willem. Jude’s admission that he wasn’t made for romantic relationships is curious. Presumably, something happened to Jude that has given him poor self-esteem and made it difficult to open up to others, and this is to blame for his failure to connect with anyone romantically. And yet, Jude frames his love trouble as a personal failing—as something he was born with, a symptom of a debased soul.



Jude wants to leave because Willem has crossed a boundary by urging Jude to talk about his intimacy issues and low self-esteem. Earlier, the novel showed that JB and Jude both engage in self-destructive behavior, but Jude’s behavior (unlike JB’s) rarely inflicts pain on others. In this scene, though, the novel shows that this isn’t quite true: Jude’s secrecy hurts Willem. Jude’s secrecy suggests to Willem that Jude doesn’t trust him, and this is likely painful for Willem, since he sees it as a personal failure that he can’t break through Jude’s protective shield.



Jude seems to believe that his status as a single 40-year-old is as shameful and humiliating as his disability. He believes these things give the impression that there’s something wrong with him. Also note two cryptic details about Jude’s past that Jude lets slip here: he recalls lying beside Brother Luke in a motel room and running away from home. The Brother Luke remark is troubling and suggests that Brother Luke, who Jude once considered his savior, ends up abusing Jude just like the other monks.



Jude’s desire for a romantic relationship gets at the human need for companionship to lessen the sting of daily life. The novel holds that suffering is unavoidable on this earth, and nothing—not even love—is enough to banish suffering. But building connections with others does lessen the pain of living, and Jude, whom life has dealt a particularly rough hand, longs to alleviate some of his suffering. Also note Jude’s remark about not having sex with anyone since he was 15. All of Jude’s sexual encounters happened when he was legally a minor—a child—and this explains why it’s so impossible for him to feel comfortable in his skin and be vulnerable around people. He’s been violated so many times before and betrayed by adults who were supposed to protect him.

Jude's legs were the first part of himself that he **cut**. Nobody noticed them—not even Brother Luke. Jude recalls a client he once saw in Texas. The man had a protruding stomach that pressed against Jude's neck as Jude was forced to give the man a blowjob. Jude had felt disgusted, and the man apologized repeatedly. Jude doesn't want to disgust another person as this man had disgusted him. If Jude could have sex for food and shelter, he wonders, could he do it for companionship? To get rid of his loneliness?

So far, the novel has revealed that monks sexually assaulted Jude at the monastery. This passage, with Jude's mention of a client, suggests that Jude was forced into human trafficking at some point in his past as well. And it's clear that the trauma of this experience continues to haunt Jude, who seems unable to separate himself from the disgust he felt when clients forced themselves on him. This, in turn, has drastically compromised Jude's ability to connect with others—physically and emotionally.



Weeks pass. Willem has a busy schedule but still calls Jude all the time. Jude has to resist giving in to the temptation to stay inside the entire time Willem is away. He forces himself to attend museum shows and see his other friends. Felix, the boy Jude once tutored, is now in a punk band called Quiet Americans, and Jude takes Malcolm to one of their shows.

Again, devoid of cultural references and nods to specific years, the novel includes only sparse details, such as Felix's path into adulthood, to mark the passage of time. This technique prompts the reader to compare the changes others undergo to Jude's relative lack of development. Felix blossoms from a shy, friendless young boy into a member of raucous punk band. Meanwhile, Jude remains as suffering and alone as ever.



A couple weeks into Willem's absence, Jude goes to Rhodes's new **apartment** for a dinner party. Eleven guests attend the party. Jude sits next to Rhodes's wife, Alex. As Alex talks about her and Rhodes's children, Jude considers how their children inform every aspect of their life. It's given them purpose and direction. He and his friends don't have children, and so life "sprawls before them, almost stifling in its possibilities." Once, when Malcolm presented Jude with a pro-con list for having or not having children with Sophie, he asked Jude if it ever feels they were all still children. To Jude, it doesn't, since his life now is so different from his childhood.

As has been the case for much of the novel, apartments (and houses) are a place people gather together to socialize and share in a sense of community. Jude's thoughts on how his adulthood differs from his childhood shows, perhaps, that he is deluding himself about his unresolved trauma. His circumstances are no doubt different. But the abuse Jude suffered as a child continues to affect his life in a myriad of ways, from his struggles with intimacy to his ferocious self-hatred.



Alex leaves to help Rhodes in the kitchen, and so Jude turns to talk with the man sitting to his right. The man introduces himself as Caleb Porter. Caleb explains that he just moved to New York from London to take over as Rothko's CEO; it was Alex who invited him to this party. Caleb is 49 and was born in Marin County, though he hasn't lived in New York in decades. Jude mostly talks to Caleb the rest of the meal. When it's time to leave, Caleb shocks Jude by asking if he'd like to have dinner sometime. Jude is terrified, but he agrees. He and Caleb exchange cards, and Caleb promises to be in touch.

Finally, with Caleb, Jude is showing signs that he's ready to take on an intimate relationship. Jude's terrified response to Caleb asking him to dinner is concerning, though, and reflects Jude's perspective that he's unworthy of others' attention. It's clear that Jude's low self-esteem and struggles with intimacy are still very strong forces that shape his life, so the question becomes: will Jude be able to handle all that a potential relationship with Caleb might ask of him?



Caleb reaches out to Jude the next day, and they agree to have dinner on Thursday. They meet at an izakaya in west Chelsea. Once they've ordered, Caleb tells Jude that he recognizes him from a painting by Jean-Baptiste Marion (JB). This has happened before, but it still makes Jude feel uncomfortable. Jude says he and JB aren't close anymore. Jude and Caleb talk about art some more, and then Caleb talks about his parents, who both died when Caleb was in his 30s. Inwardly, Jude assumes that Caleb is interested in hiring him as legal representation, and he thinks he should refer Caleb to Evelyn, a young partner at his law firm. But then Caleb asks if Jude is single. The question completely surprises Jude, but he admits that he is.

After dinner, Caleb says he has a car waiting and asks if he can drop Jude off someplace. Jude accepts Caleb's offer. By the time they reach **Greene Street**, it's raining heavily. Caleb gets out, pops open an umbrella, and walks Jude to the lobby. Then Caleb kisses Jude, who "goes blank." He thinks back to when Brother Luke would kiss him and tell him to "relax and do nothing," and this is what he does now, too. Caleb continues to kiss Jude, and Jude feels like his body doesn't belong to him. Caleb pushes Jude to invite him upstairs; Jude wishes Willem were here. Inwardly, he considers whether he's actually ready to be with someone. Maybe Willem is right—maybe he's not as disgusting as he thinks he is. He doubts this, but he also fears an opportunity like this won't happen again, so he invites Caleb inside.

Jude finally gets a big case he's been working on for months dismissed. Lucien urges Jude to go home and relax—he deserves it. Jude returns home a while later and feels exhausted. The case has taken so much out of him—he's barely spoken to his friends in months. He hasn't told Willem about Caleb, and he's not sure how he feels about Caleb himself. He doesn't even think that Caleb likes him. Jude likes talking to Caleb, but he sometimes catches Caleb looking at him with a look of disgust on his face. And Caleb hates that Jude has a limp.

Jude and Caleb's date isn't off to a great start. Caleb recognizes Jude from one of JB's paintings (which Jude doesn't like, since the paintings depict him looking vulnerable and exposed), and this alone makes the playing field uneven. Then, there's the matter that Jude hadn't realized it was a date in the first place: he assumed it was a business meeting. This misunderstanding reflects Jude's low self-esteem, as it hadn't even occurred to him that Caleb would be interested in him romantically. Still, maybe Caleb's interest will be enough to encourage Jude to push on and pursue an intimate relationship.



A single kiss sends Jude back to his traumatic past—to whatever happened with Brother Luke—and with this, it's clear that this relationship with Caleb won't go well. Jude is still struggling with unresolved trauma related to his abusive childhood, a fact that's evidenced by Jude's instinct to "relax and do nothing" when Caleb touches him, just as Jude had done at Brother Luke's command. Meanwhile, Jude's crippling self-doubt—another effect of his childhood trauma—makes him feel that he's so unlovable the chance at a relationship might not happen again for him, and so he seems prepared to dive headfirst into a romance with Caleb—even though he clearly has reservations about doing so.



The fact that Jude hasn't spoken to his friends much the past few months suggests, perhaps, that Jude uses work to hide from issues in his personal life. Or in the very least, that his professional life and personal life do not overlap. Again, this reinforces the idea that a person's professional success doesn't necessarily correspond with—and can actually act against—a person's sense of happiness and personal fulfillment. Also note the many red flags that Caleb has raised in the handful of months that he and Jude have been seeing each other. Caleb disrespects Jude and seems disgusted by Jude's disability.



Jude remembers giving Caleb a tour of his apartment, which he is really proud of. He loves the open, sunny space and has filled the place with his friends' art. As he showed Caleb around, he could tell that Caleb was impressed. But then Caleb caught sight of **Jude's wheelchair** and asked whose it was. "Mine," Jude said, explaining that he uses only when absolutely necessary. Caleb snapped at Jude not to use the chair.

Thus far, Jude's self-harm injuries have acted as symbols of his shame and feelings of low self-worth. Here, Jude's wheelchair (and Caleb's disgusted, angry reaction to it) starts to carry a similar meaning. Caleb's disgusted reaction upon learning that Jude sometimes needs a wheelchair reaffirms Jude's fear that people judge and look down upon him for his disability. Thus, the wheelchair becomes a symbol for Jude's hang-ups about his disability, and his inability to accept it.



Jude recalls meeting up with Caleb in the Meatpacking District one evening a month after the wheelchair incident. Jude drove, and it was nice out, so he waited in his **wheelchair** until he saw Caleb appear. Jude waved at Caleb—and he knew Caleb saw him, too—but Caleb was talking to some other man and barely acknowledged Jude. Once the other man left, Caleb approached Jude and demanded to know why Jude was in his wheelchair—he was visibly angry and disgusted. He told Jude it was obvious Jude wasn't feeling well and that he thought it was best they not have dinner that night after all.

Caleb makes it clear that he will not accept Jude when Jude is in his wheelchair. By extension, then, Caleb shows Jude that Jude's disability makes him undesirable and unworthy of love and respect. In Caleb, Jude's worst fears become suddenly more valid than ever before: Caleb shows Jude that Jude is just as deformed and unimportant as Jude has always feared he is. However successful or socially well-adjusted as Jude may become, his disability—something he has no power to change—means he can't fully reinvent himself or leave his past behind.



Caleb finally called back on Saturday. He apologized for being so put-off by the chair. He explained that his parents were sick and disabled for much of his adult life, and **Jude's chair** made him think of how his parents "surrender[ed] to illness." Then he told Jude he wanted to keep seeing him, but he "can't be around these accessories to weakness, to diseases," because it "embarrasses" him. He asked Jude if this was okay, and Jude, on the verge of tears, said yes.

Caleb's explanation about his parents seems like a stretch—it's more likely that he's simply using this as an excuse to belittle and abuse Jude. At the same time, though, Caleb's explanation underscores how a person's past—their childhood, the experiences that shaped them—can have a major impact on the person that they become. Caleb's insistence that Jude is weak for using his chair when Jude can technically walk redirects blame away from Caleb (for being cruel and dismissive of Jude's pain) and toward Jude (for being weak and "embarrass[ing].") Caleb's position assumes that Jude can control his pain level, when in fact Jude's disability is neither within Jude's ability to control, nor anything to be embarrassed about. But Jude, who has spent his life learning to see himself as different and lesser due to his disability, accepts Caleb's biased opinion as objective fact.



Jude still doesn't understand how Caleb managed to insert himself into Jude's life so swiftly and completely. The sex is the worst part. He'd forgotten how painful it is. He always thought things might be better as an adult, but they aren't. Caleb was patient at first, but then he wasn't. Still, Jude likes talking to Caleb: he's interesting, and he's a good listener.

Jude, in calling Caleb interesting and a good listener, is making excuses for Caleb, suggesting that this positive attributes outweigh Caleb's verbal abuse. This makes it clear that Jude's low self-esteem and unresolved trauma lead him to believe that he doesn't deserve respect or good treatment that other people would expect in a romantic relationship. Also, this scene reaffirms how Jude's problems with physical intimacy haven't faded over time. His childhood sexual abuse hasn't healed, though it's not clear if these psychological wounds are incapable of healing, or if Jude simply hasn't received the therapy or treatment that could help him to heal.



Jude remembers the first time Caleb hit him. It happened in July. He went to Caleb's place after work on a day he had to use his **wheelchair**—something was wrong with his feet. When he arrived at Caleb's, he left the chair in the car to avoid angering Caleb. Caleb was clearly already in a bad mood, and Jude should have known to leave right away. But he didn't. His pain made him walk oddly, which angered Caleb even more. Jude tried to walk normally, but he tripped and fell to his feet, spilling the green curry he'd brought for them to share all over Caleb's carpet. Caleb didn't even say anything—he just hit Jude with the back of his hand. Then he told Jude to leave.

This passage reveals that Jude and Caleb's relationship is even worse than it initially seemed: not only does Caleb emotionally abuse Jude, but he physically abuses him, as well. Jude, who is predisposed to blame himself and feel ashamed of his disability, can't bring himself to blame Caleb for Caleb's abuse. Instead, he blames himself. This latter point is made clear in Jude's focus on the mess he made of Caleb's carpet when he spilled the green curry. But Jude is too traumatized and self-hating to explicitly acknowledge that Caleb's abuse isn't his fault.



Later that week, Jude had an appointment with Andy, who was horrified to see Jude's bruised face. Jude lied that he injured his face playing **wheelchair** tennis. Andy seemed to believe him, but he was still concerned about the intensity of the bruising. Jude changed the subject, explaining how recently, his feet have started to feel as if they are encased in cement. Andy regretfully told Jude that this was a sign of nerve damage—though, fortunately, it wouldn't be permanent. Jude ended up letting Andy prescribe him a pain medication. Before he left, Andy made sure to bring up Jude's **cutting**, which has gotten worse since he started seeing Caleb.

Jude's exact reasons for lying to Andy aren't known, but readers can surmise that he lies for the same reason he hides his self-harm and past from everyone in his life: out of shame. He's ashamed to come clean about his abusive relationship because he feels that abuse is his fault. That Jude's cutting has grown worse since he's started seeing Caleb lends additional credence to this theory, since Jude's self-harm is both a reflection of his unresolved trauma and internalized shame, as well as a source of additional trauma and shame.



When Jude returned to **Greene Street**, Caleb was there. Caleb apologized for hitting Jude and made an excuse about work being stressful. To this day, Jude can't figure out why he let Caleb come up that night. But he did. And now, he understands that he accepts Caleb's abuse because he deserves it for being so arrogant as to think that someone like him could have nice things. He thinks of Caleb much in the way he thought of Brother Luke: he's someone he hoped might save him.

Jude's unresolved trauma and abuse leads him to devalue himself. He accepts Caleb's abuse because he doesn't believe that he deserves respect and compassion, and Caleb's abuse, Jude feels, is punishment for Jude's momentarily lapse in judgement in thinking he deserved respect and compassion. In this way, enduring Caleb's abuse functions as yet another act of self-harm: it's something Jude endures to punish himself for being (he believes) disgusting and unworthy, and then the abuse just makes Jude feel more disgusting and more unworthy, which makes him continue to seek out and endure more abuse. It's a vicious cycle of pain and degradation and shame.



In September, Jude joins Caleb for the weekend at Caleb's friend's house in Bridgehampton. Lately, Caleb has been more affectionate—he's only hit Jude one other time, and he apologized right away. Saturday begins smoothly; Caleb and Jude enjoy working outdoors all day, and they're both happy. Caleb doesn't make Jude have sex that night, either. But Sunday is different. Jude awakens and feels immediately in pain. He tries to walk, but the pain becomes worse with each step he takes. He panics, not wanting Caleb to see him like this. While Caleb is out for a run, Jude drags himself into the bathroom to shower. He longs for his spare **wheelchair** in the car—would Caleb really mind if he used it, just for today?

When Caleb returns from his run, Jude is sitting on the couch, dressed and presentable. Caleb is usually calm after his runs, so Jude attempts to ask Caleb about using the **chair** just this once. Caleb tells Jude that if he can walk, he should—even if it's painful. Otherwise, he's just being weak and taking the easy way out. Jude feebly agrees. He tries to move as little as possible for the remainder of the day.

Caleb cooks dinner later that evening. When he calls Jude to the table to eat, it takes Jude forever to reach his chair—he's trying so hard not to fall. Caleb tells him to hurry up. They eat in silence. Afterward, Caleb goes to the sink and asks Jude to bring him his plate. Looking back, Jude will wonder why he made himself do this. But he does do it. And when he tries to walk to the sink, he trips, and his plate falls to the floor and shatters. Caleb punches Jude in the face so hard Jude flies back into the table, knocking the bottle of wine to the floor. Jude pleads for Caleb not to hurt him anymore, but Caleb doesn't listen.

Jude regains consciousness. He's on the floor, and he knows that he's alone. Jude sits up and pulls up his pants and underwear. He crawls to the bedroom, cleans himself up, and packs his things. Then he gets in his car and drives away. He calls Willem and tries to sound normal, but Willem can tell that something's wrong. Jude lies that he has a headache. Jude wants nothing more than for Willem to be with him.

Jude's refusal to use his chair—even when he knows he needs it—reveals more about how Jude regards relationships more broadly. He feels he has to earn other's affection and that all love is conditional and subject to change, should he disappoint or let down the other person. If he grabs his wheelchair, he disappoints Caleb and, with his logic, deserves whatever cruelty and abuse Caleb hurls his way. Though much of the specifics of Jude's childhood abuse remain unknown at this point, it's highly plausible to guess that Jude, through years of abuse, learned not to expect good, fair treatment from others; instead, he learned that good treatment and love would only be given to him when he earned it.



Jude obeys Caleb (instead of listening to his own body) because he feels he needs to earn Caleb's love and respect, and he won't earn Caleb's love if he caves and uses his chair. That Jude yields to Caleb instead of his body's needs shows how Jude's unresolved trauma and self-hatred causes him to devalue himself and place others' needs over his own.



When, in the future, Jude asks himself why he made himself walk to the sink even though he knew he wouldn't be able to handle it, it's further evidence that he blames himself—and feels deserving of—Caleb's abuse. In reality, Caleb doesn't beat Jude because of anything Jude does or doesn't do: he beats Jude because he's an abuser. But Jude's self-esteem and shame is so overpowering that he can't see things from this objective perspective, and so he blames himself.



Jude wants Willem to help and comfort him, but he's perhaps too ashamed of the abuse he suffers to confide in Willem. Jude is dealing with the abuse he endures as an adult exactly the way he deals with the abuse he endured as a child: he feels responsible for what has happened to him, and so he tells no one out of shame. This, in turn, makes it impossible for Jude to heal.



The next day, Jude examines himself in the bathroom mirror and is ashamed of how deformed he is. Caleb kicked him in the side, and every breath he takes is excruciatingly painful. He makes an appointment at the dentist—one of his teeth has been knocked loose. Later, at his appointment with Andy, Andy asks about the marks on the back of Jude’s neck. Jude lies that it’s a tennis accident. Andy says nothing, but he calls Jude the next day to talk in person.

The next day, Jude meets Andy at a bar. Andy asks Jude if Jude’s **injuries** are self-inflicted—has he been throwing himself against walls or furniture, like he did when he was a child? Jude says no and repeats the lie about tennis. Andy tells Jude how many nights he’s laid awake and wondered whether he’s made the right decision not to have Jude committed. He wants Jude to get better. Jude apologizes, but Andy reminds him that he’s the patient, and it’s not his fault.

Jude meets Harold for dinner on Friday—Harold is in town for a conference. Though Jude warned Harold about his injuries, Harold is still concerned. Midway through their meal, a visibly drunk Caleb interrupts them—he explains that Jude’s secretary told him where he was. Caleb tells Harold that he and Jude are dating. Then he asks Harold if he wishes he ever “had a normal son, not a cripple,” which sends Harold into a rage—especially once he realizes that Caleb caused Jude’s injuries. Harold makes a scene, despite Jude’s protests. Caleb grips Jude’s hand so tightly that Jude fears it will break. Caleb only leaves after Harold threatens to call the police.

Harold pays the bill, and then he and Jude leave the restaurant and walk toward Jude’s car. Harold apologizes for losing his temper, but Jude interrupts him. He begged Harold not to say anything, but Harold did anyway; does Harold not take him seriously? Jude hears himself talk but doesn’t know why he’s saying the things he says. Harold gently apologizes again. Then he asks Jude why he’s dating someone who treats him so badly. Jude says that a person as ugly as him will take whoever wants them. Harold reaches over to hug Jude, but Jude recoils. Harold lowers his arms. Jude tries to restart the car, but his hands won’t stop shaking. Finally, he calms down enough to drive to Harold’s apartment. When they arrive, Harold begs Jude to stay at his place tonight, but Jude refuses. Harold exits the car, stroking the back of Jude’s car before he leaves.

Jude continues to lie to his loved ones about the source of his injuries. Just as Jude hides his self-harm scars from the world, he hides his abusive relationship from the world, since both of these, Jude thinks, will give people reason to be disgusted by or look down on him. Confiding in one’s friends can be a source of healing, but Jude is too ashamed and self-hating to confide in his friends and give himself the chance to heal.



This isn’t the first time Andy has expressed that Jude’s injuries—regardless of how they got there—aren’t Jude’s fault. But Jude can’t accept this. This scene also gives additional insight into the obligation Andy feels—as a doctor and as a friend—to heal Jude. He feels that Jude has the capacity to heal, and so, as a doctor, it’s his fault for not finding the right way to “fix” Jude. Whether or not Jude can be fixed, though, remains unclear.



Caleb’s insult that Jude is “a cripple” and not “a normal son” turns one of Jude’s greatest fears (that Harold will see Jude for the damaged person Jude believes he really is and abandon him) into reality. This, of course, is nonsense—Harold’s angry response to Caleb makes this clear. But Jude’s self-worth is so damaged from years of unresolved trauma and abuse that he can’t assess the situation clearly, and so Harold’s angry response isn’t a comfort to him.



Jude can’t seem to consider his relationship with Harold apart from his shame and self-hatred. He can’t see Harold’s angry reaction to Caleb as a positive thing—as Harold defending Jude against Caleb’s abuse. Instead, Jude only sees Harold’s anger as yet another source of shame and humiliation: he’s ashamed and mortified that Harold sees him as someone pitiful who needs to be defended. The book thus far has shown that friendship (and companionship more broadly) can be a great source of comfort in an often cruel, difficult world. But Jude’s inability to accept Harold’s comfort shows that there are limitations to what friendship can do.



Jude arrives at **Greene Street**, and before he can switch on the lights, someone hits him against the swollen side of his face—it's Caleb. Caleb silently turns on the lights and drags Jude to the sofa. Then he starts removing Jude's clothing. Jude panics and tries to escape, but Caleb presses his arm against the back of Jude's neck, immobilizing him. Caleb assesses Jude and calls him "deformed." Jude begins to cry. He apologizes to Caleb and pleads with him not to hurt him anymore. But Caleb doesn't listen; he drags Jude out the front door, into the elevator, and out onto the street. Jude is naked, and it's pouring out. "Beg me to stay," Caleb orders Jude. Jude apologizes repeatedly, and Caleb finally drags him back inside.

Once they're back inside the apartment, Caleb releases Jude's neck, and Jude collapses to the floor. Then Caleb kicks him in the stomach, and Jude vomits all over the beautiful floors that Malcolm designed for him. He hates that this is happening inside his **apartment**, where he's always felt so safe and secure. Jude's vision fades in and out. He realizes that Caleb is dragging him to the emergency stairs at the back of the apartment. As Jude whimpers, Caleb kicks him down the stairs.

As Jude flies down the stairs, he remembers when Dr. Kashen asked him what his favorite axiom was. "The axiom of equality," Jude had answered immediately. The axiom of equality states that $x = x$: that an assigned value always has something equal to itself. It's impossible to prove, but Jude likes the "elusive[ness]" of it. It can drive a person crazy, and they can obsess over it forever. Now, though, Jude sees "how true the axiom is." He thinks that his life has proven it: he'll always be the person he is, even as he moves up in the world and has an **apartment** of his own. He knows that no matter how many years pass since his time at the monastery, he'll always be himself: " $x = x$."

PART 4: THE AXIOM OF EQUALITY: CHAPTER 2

This section is told from Harold's first-person perspective. He describes the onset of Jacob's illness. When Jacob is four, Harold and Liesl notice that something is wrong. It's October, and Jacob has started to tire easily. One of his teachers thinks he must be coming down with something. Harold carries Jacob to the car, and when they get home, Jacob seems a little better. That night, Harold tells Liesl what the teacher said, but they don't think much of it. But things get exponentially worse from that point forward; at Thanksgiving dinner at Harold's parents' house, Jacob has a seizure. Harold's father calls a friend at New York Presbyterian, and they admit Jacob right away.

That Jude apologizes to Caleb when Caleb is the one presently hurting Jude shows how instinctively Jude accepts that everything bad that happens to him is his own fault. It's as though he's suggesting that his being or looking a certain way has given Caleb justification for abusing him. This is, of course, untrue—abuse is never the victim's fault—but Jude's unresolved trauma has left Jude unable to see himself and the abuse he continues to endure through an objective lens.



Jude bought this apartment for a practical reason—to ensure that he has a place suited to his limited mobility. But the apartment also symbolized his efforts to reinvent himself and move forward from his unresolved childhood trauma. He strove to become a new, successful, normal person—or at least, to project that image to the world—and the apartment was part of that image. And now, when Caleb intrudes on that sanctuary, it proves to Jude that all this has been a ruse: that he's still the fragile and broken person he's been since childhood, and something as superficial as a new apartment doesn't change that.



Up to this point, Jude's story has been one of struggle, but also one of possible recovery. He suffers the pain of his unresolved childhood trauma, yet his relationships with his close friends remain constant (for the most part) and he continues to advance in his career. Now, as Jude suffers the worst of Caleb's abuse, and as he considers Dr. Kashen's remarks about the axiom of equality, it's as though he's decided to give up: to accept that he'll always be the same broken, traumatized person (" $x = x$ ") and that recovery is impossible.



As in the earlier chapter he narrated, Harold doesn't explicitly introduce himself as the narrator, but it's possible to discern through context clues that the narrator is, indeed, Harold. Here, the reader gets more background information about the tragic circumstances of Jacob's death. Knowing the full story will, perhaps, help the reader to understand why Harold is so invested in forming a relationship with and helping Jude: because he failed to do these things with Jacob so many years before.



They return home once Jacob is stable, and Liesl contacts Jacob's pediatrician—a friend from med school—to set up appointments with the best specialists. Jacob undergoes countless invasive tests and scans, but nobody can determine what's wrong. Eventually, Jacob is diagnosed with Nishihara syndrome, a rare neurodegenerative disease. By this point, Jacob is practically blind. And by the time he's five, he's blind and likely deaf. The seizures worsen. Most drugs don't work, and the one that does causes Jacob agonizing pain.

Harold's narrative describes Jacob's swift decline in sharp, excruciating detail. It's comparable to the sharp, excruciating detail with which the novel describes Jude's episodes of self-harm. In both cases, these details force the reader to confront the reality of Jude, Harold, and Jacob's suffering closely and frankly. The reader has no choice but to feel the full weight of characters' suffering. This mirrors the book's stance on suffering: in the book, as in life, there is no way to fully avoid suffering. It's a fundamental and inescapable aspect of the human experience.



Harold can't focus on work. On campus, he hears students bemoaning their problems, like breakups and bad grades, and he hates how self-absorbed and petty they are. By September, the doctor tells Harold and Liesl that Jacob will die soon. Jacob's limbs have grown floppy from disuse. Harold thinks he's being punished for not wanting Jacob enough when he first learned that Liesl was pregnant with him.

Harold's (likely superstitious) belief that he's being punished for not wanting Jacob more when they first learned of Liesl's pregnancy gets at the problematic belief that suffering (and happiness) are deserved: that a person who suffers is being punished, and that a person who is happy is being rewarded. In reality, though, there are no explanations for Jacob's illness and death: it's simply something tragic and unfair that Jacob, Harold, and Liesl must endure.



Jacob's illness makes Harold think about parenthood. Everyone thinks it's enough for their kids to be "happy, and healthy" but they really want their kids to be "better"—and it's impossible to imagine "that they might be worse." When Jacob first became sick, Liesl immediately made plans for how they could give Jacob the best life possible in light of his condition—how they could find ways for him to retain some independence. At the time, this angered Harold: he thought Liesl was giving up on Jacob too easily. Now, he sees that she was right: "she was adjusting to the fact that the child she thought she would have was not the child she did have." Harold now sees it was foolish of him to assume that Jacob would get better.

Harold now sees his steadfast belief in Jacob's ability to recover as flawed and unrealistic. This should make the reader question from what point in time Harold is delivering this monologue (or letter, or speech—it's not clear to whom Harold is speaking in these first-person chapters, or in what context), since Harold seems to apply the same misguided thinking to Jude and Jude's unresolved trauma. As with Jacob, Harold seems convinced that Jude can and will recover from his psychological problems, if only Harold can love Jude enough. In the world of the novel, though, sometimes a person is beyond help.



Harold was 32 when Jacob was born, and he's 37 when he dies—less than a year after that first seizure. A year after Jacob's death, Harold and Liesl discuss whether they should have another child, but they fight a lot. Eventually, their grief destroys their marriage, and they divorce. They don't speak for a long time afterward. Liesl moves to Portland, and Harold meets Julia. Sixteen years pass, and Liesl and Harold meet for dinner when Liesl is in town for a conference. Liesl has married and had another child. Harold tells Liesl about Jude, and Liesl can tell that Harold loves him. When they part ways after dinner that evening, they stay in touch only sporadically, reaching out every time they see young men who look how they imagine Jacob would have looked, if he'd lived.

The dissolution of Harold and Liesl's marriage following Jacob's death reaffirms the book's central premise: that there is some pain too severe to heal from. Just as Jacob could not heal from his illness, Harold and Liesl's marriage couldn't survive the strain and heartache of Jacob's death. Harold implicitly equates Jude to Liesl's second child, further supporting the theory that Harold sees Jude as a second chance to protect and save a son. He seems haunted by the (unfair) guilt that he let Jacob down in some way, though, of course, there was nothing that Harold or Liesl could do to save Jacob.



Harold loves Julia. She's a scientist, just like Liesl. But what he had with Liesl was "deeper" and "more profound" because they'd created a life together—and then they watched it suffer and die. After Julia and Harold decide to adopt Jude, Harold asks Laurence what he thinks about it. Laurence is wary—how much does Harold really know about Jude? Not much, Harold must admit, but he has discerned that something, at some point, must have gone wrong in Jude's life. Harold's suspicion is confirmed the first summer Jude and his friends join them in Truro—JB confronts Harold in secret to ask him not to ask Jude any more questions about his past. Nobody knows for sure, JB says, but they suspect he was physically—and possibly even sexually—abused.

A month before they finalize the adoption, Andy calls Harold and explains that Jude's been having a hard time. The next day, Harold contacts Laurence to see if he can find out anything about Jude in the state's juvenile records. Harold has convinced himself that he doesn't care about Jude's past, but he realizes now that this was naïve of him, for Jude's past has made him the person he is today. Laurence doesn't find anything, and the adoption goes through as planned. Harold is immensely happy and has no regrets. But it isn't easy to be Jude's parent—Harold can see that somebody in Jude's past taught him that he doesn't deserve happiness.

Harold remembers Jude as a gentle person who was never angry or sarcastic. After Jude drops off Harold after the run-in with Caleb at the restaurant, Harold paces around his apartment and anguishes not over the things Caleb said to Jude—but the fact that Jude so clearly believed that these things were true. He feels that he's failed Jude as a parent. Following Julia's advice, Harold goes to see Jude the next day. When he rings the buzzer at Jude's apartment, Jude hesitates before telling Harold he could come up—but only if he promises not to get upset. When Harold sees Jude, he's horrified to find Jude collapsed on the floor, horribly beaten. Jude explains that Caleb took a spare set of keys and was waiting for him at the apartment last night. Harold frantically calls Andy, who agrees to see Jude at his office in 20 minutes.

That watching Jacob die together means that Harold and Liesl will always have a special relationship underscores how some pain and suffering is too great to heal from. Harold's admission about Truro solves a mystery for which Jude doesn't yet have an answer: it was JB who told Harold about Jude's traumatic (but mysterious) past, and this is why Harold stopped asking Jude so many questions.



This passage shows that Jude never had to worry that Harold would change his mind about the adoption if he ever found out the truth about Jude. Instead, Harold accepted that Jude had had a troubled past, and this wouldn't change the way Harold thought of him. Harold clearly wants to know what happened to Jude, but it's not to judge Jude: it's so that Harold can better help Jude to heal. Harold recognizes that Jude has learned to believe that he's undeserving of happiness or love, and he seems to accept that it's one of his responsibilities, as a parent, to change this.



The way Harold refers to Jude in this passage is curious: he remembers Jude as being a gentle person. Harold's use of the past tense implies that Jude is no longer in Harold's life—or perhaps that Jude is no longer living at all. This might foreshadow Jude's eventual death. It also gives the reader more insight into when Harold is delivering this address: it's at some point in the future, after everything with Caleb has happened. And this also gives insight into the events that unfolded following Caleb's attack, which the novel has yet to address. Finally, Harold's admission about feeling that he'd failed Jude supports the theory that in Jude, Harold sees a second chance to protect and save a son—though, at least in Harold's mind, he's failing yet again at this task.



At Andy's office, Harold speaks with Andy privately and fills him in on Caleb. They both feel stupid and ashamed that they believed Jude's lies that his injuries were from tennis. While Andy goes with Jude to the hospital to get X-rays, Harold returns to Jude's apartment to clean up. Besides the mess that Caleb caused—Jude's vomit, the clawed-off clothes—the apartment is strikingly clean. The place looks like “an advertisement for an enviable life.” Harold calls Jude's boss, Lucien, and lies that Jude has been in a car accident and will be in the hospital for some time. Then he calls a locksmith to have all the locks changed. Harold wants Caleb arrested, but he knows this won't happen if Jude—Caleb's victim—refuses to press charges.

Harold continues to clean. He goes to the bathroom and finds Jude's hidden bag of razors and cotton pads—he knew he'd find it there, because, seven years ago, he found the same bag hidden under the sink at his house in Truro. He didn't know that Jude **cut** himself then, but when he found the bag, he instinctively knew what it was for. When he confronted Jude about the bag, Jude apologized—which angered Harold. Later that night, Jude explained that the cutting was a way for him “to make physical” the shame and anguish he felt on the inside. Jude paused, and then he told Harold that he could absolve the adoption if he wanted. That night, Harold threw away every sharp object he could find. And since then, every time he goes to **Greene Street**, he throws away Jude's hidden bag, even though Jude always replaces it.

Harold tries repeatedly to discuss the **cutting** with Jude, but it's always a failure. Nobody knows what to do, or what advice to give Jude. “You [Willem] were the one who got furthest with him,” observes Harold. Harold knows that his audience (Willem) blames himself, just as Harold blames himself, for Jude's failure to get better.

Jude's refusal to press charges against Caleb symbolically reflects his inner shame. He doesn't think he can legitimately press charges against Caleb because he doesn't see himself as a victim—he sees himself as deserving of Caleb's abuse. Likewise, Harold's vehement desire to protect Jude, again, might be seen as a reflection of Harold's own unresolved trauma: Harold is trying to save Jude because he wasn't able to save Jacob. And, once again, Harold is realizing that some problems can't be fixed, and some people can't be saved.



In this passage, Jude—through Harold—offers more insight into why he self-harms: “to make physical” the pain and shame he feels on the inside, feelings caused (presumably) by his unresolved trauma. Another important detail here is Harold's repeated efforts to curb Jude's self-harm by removing Jude's hidden bag of razors and cotton pads. Harold continues to throw away the bag, even though he knows Jude will just replace it with a new one. Harold, in this way, shows that he's somewhat aware of the futility of his efforts to help/save Jude. All the same, he feels obligated—morally, and as a father and friend—to at least try to stop Jude from cutting himself.



In Harold's initial first-person address, he was speaking with Willem, so it's reasonable to assume that he's speaking with Willem again in this chapter. And, that the person to whom Harold is speaking “w[as] the one who got furthest with [Jude]” further supports this theory, since, so far, Willem seems to be Jude's closest friend, and the person Jude trusts the most. Also note: Harold's remark about blaming himself for Jude's failure to get better further supports the theory that Jude has died by the time Harold is narrating this section. Harold's blame, too, shows that Harold has yet to understand that not all pain and suffering can be alleviated—that some wounds are too deep to heal from.



The night after Caleb's beating, Andy calls Harold to say that Jude is asleep in the examination room. He's mended Jude's many broken bones. Harold will need to clean and dress the wounds on Jude's back every day, though Jude will likely resist this. Andy also gives Harold painkillers to give to Jude, which Jude will also resist. Andy and Harold both feel like they'd kill Caleb if given the chance.

Jude and Harold return to **Greene Street** and Jude crawls into bed. Harold follows him into the bedroom, and Jude apologizes profusely for yelling at Harold the night before. Harold tells Jude it's not his fault. He pauses, and then he asks Jude if Jude was sexually abused when he was a child. "Jesus, Harold," Jude says after a long pause. He doesn't answer the question, but Harold knows the answer anyway. He reminds Jude that nothing is his fault. Willem calls Jude later that night, but Harold picks up the phone and lies that Jude had been in a minor car accident.

Harold stays with Jude the rest of the week. Jude obediently takes his pills, and he sleeps a lot. Willem calls every night. Jude's friends visit him, and Lucien comes, too. He tells Harold how he admired Jude is at the firm, and Harold feels proud. It's the same pride he felt, so many years ago, when Jacob's preschool teachers praised his abilities with clay. By the time it's time for Harold to return to Cambridge on Monday, Jude looks much better. Harold promises to return on Thursday, after he's done teaching for the week. Jude protests, but Harold doesn't listen. By the time Willem returns in November, Jude has regained some of the weight he lost.

They have that year's Thanksgiving at Harold's **house** in New York so Jude won't have to travel, though he's able to walk now. Harold remembers the day he found out Jude used a **wheelchair**. It was shortly after Harold discovered the bag. He asked Jude why he'd kept the **chair** from him and explained that it would never change how he thought of Jude. But it had—it reminded Harold how little he really knew about Jude.

It's understandable that Harold and Andy would be furious with Caleb, given the extent of Jude's injuries and their deep feelings for Jude. At the same time, though, their anger betrays their shared misconception about the nature of pain, suffering, and deserving. They seem to believe that bad people deserve suffering and good people deserve happiness and justice. But in reality, the world doesn't work this way, and it's not always fair who suffers and who doesn't.



Even in his lowest moment, when one would expect Jude might have nothing left to lose and finally confide in Harold about his past, he refuses to be forthcoming about whatever happened to him as a child. Harold can sense the truth anyway—that Jude was sexually abused—but Jude can't bring himself to voice this truth aloud. Jude's silence conveys Jude's lasting sense of shame about his past. Harold urges him to see that nothing is his fault, but Jude remains unwilling to believe this.



When Harold compares the pride he feels at Lucien praising Jude to the pride he felt when Jacob's teacher praised Jacob, it's further proof that Harold sees Jude as a second chance to raise and protect a son. This, too, explains why Harold is so adamant about making sure he's there physically for Jude. The nature of Jacob's disease limited all Harold could do to save Jacob, but Harold has the power to be there for Jude now, and he seems determined to do all he can to help Jude.



Knowing about Jude's wheelchair did change Harold's opinion of Jude—but not in the way Jude expected. Instead of feeling disgusted by or pitying of Jude, Harold seems to have felt sad to realize that Jude was no more forthcoming with Harold that he had been in the earliest days of their relationship. The distance remains constant between them—it doesn't shrink or improve.



Years later, Harold will realize how much the incident with Caleb affected Jude. It made him into a new person. Before Caleb entered Jude's life, Jude was in a period of healing. But afterward, he began to deteriorate. Harold sees now that Jude "had decided that Caleb was right, that he was disgusting," and that he had chosen to believe Caleb over his friends. When things get really bad, Harold will wonder if he could've said or done any more.

These closing remarks are rather ominous; Harold is implying that from Caleb's abuse onward, Jude's life begins a downward slope—one that, presumably, ends with Jude's death. Thus, all Harold's hopes that Jude might one day get better are dashed. And yet, despite this knowledge, Harold continues to blame himself for Jude's demise, implying that Harold continues to believe that all maladies can be fixed—that no trauma is too painful to overcome.



PART 4: THE AXIOM OF EQUALITY: CHAPTER 3

The narrative flashes back to Jude's childhood at the monastery. Every afternoon after he's finished with classes, he has a free hour before he's supposed to start his chores. Recently, he's started spending that time in the **greenhouse** helping Brother Luke water the plants. When Brother Luke isn't there, he plays with his things—Brother Luke has showed him a secret spot beneath the grate in a corner of the greenhouse where he can hide his special objects, including a metal whistle and a piece of sea glass that Brother Luke gave him.

It's already established that something bad happened between Jude and Brother Luke when Jude was a child, so the reader should be mindful of this as more of Jude's past is filled in. Another thing to note here is the house scenery. Jude will later view houses (and apartments, lofts, etc.) as safe spaces: as physical manifestations of his ability (and lack thereof) of his ability to reinvent himself and make a new life. This passage possibly explains the origin of this reasoning: Jude had a bad, abusive life at the monastery before Brother Luke came into his life, and now—in the time they spend together in the greenhouse—this has all changed, and things are looking up for Jude.



Yesterday, Brother Luke told Jude to come to the **greenhouse** after class—he has a surprise for him. Jude arrives and finds Brother Luke in a little supply room at the back of the greenhouse. He's kneeling over a muffin with a lit match in its center—it's for Jude, whose eighth birthday is today. Jude's never had a birthday cake before. He closes his eyes, makes a wish, and blows out the match. Brother Luke smiles at Jude as Jude eats the muffin. Then he gives him a small gift wrapped in newspaper. Jude opens it, and inside is a plain box filled with notched pieces of woods meant to look like logs. Brother Luke explains that Jude can build little houses with them.

The toy log set is further evidence of the origins of Jude's positive thoughts about houses, security, and reinvention. For Jude, the toy is a symbol of the protection and happiness he gains through Brother Luke's friendship. Also note that it's worth reading this scene through a skeptical lens: readers know that something bad (likely sexual abuse) eventually happens between Jude and Luke, so it's plausible to interpret this gift as Brother Luke grooming eight-year-old Jude.



Jude loves Brother Luke and spends every moment he can with him—he's the only person who doesn't treat Jude like a nuisance, and he thinks Jude is smart. Whenever the other brothers mistreat Jude, he imagines himself back with Brother Luke to make things better. The first time Brother Luke tickles Jude, they both laugh uncontrollably, and Brother Luke compliments Jude's laugh and smile.

Jude thinks he loves Brother Luke, but this is only because Jude doesn't have a single other positive relationship in his life to compare to his relationship with Brother Luke. Also note the detail of Brother Luke tickling Jude. Jude, as a child, doesn't see anything wrong with this, but an adult reader likely will immediately feel uneasy at Luke touching Jude and complimenting Jude's smile, as though he's coming onto Jude.



The other monks notice that Jude is spending all his time with Brother Luke and warn him to be careful—Luke isn't the kind of person Jude thinks he is. Lately, Jude's beatings have been worse than usual, and Jude worries that the brothers might abandon him. Things are so bad that Jude lately hasn't had the energy to make it to the **greenhouse**. He's also started avoiding Brother Luke at meals, since he's ashamed that he's not the happy, lighthearted boy Brother Luke thinks he is. He starts hiding in a corner of the cellar where the monks store food.

The other monks' warnings are likely true, given what readers (vaguely) know about Luke's eventual abuse of Jude. But at this point, Jude fails to listen to the monks, whose abuse gives Jude little reason to trust them. Even at this young age, it's clear that Jude's history of abuse and mistreatment have conditioned him not to trust people. Also note the parallel between Jude avoiding Luke out of shame that Brother Luke will abandon him if he finds that Jude isn't the always-happy boy Luke thinks Jude is—and the avoidant behavior Jude will later display toward Howard. This is another example of how behavior Jude learned in his traumatic childhood stays with him many years into the future.



Jude spends a week avoiding Brother Luke. Then one day, when Jude goes to his hiding place in the cellar, Brother Luke is there waiting for him. He tells Jude to sit down next to him, and Jude obeys. Then Brother Luke offers Jude a glass bottle of apple juice. He tells Jude that what the brothers do to him is wrong, and it isn't Jude's fault. He says he had a son before he came to the monastery, and Jude reminds him of his son. Then he starts to cry as he tells Jude that Jude deserves to be somewhere else, with someone who loves him. If it were just Jude and Brother Luke, Luke says, things would be great. Then he suggests that he and Jude go camping together.

Alarm bells should go off at Brother Luke's suggestion that he and Jude go camping together, but Jude, a child, can't recognize this as a potential hazard. Also note: Brother Luke's story about how he used to have a child mirrors, a bit, Harold's story about losing Jacob. In this light then, and in light of the fact that Luke will come to hurt Jude in some way at a later point, the reader can better understand Jude's fears about Harold abandoning or hurting him much later in life. Brother Luke, like Harold, acts as a father figure to Jude, so it would make sense that Jude has similar reservations and fears about them.



Jude resumes his daily visits to the **greenhouse**, and every day, Brother Luke tells Jude all about all the fun things they could do together if they were on their own, like go to the beach or eat pizza and ice cream. They could even build a cabin, just like the one's Jude builds with his toy logs, only bigger. Over time, Jude becomes "intoxicated by Luke's stories," and thinking about them gives him an escape from his miserable life at the monastery.

This passage further explains the origins of Jude's association of dwellings with security and reinvention. As a young boy, he came to associate his and Brother Luke's hypothetical cabin with the new, happier life they'd create together. The cabin represented the possibility that a person could change and improve their circumstances.



One afternoon in early January, Jude is in the **greenhouse** with Brother Luke, and he can tell that Brother Luke is in one of his quiet moods. Jude has learned not to push Brother Luke to talk when he's feeling this way. But suddenly, Brother Luke speaks. He explains that he's very sad because he's been getting the feeling that Jude doesn't love him. He also worries that Jude thinks the cabin and the adventures they'll have together are only stories—that Jude doesn't want these things to actually happen. Jude immediately protests; of course he thinks the stories are real! It takes some doing, but he finally convinces Brother Luke how serious he is. And when he does, Brother Luke smiles and gives Jude a big hug, running his arms up and down Jude's back.

To the mature reader, it should be clear that Brother Luke is manipulating Jude. This scene also helps explain some of the habits and patterns of thinking Jude will adopt as an adult—in particular, Jude's tendency to believe that other people's love and compassion for him is conditional and can be taken away if Jude fails to live up to their standards. Another thing to note is Brother Luke's continued physical contact with Jude, which, knowing what the reader knows about how Brother Luke will eventually hurt Jude, is highly inappropriate.



And so, Brother Luke forms a plan: they'll leave in two months, right before Easter, and they'll celebrate Jude's ninth birthday in their **cabin**. Finally, the night arrives. Jude is nervous, but he trusts Brother Luke. The air is cold as they walk down the monastery's long, winding driveway. To pass the time, Brother Luke points to different constellations, and Jude names them. Brother Luke says Jude is smart; "I'm so glad I picked you," he tells Jude. They finally reach the car, and then they're on the road, and Jude is leaving his old life behind him.

Once more, the cabin imagery reflects Jude's hope for a new life of safety and security and love. Brother Luke's remark, "I'm so glad I picked you," feels different to Jude than it does the reader. The reader will recognize Luke's remark as a red flag: it's essentially Luke admitting that he's selected and groomed Jude. Jude, though, who seems to have received nothing but abuse and hatred from the adults in his life up to this point, feels gratefully to finally have someone in his life who has chosen to love him. This sheds light on why Jude stays with Caleb as an adult: he's learned to accept the love people offer him, and a history of abuse and trauma have blurred the lines for him between what is love and what is abuse.



The narrative flashes forward to Jude's present. Later in his life, Jude will practice "two ways of forgetting." One way involves picturing a "vault" in his mind where he locks up all the things he doesn't want to talk or think about. He has also tried to relive his memories again and again until they become "meaningless," or until he can pretend that they happened to someone else. But the memories never truly go away. Still, Jude tries to use these coping mechanisms, and others, to overcome the trauma of Caleb's beating. He employs practical measures too, like testing the old keys to make sure they no longer work and installing an alarm system. But this doesn't stop him from replaying the image of him flying down the staircase in his head.

This passage sheds additional light on the methods Jude has adopted to cope with his trauma. He's chosen to "forget[]" or compartmentalize the past rather than confront it, and it's clear—by Jude's own admission, even—that these avoidant methods haven't helped him. In failing to confront his past, Jude allows the past to haunt his present and cause him more pain and suffering.



For a while, Jude spends all but a few hours at work. But he stops this after he has a particularly bad episode late one night at the office; the night janitor calls management, who calls Lucien. Lucien arrives and tends to Jude as he writhes and vomits on the floor. He orders Jude to take some time off, and he also orders Jude not to stay at work past midnight on weeknights any longer.

Symbolically, Jude's bad episode shows how avoidance—in this case, by spending all this spare time working—is only a temporary fix for Jude's problems. He can avoid confronting his pain, trauma and abuse, but inevitably, everything he's trying to suppress or avoid will catch up with him.



Jude struggles to talk to Harold after Caleb's beating. He's ashamed and embarrassed that Harold had to see him that way. And he's also mortified that Harold asked him about his childhood—does everyone suspect that he was abused? Harold also treats Jude differently after the incident. He's stopped ragging on Jude for working at Rosen Pritchard. And he doesn't bug Jude about finding someone to settle down with.

Harold's heightened sensitivity is likely meant as an act of compassion. But all it really does is prove one of Jude's worst fears: that people will treat him differently if they know about his past trauma. Also note Jude's disbelief that everyone assumes he was abused—the way Jude expresses this thought suggests that Jude, himself, doesn't quite believe he was the victim of abuse. Jude is insinuating, perhaps, that he believes he had some responsibility in what happened to him as a child.



Andy's nightly phone calls resume after the beating, too, and he increases Jude's checkups to every other week. He also gives Jude the business card for a psychologist named Sam Loehmann. Jude knows everyone means well, but he feels like this is just another version of people "decid[ing] how his body would be used."

Willem returns, and Jude wants so badly to tell him everything. But he doesn't. Life goes on: Jude wakes up every morning, goes to work, and deals with his loneliness. He wins a big court case, and though Lucien applauds him, Jude feels nothing but anxiety: with the case over, he no longer has something to occupy his mind. He struggles to keep his memories of Caleb at bay. He also replays scenes involving Brother Luke and Dr. Traylor, and then the injury itself: "the headlights' white glare, his head jerking to the side." Eight months pass, and things get worse—not better.

Finally, over dinner one night in June, Willem suggests that the two of them take a vacation to Morocco. Willem and Jude are out to eat at a restaurant in the Flatiron District. It's been nine months since the incident, and Willem will leave soon to shoot a movie in Sri Lanka. Jude agrees, but he's too preoccupied with thoughts of Caleb to pay much attention. Then, as they get up to leave, a rush of panic surges through Jude as he thinks he sees Caleb. It turns out to be someone else, but Willem notices, and he can tell that Jude has just seen someone he's scared of. He demands to know who the person is, but Jude won't tell him.

They get home, and Willem continues to pester Jude about whatever happened while he was away. Jude wants to tell Willem, but all he can say is, "I'm sorry." Willem stays in Jude's room. And he's there the next night, too. Jude hates to admit it, but having Willem there stabilizes him and distracts him from thinking about Caleb. Willem remains at Jude's apartment until he has to leave for Columbo. Jude wants to beg him not to leave, but he knows he can't.

Like Harold, Andy, changes the way he treats Jude following Caleb's assault. This passage also shows how Jude's history of abuse prevents him from seeing his friends' actions objectively. He can recognize that everyone is just trying to help him, but he can't shake the instinctual feeling that they are also "decid[ing] how his body would be used," just as Jude's abusers have done throughout his life.



Jude's mental health continues in its downward trajectory, and his inability to open up to Willem makes matters worse. Another factor contributing to Jude's decline is his lighter work schedule: following the conclusion of the big court case, he no longer has as much to distract him from his unresolved trauma. Also note the remark about "the headlights' white glare, his head jerking to the side." This vague description bears resemblance to the car "accident" Jude mentioned in college (the so-called accident that resulted in his leg and back injuries). Here, Jude seems to hint that someone named Dr. Traylor might have been involved in this incident.



Jude's inability to talk about Caleb hurts Jude himself, but it hurts Willem, too. It's clear that Willem can sense Jude's distress upon seeing the Caleb-lookalike, and Jude's failure to come clean about the situation compromises Willem's ability to help Jude. This passage further illustrates how friendship could be a great source of healing for Jude—but only if he allows his friends to help him, which he's yet unable to do.



Jude's declining mental health is evidenced by Willem's more aggressive efforts to help Jude, even if Jude won't let him do much. Much earlier in the novel, Willem might have left Jude alone if Jude made it clear he didn't want to talk. Now, though, Willem stays, suggesting that he sees that Jude is doing worse than normal.



After Willem leaves, things are okay for a while. But Jude's "hyenas" return, and they're "more vigilant in their hunt" than ever before. Years of repressed memories bubble to the surface. He thinks about Caleb raping him in the shower and wants to light himself on fire. He takes on more work and **cuts himself**. But nothing is enough. It's August now, and his friends are all out of town. Jude doesn't want to be around Harold, because Harold reminds him of the bad night.

These "hyenas" seem to be a metaphor Jude creates to allow himself to think about his past trauma indirectly, without explicitly admitting that he's been the victim of trauma. This idea that Jude isn't the victim of trauma is in line with his insistence that he is to blame for/deserves the bad things that have happened to him. This scene also reinforces the theory Harold put forth in his earlier narrative, that Caleb was a turning point for Jude, and that Jude's life took on a downward spiral following Caleb. Here, readers see that Jude is quickly spiraling out of control.



One night, Jude has a nightmare. In it, a dark cloud chases him. Then he hears a voice say, "Stop," and then, "You can end this." Jude has considered suicide before, but he could never go through with it. Almost as an experiment, now, he starts to fantasize what it would mean to die. He thinks about all the letters he'd need to write, the arrangements he'd need to make. These thoughts help him get through his days. Over time, his plans become less hypothetical. His whole life, he's tried to get better and become a different person, and his whole life, he's failed. And now that he's decided to end it all, he finally feels at peace.

Jude's downward spiral achieves a new low as his suicidal ideations develop into real plans to end his life. In Harold's earlier narrated section, he spoke of Jude in the past tense—as though Jude is already dead whenever Harold narrates that passage. Could it be that Jude dies by suicide in his 30s? It seems unlikely, given that Jude is the novel's protagonist and there is still a long ways to go. At the same time, though, Harold also asserts that Jude doesn't get better following Caleb's abuse—that something shifted in Jude following Caleb. So, it's conceivable that Jude will go through with these plans.



Then the day comes. It's a Monday in late September. Jude comes home, removes his shoes and tie, pours a glass of scotch, and grabs a box cutter. He **cuts** deep vertical lines into both arms. They're more painful than he thought they'd be, and the blood that flows from them is thick as oil. Jude sits against the shower wall and waits. He closes his eyes and pictures a **house** where he can lie down, rest, and finally be safe.

Jude cuts his wrists and waits to die. Whether he will succumb to his injuries, though, remains to be seen. Another interesting note here is that Jude pictures a house as he lays dying. For so long, Jude has associated houses and other dwelling places with security, safety, and stability—with the new life he's built for himself in the aftermath of a horrible childhood. Now, though, it seems that he's given up finding security and stability in life and has decided that death is the only means by which he may fully recover from his past—that death is the only thing that will stop his pain and suffering.



The narrative returns to Jude's trip with Brother Luke. They've just passed into Nebraska. Brother Luke pulls over beside a wheat field and drags Jude behind a giant tree. He explains that the brothers will be looking for them, so they'll have to wear disguises. Brother Luke gives Jude a change of clothes, and then he shaves Jude's head. Then they get back in the car and drive to Texas. When they finally arrive, Brother Luke says they'll stay in a motel for a few days—they need to lie low, since the brothers are probably following them.

In a way, the disguise Jude dons upon fleeing the monastery is an early version of the metaphorical disguise he dons as an adult. In this scene and in adulthood, Jude is trying to leave his past behind him through superficial, skin-deep means (a disguise, a successful career, long-sleeved shirts that hide his self-harm scars, etc.). And, in this scene with Luke and in adulthood, Jude's superficial disguises proves incapable of keeping the painful memories of Jude's past at bay.



The motel that Jude and Brother Luke stay in is called The Golden Hand. Brother Luke tells Jude to take a shower while he runs out and gathers some supplies. Jude is terrified that Brother Luke will abandon him, but Brother Luke promises to return. And he does, groceries in hand. They have a routine they practice every day: they wake up early and Brother Luke makes coffee. Then, they drive into town, and Brother Luke watches Jude run around the high school's track. Then they return to their room, and Brother Luke gives Jude his lessons.

After lessons, Brother Luke leaves to look for locations where they'll build their **cabin**. He orders Jude to stay behind and not to open the door for anybody. He says that there are bad people out there, and he just wants to keep Jude safe. Jude reads while he waits for Brother Luke to return—Brother Luke has forbidden him from watching TV, and he'll know if Jude has disobeyed him.

One day, Brother Luke returns. He looks exhausted and sad. He explains that he just doesn't have the money to buy the land to build their **cabin** on, and then he starts to cry. Jude offers to get a job to earn money for the cabin—he knows how to do all kinds of things, like polishing silver and scrubbing toilets. And Brother Luke has helped Jude so much, that it only seems right that Jude helps him in return. Brother Luke cheers up at this and gives Jude a hug.

The next day, Brother Luke leaves after Jude's lesson like usual. He returns later, a smile on his face as explains that he's met someone who wants to give Jude some work—and he's waiting just outside. Brother Luke explains that Jude is "going to do what [he] did with Father Gabriel" and the other brothers. Hearing this fills Jude with fear, and he instinctively backs away from Luke. Luke strokes Jude's hair. Then he tells Jude that Jude is good at it, and it'll be over in no time. Then the man—the client—enters the room, rapes Jude, and leaves. Afterward, Luke is kind and affectionate. He brings Jude a cookie.

Brother Luke continues to groom Jude, who has been so let-down and abused throughout his life that Jude will see practically any degree of stability and care that Luke can offer (coming back when he says he will, feeding Jude and giving him a roof over his head, etc.) in a positive light and feel grateful and indebted to Luke. Luke has rescued Jude from an abusive home, after all; why shouldn't Jude trust him?



That Luke orders Jude not to watch TV should raise a red flag for the reader—it's likely Luke doesn't want Jude to see any news coverage about Jude's abduction. For though Brother Luke has framed their travels as an adventure, Luke is not Jude's legal guardian, and Jude is a minor, so legally, Luke has kidnapped Jude. It's also additional evidence that Luke is grooming Jude: in cutting Jude off from the outside world and claiming that he is only trying to protect Jude against the outside world, Luke effectively ensures that Jude has no choice but to place his full trust in Luke. What's more, Luke manipulates Jude by holding plans for their hypothetical cabin over Jude's head.



Earlier in the novel, Jude makes brief reference to servicing a "client," implying that, at some point in his childhood, he was sex trafficked. So, the reader should be wary of Brother Luke's plans to put Jude to work. Also note how Jude's past trauma has shaped his sense of obligation. He's never had an adult he can rely on, and he's learned that he has to earn love and affection, so it makes total sense to him that he—a nine-year-old boy—should be the one to pay the bills rather than Luke, the adult in their relationship.



This scene confirms what the novel has only hinted at thus far: that Jude (as a minor) is a victim of human trafficking. That Jude backs away from Brother Luke when Luke first confronts him about the sex work shows that Jude has sensed (at least subconsciously) that he can't trust Luke. But Jude, who is otherwise completely alone in the world, seems to recognize that he has no other choice. Also note that Luke continues to groom and manipulate Jude, showing him kindness and giving him treats after Jude succumbs to the sexual assault.



And so, this becomes their new routine. They still have class in the afternoon, only now, Brother Luke brings clients back to the room for Jude. Jude tries not to cry afterward, but he often does anyway. He asks Brother Luke how much longer it'll be until they have enough money for their **cabin**, but Brother Luke never gives him a definite answer. This goes on for a few months; they move around every week or so.

Then everything changes. Jude is lying in bed one night. Brother Luke asks Jude if Jude loves him. Before, Jude would've said yes—but now, he's not so sure. It's true that Brother Luke protects Jude against clients who get too rough with him—and, after all, Jude did volunteer to do this work. So, Jude tells Luke that he loves him. This makes Luke very happy; he loves Jude, too. Then, Luke explains that people who love each other do certain things, like kiss and lie in bed together. He tells Jude that they should do this, and Jude obeys. This progresses to sex. Brother Luke promises it'll be different than it is with the clients, since he and Jude are “in love,” but it doesn't feel different to Jude. He starts to feel like nothing belongs to him anymore, not even his name or his body.

Jude hardly talks anymore. Looking back, Jude will try to determine when, exactly, he understood that the **cabin** was never going to happen. One memory sticks out. He and Luke are driving to Washington to see a doctor friend of Luke's, who's going to treat a disease that Jude caught from one of the clients. Luke pulls over beside a baseball field to study a map, and Jude sees a group of boys around his age, dressed in uniforms, shouting, and running. They're so much like him—and yet they're nothing like him at all. And Jude knows he'll never be like those boys.

Jude's naïve hopefulness that the cabin will give him the safety and security he desires—and that it will happen at all—shows that Jude continues to trust Luke, despite Luke giving Jude every reason to doubt him. This is further evidence of the damage that years of abuse have done to Jude; it's completely ruined his ability to distinguish between people who mean to help him and people who mean to harm him. To the reader, it's abundantly clear by this point that the cabin will never happen. It's merely something Luke uses to ensure that Jude continues to cooperate and remain loyal to him.



Just when it seems that things can't get any worse for Jude, they do: the one person Jude thought he could trust (or at least, the person who has, until now, hurt Jude the least) betrays that trust and sexually assaults Jude just like the other monks at the monastery. While Jude describes what's happening as sex, it's worth keeping in mind that given Jude's age alone, this is rape. What's more, Luke manipulates Jude (who, remember, is not yet 10) into conflating abuse with love. This passage helps the reader to understand how Jude, as an adult, will struggle to form romantic, intimate bonds with others.



This passage reveals the roots of Jude's characteristic secrecy. He learns to cope with his pain by shutting down and keeping his pain inside, and he carries this coping mechanism—and the unresolved trauma it masks—with him to adulthood. When Jude watches the boys playing and sees their innocence (and his own lack thereof), it closely mirrors a scene from [Lolita](#), another book about a pedophile who kidnaps a child, drives across the country, and assaults them in various motels. Toward the end of [Lolita](#), the narrator and pedophile-antagonist, Humbert Humbert, observes a group of children playing in a field and finally realizes that his actions have prevented Lolita, the girl he kidnapped, from joining these children in their innocent play.



The narrative flashes forward to the present, after Jude's suicide attempt. The first thing Jude remembers is a hospital room—he can smell it. Willem is asleep in a chair beside his bed. He remembers other friends' faces. Everyone cries. Jude tries to tell them not to, but his tongue feels too heavy to speak. Finally, Jude regains conscious enough to speak to the man sitting beside his hospital bed. The man introduces himself as Dr. Solomon. He explains that he's a psychiatrist, and that Jude is in the psychiatric wing of the hospital. He asks Jude if he knows why he's here, and Jude says he does: it's because of what he did in the shower.

Jude improves little by little. He learns that it was Richard who found him and called the ambulance. Eventually, Jude is released into Harold and Julia's care. He's supposed to see Andy twice a week, and he's supposed to start therapy. Harold and Julia take Jude to Truro, where Willem is waiting for him. It's October now. Jude is ashamed that he failed, and he hates how everyone tiptoes around him now. He feels helpless—he can't even cut his food or shave on his own because the **cuts** damaged the nerves in his hands.

Jude and Willem stay at Truro for 10 days, and then they return to **Greene Street**. Willem stays at the apartment with Jude. One of the conditions of Jude's release was that he take a sabbatical from work, so his days are empty. He swims and eats breakfast with Willem. A physical therapist drops by and helps him with his hands. People are always visiting, though Willem never lets them stay for longer than an hour. Willem asks Jude every day if he wants to talk to Dr. Loehmann, but Jude always declines.

In November, Willem and Jude go out to dinner at a Japanese restaurant to belatedly celebrate Willem's 43rd birthday. Walking home afterward, Jude floats the idea of going to Morocco after all. Later, when he asks Willem about the project he was supposed to shoot in Russia in January, Willem says something vague about it falling through. But when Jude looks it up on online, he sees news coverage that Willem left the film for "personal reasons."

Jude survives his suicide attempt after all—and he doesn't seem terribly pleased to realize this. Though Jude's friends cry, Jude remains stolid and unmoved. Jude's friends seem more determined to keep Jude alive—to make him well—than Jude does. This further explores the novel's question of what obligation a person has to force someone who does not want to live to stay alive—and what obligation a person has to their loved ones to keep themselves alive when they no longer find life worth living.



There are so many characters involved in this scene, each performing a critical role in ensuring Jude's successful recovery. This emphasizes the stark contrast between the many caring friends that surround Jude—and the relative lack of comfort that Jude experiences while in their care. This, in turn, reinforces the novel's insistence that friends and loved ones have limited capacity to heal both physical and psychological wounds.



Jude's refusal to speak to Dr. Loehmann (the psychiatrist whose information Andy gave Jude earlier) reinforces the idea that Jude isn't happy to be alive. One has to wonder whether he wouldn't just re-attempt suicide if his friends weren't monitoring him constantly.



Willem is willing to hurt his career and reputation to stay home and care for Jude. Unlike someone like JB, for instance, who repeatedly puts ambition above friendship, Willem prioritizes his friends—and most of all, his relationship with Jude—above all else.



Jude continues to recover. He eventually stops taking his pills. He's initially happy to discover how clearheaded he feels; but soon, the hyenas return, and with them, more repressed memories. A voice inside his head whispers at him to "try again," and he tries desperately to ignore it.

Jude seems to oscillate between two unhappy extremes: he can exist in a drugged stupor and forget his traumatic past, or he can be clearheaded and awash with painful, shameful memories of his unresolved trauma. When the hyenas—a metaphor Jude created as a stand in for his unresolved trauma and unwanted thoughts—urge Jude to "try again" (that is, attempt suicide again), Jude resists. This should make the reader consider whether Jude has decided that life is worth living, or whether he simply feels indebted to friends like Willem, Harold, and Andy, who have sacrificed so much to ensure Jude's wellbeing.



Then it's Thanksgiving again. Jude and Willem, Richard and India, and Malcolm and Sophie go to Harold and Julia's apartment on West End Avenue to celebrate. Willem talks about his and Jude's upcoming trip to Morocco. Jude and Willem leave early, and Jude returns home and **cuts** himself for the second time since his release. The first time, it hurt, and he wondered if he wanted to do it at all. But this time, he feels the familiar release.

Not only is Jude lucky to be alive, but he has the great fortune to celebrate Thanksgiving surrounded by people who care about him. And yet, he immediately goes home and cuts himself—and it's only then that he feels okay. The novel seems to suggest that Jude is too far gone to find comfort and stability in love and friendship. For much of his childhood, pain and suffering were all he could rely on, and so now, as an adult, they are the only things that bring him a sense of stability.



One night, Jude awakens from a nightmare to cold water being splashed in his face. Willem is standing above him, empty glass in hand, and apologizes—he hadn't been able to rouse Jude on his own. Then Willem asks Jude who Brother Luke is—he'd been screaming in his sleep for Brother Luke to save him. Jude can't tell Willem about Brother Luke, though.

Jude's nightmares are a new development and support the theory that his life will be on a downward slope from now on. It's also interesting that Jude cries out to Brother Luke to save him. This further shows how Jude sees abuse and pain as the only constants in his life. He turns to his abusers to save him—not the true friends, like Willem, who actually have Jude's best interests in mind.



One day, as Jude and Willem are sitting at the table and planning their trip to Morocco, Willem announces that he finally knows what he wants for his birthday: he wants Jude to tell him who Brother Luke is, and what Jude's relationship to him was. Jude agrees to Willem's request, but he tells him he's going to need some time first. Willem accepts this. In the meantime, though, he asks if Jude can answer a smaller, simpler question. Jude hesitates, but then he agrees. Willem asks Jude how he got the **scar** on the back of his hand. Jude is relieved—the burn scar happened well before all the other horrible things. Willem leans against the table, relishing this first time that Jude tells him a story.

The scar on the back of Jude's hand is from when Father Gabriel lit Jude's olive oil-soaked hand on fire. Though this episode of abuse pales in comparison to the abuse Jude suffered at Brother Luke's hands, it's a positive thing that Jude seems willing to open up to Willem about something. Still, one has to wonder why Jude is telling Willem now—is it because he wants to get better, or is it because he fears that Willem will leave him if he doesn't give him what he wants? Jude's interpersonal issues (a consequence of his unresolved trauma) once more complicate his ability to heal.



The narrative returns to Jude’s trip with Brother Luke. Years pass, and Jude is now 11. He’s tired all the time and can hardly stay awake for clients. Brother Luke reminds him that the clients are paying to be with him, so he should act like he’s enjoying it.

It’s around this time that Jude starts **throwing his body at walls**. It begins as an accident. He and Brother Luke are staying at a motel in Washington, and Jude accidentally trips down the stairs. Nothing is broken, but he’s scraped up and bleeding. Brother Luke cancels Jude’s appointment that night. This—and the pain—restores Jude. He feels awake and clearheaded. And it’s “a pain without shame or filth.” He starts intentionally throwing himself against brick walls from then on.

Brother Luke catches on and tells Jude the clients don’t like seeing him bruised. One night, when Jude is feeling particularly bad, Luke teaches him to **cut** himself. Luke gives Jude his own bag of razors, alcohol wipes, cotton, and bandages. Jude learns to love the control the cutting affords him. Finally, some part of his body is his own.

Though Jude never likes Luke’s body, in time, he gets used to it. He comes to believe that nobody will treat him as well as Luke does. He remembers how Luke once yelled at a client who smacked Jude and called him a “slut.” A lot of the clients call Jude horrible names, but Luke never does.

Luke still talks about their future together, but it’s always somewhere different now—he’s stopped talking about the **cabin**. He’s also stopped thinking of Jude as his son. Now, he tells Jude that they’ll get married when Jude turns 16. He also keeps pushing back the age Jude can “retire.” At first, that age was 12—but now, it’s 16. Another thing that bothers Jude is that Luke sometimes acts like he enjoys hearing Jude with the clients.

Jude thought his life would improve once he left the monastery, but it’s only become much worse than anything he could have imagined. Again, Jude’s character arc seems not to be one of healing and positive development, but rather one of slow, steady, and unceasing decline.



This passage explains the origins of the self-harm that will become Jude’s primary coping mechanism as an adult. Self-harm—in any form—is a way for Jude to experience “pain without shame or filth.” It’s a way for him to reclaim ownership and feeling over his body, two things he’s lost since the brothers first began to abuse him.



In this passage, Brother Luke becomes an even more reprehensible villain. Not only is he the source of much of Jude’s unresolved trauma, but he’s also the person who taught Jude such a self-destructive method of coping with that trauma. Still, that Jude wants to reclaim his body shows that he’s still struggling to survive—that he wants to lay claim to the life and body that have been stolen from him and have a future of some sort. The same can’t quite be said of adult Jude, who increasingly seems to have lost the will to live.



Though Brother Luke is abusive, he treats Jude better than anyone else in Jude’s life has treated him. Because Luke’s “love” is the closest thing to love Jude has experienced, it warps his view of reality and makes him conflate love with abuse. Knowing these details of Jude’s backstory helps the reader to better understand why Jude, as an adult, felt that he deserves Caleb’s abuse.



It’s clearer than ever before now that Luke had only called Jude his son to groom Jude and persuade him to run away with him. Now, with both his words and his actions, Luke shows his true colors and reveals himself to be the abusive pedophile he has been all along. As Jude grows, he starts to realize that Luke isn’t as good and caring as he’d once thought (as when Luke acts like he enjoys hearing Jude with the clients). But by this point, Jude is too dependent on Luke and traumatized to break free from this cycle of abuse.



And then it's September. Jude and Luke are staying at a motel somewhere in Montana. They're in bed together when they hear loud pounding on the door—it's the police. Brother Luke hisses at Jude to be quiet. The police shout that they have a warrant to arrest "Edgar Wilmot." Jude is puzzled, but then he realizes, by Brother Luke's expression, that Edgar Wilmot is Brother Luke. Brother Luke hisses at Jude not to move, and then he goes into the bathroom and locks the door behind him, even as Jude pleads with Luke not to leave him.

The police have finally located Luke and have arrived to rescue Jude. With the revelation that "Luke" might really be "Edgar Wilmot," more pieces of the puzzle seem to fall into place for Jude. Yet, even after suffering years of abuse, Jude can't bring himself to part from Luke. Luke's systematic grooming and manipulation have made Jude feel that he depends on Luke for survival—and for love and companionship. And when Luke locks himself in the bathroom, he does leave Jude—and, in so doing, betrays him. This seems to have contributed to the trust/intimacy issues Jude carries into adulthood.



The police break down the door. One officer pulls up Jude's pants. He hears another officer yell for someone to call an ambulance. Jude frees himself from the officers and runs to the bathroom, just in time to see Brother Luke hanging from the bathroom ceiling. Jude doesn't remember much after this. The police ask him how many times he'd been raped, but he doesn't even know he's been raped. He's brought to a home, and the kids there treat him cruelly. They know there's something shameful about him.

Brother Luke has died by suicide in the bathroom, just as Jude tries to do decades later. Is it possible that Jude has this traumatic memory in mind when he undertakes his own suicide attempt? In addition, the way Jude shuts down after he sees Luke's body suggests that he mourns Luke's death; though Luke abused him, Jude came to believe (through Luke's manipulation) that Luke was the only person who loved him, and now, once more, Jude must face the cruel world on his own.



Jude thinks about Brother Luke every day. Later, Jude will tell Ana that while he knows that Luke hurt and lied to him, he knows that Luke loved him, too. Ana tells him that Luke was "a monster" who only claimed to love Jude to manipulate him. Jude still can't decide how he feels about Luke. On the one hand, Luke instilled in Jude a love of music, math, gardening, and other passions. But he also made him incapable of having a healthy sex life as an adult, made him ashamed of himself, and taught him how to **cut**.

Jude's inability to think of Luke as "a monster" shows how Jude's abusive childhood taught him to confuse abuse for love, and pain for pleasure. Nothing in his life has been devoid of suffering, and so Jude has come to see suffering as a fundamental part of all experience. This mindset, the after-effect of trauma, enables Jude to justify all manner of abuse and mistreatment in his relationships. It is enough, for Jude, that Luke loved him—even if that love was born of abuse.



No matter how many years pass, Jude can always see Luke's face in his mind. He thinks about way back, "when he was being seduced and had been too much of a child, too naïve, too lonely and desperate for affection to know it." Looking back, running to the **greenhouse** to see Luke, who called him his "beautiful boy," was the last moment of "uncomplicated joy" that Jude felt.

The greenhouse was the first—and last—place in which Jude finds "uncomplicated joy" and security, even if even that joy was corrupted by abuse Jude was too young to understand at the time. He's tried to regain the feeling of happiness he had with Luke in the decades that followed, and he's failed. This simple but poignant admission explains the heart of Jude's suffering: Jude will never find another love like Luke's. But at the same time, that abusive love has prohibited him from recognizing or believing he deserves genuine love, respect, and compassion.



PART 5: THE HAPPY YEARS: CHAPTER 1

Willem is 38 the first time he realizes he's famous. At first, it's not too strange for Willem—he's always been rather "famous," or at least known, in his expansive social circle. When Willem was 37, he took a part in a film called *The Sycamore Court*, in which he played a small-town lawyer who comes out of the closet. To prepare, he had Jude explain everything he did all day as a lawyer. And hearing this made Willem a little sad that someone as brilliant and imaginative as Jude was doing such dull, uninspired work. Willem always thought that Jude would become a math professor or a voice teacher, or even a psychologist.

The Sycamore Court was a huge hit, and it earns Willem outstanding reviews. It's the first time in Willem's career that he's not afraid about finding a next project to film. In September that year, Willem returns from a shoot and has only one day in New York before he has to leave for a publicity tour in Europe. He grabs lunch with Jude at a French restaurant in midtown. The place is filled with highly wealthy people in fine suits. As Willem and Jude sit down to eat, Willem senses that people are staring at him, and he worries that he's not dressed properly. But Jude smiles at Willem and explains that it's not what Willem is wearing. It's who he is: everyone there sees him as a celebrity.

It's an odd realization for Willem. He's attractive and used to people looking at him. But in these situations, they always wanted something from, whether it be sex or career advancement. But he's not used to people looking at him when they have other (or better) things to do. He also learns that if he walks into a place expecting people to recognize him, they often do. But if he walks in discretely, not wanting to be recognized, people don't notice him as much.

Willem recalls how he's stayed at **Greene Street** ever since Jude was released from the hospital following his suicide attempt. In time, he realized that he'd brought more and more of his personal items there, including his books, his laptop, and then his favorite woolen blanket. He'd started to hang art on Jude's walls. In the weeks following Jude's suicide attempt, Willem entered Jude's room at all hours to make sure that he's alive.

Willem, unlike JB, for instance, seems to understand that success in one's career doesn't necessarily mean a person will live a happy life. At the same time, though, his regret about Jude's law career falls into the trap of imagining that Jude might be happier if he'd chosen a different career path. Of course, Jude's dull, uninspired work is the least of Jude's problems.



Not only does this scene reaffirm Willem's humility, but his failure to grasp his fame also shows how he separates his work from the rest of his life. Willem, like his friends, wants to be successful and find his work meaningful. But, perhaps more than the others, Willem seems to realize that fame, success, and other superficial markers of fulfillment don't mean all that much in the grand scheme of things. Willem, more than many most other characters, recognizes that a person's relationships with others are what's most important in life.



Willem's discomfort with fame is a bit similar to Jude's discomfort with intimacy. They both always operate under the assumption that people want or expect something from them—that their attention and commitment is exclusively conditional.



Willem's commitment to his friendships further comes through in his constant, careful monitoring of Jude. Unlike JB, who exploits Jude and threatens Jude's mental wellness for the sake of his career, Willem actively refuses to let fame go to his head and spends all his spare time tending to Jude. As has been the case for the entire novel, Willem and Jude have the strongest relationship among all their friends, and it remains to be seen if this special relationship might develop into a romance of sorts.



Since Jude has opened up to Willem, Willem has learned more about Jude than he's learned in the decades they've known each other. Every story Jude tells him is awful, and Willem never knows how to respond. After Jude tells Willem about the scar on the back of his hand, Willem can't stop staring at it, and Jude feels self-conscious. He warns Willem that he's not going to tell him more stories if Willem keeps reacting like this. So now, Willem tries especially hard to be composed—to act like it's totally normal that Jude was made to eat his own vomit as a child, or that he was whipped with a belt soaked in vinegar.

But so much of Jude's past remains a mystery to Willem. For instance, he still doesn't know who Brother Luke is, and Jude has only told him a handful of stories about his life at the monastery. Willem knows that Jude is starting with the easier stories first, and he knows he has to be patient with him. Jude started sharing the stories as part of a deal he made after he refused to see Dr. Loehmann. Andy doesn't like the compromise—Willem isn't a professional—but it's all Jude will give them.

It's now October—13 months since the suicide attempt. Willem spends his nights at the theater. After the show ends in December, he'll begin shooting an adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, which is being produced in the Hudson Valley—which means he can make it home every night. He chose this project on purpose. Last fall, he dropped a film that was set to be filmed in Russia to be with Jude. His agent, Kit, was confused: giving up roles to care for someone would make sense if that someone was a spouse or child, but Willem and Jude are just friends. Kit's observation irks Willem. But it also gets him thinking—could he love someone as much as he loves Jude?

With Jude, Willem feels more himself than with anyone else. And he craves this, since good acting requires a person to lose touch with themselves. Willem also loves being a part of Harold and Julia's life, and he knows that “they love[] him because he love[s] Jude.”

As Willem learns more about Jude, the reader does, too, as with these new examples of the atrocities Jude suffered as a child. If Jude is sharing more of himself with Willem than he has in the combined decades they've known each other, it seems like a good sign: might it be that Jude is finally on the mend, that he might finally be working through the horrors of his past?



Brother Luke is at the center of Jude's unresolved trauma. Most of the difficulties Jude faces today—his trust issues, his struggles with intimacy and sex, and his overwhelming sense of shame and worthlessness—can be traced back to Brother Luke, whose abuse seems to have been most destructive to Jude's long-term mental health. It seems, then, that if Jude can somehow bring himself to tell Willem about Luke, then maybe this will be what directs Jude down a path of healing and recovery.



This passage further hints at a budding romance (or perhaps a romance that has been there all along) between Jude and Willem. This illustrates another dimension of Willem's dedication to friendship: he doesn't believe that friends should matter any less than romantic partners, despite Kit's (and, more broadly, Western society's) opinion to the contrary. As he sees it, people should do everything they can to help the people they love and care about, and it shouldn't make a difference if someone is one's friend or one's lover.



This passage further shows that Willem prioritizes his relationships over his career—and finds the former to be more fulfilling. His relationships with others, specifically with Jude, puts him more in touch with himself, whereas his acting does the opposite.



Lately, Willem has begun to see Jude as more than a friend. One night, he felt a strong urge to kiss Jude. He's had similar feelings since then, too. These feelings worry him. He doesn't care that Jude is a man—Willem has had sex men before. The problem is that Jude is serious about everything, and so it only makes sense that he would be just as serious about sex. And Jude's sexuality is a mystery. He's never had a romantic partner, and nobody has ever even seen him flirt.

Willem starts work on *Uncle Vanya* and loves it: he knows and respects everyone he works with. It's filmed in an old mansion on the Hudson. It's the kind of place Philippa had once imagined they'd grow old in. Willem enjoys the play but finds that it's not so relevant to his life. Though he plays Dr. Astrov at work, when he returns home, he's Sonya—a character he's always "pitied" but never felt he'd embody himself.

Uncle Vanya wraps at the end of March. One night, during the last week of filming, Willem is walking home when he spots Andy reading in a café. Andy is pleasantly surprised to see Willem, and so Willem sits down, and they catch up. Soon, Willem confesses his feelings for Jude to Andy. Andy says that Willem's feelings make complete sense. And he thinks that the relationship would be "restorative" for Jude. But he cautions Willem not to start anything with Jude unless he's ready for serious commitment: it's going to take a lot of time and effort for Jude to trust Willem, and it's going to be hard for Jude to be intimate with him.

Time passes. In April, Jude returns from his business trip to Mumbai, and he and Willem celebrate Jude's 43rd birthday. Willem begins a new project and reconnects with an old graduate school friend, and they sleep together a handful of times. But he returns to **Greene Street** each night and keeps thinking about his feelings for Jude. Then, Willem wakes early one morning in late May and realizes that his hesitancy is ridiculous. "He was home, and home was Jude." Willem resolves to talk to Jude that night.

Willem recognizes how much trouble Jude has opening up to others, and so he knows that he can't casually pursue Jude: he has to be all in. Also note that though Willem knows Jude better than any other of Jude's friends, he still doesn't recognize the severity of Jude's trauma. Willem believes that Jude's sexuality is highly secret, but he assumes it's altogether healthy. He can't comprehend the degree to which Jude's unresolved trauma effects nearly every aspect of his life.



Uncle Vanya is a famous play by Anton Chekhov. In the play, Sonya, the young but plain daughter of an old professor, suffers from feelings of unrequited love for Astrov, a country doctor. Willem thus suggests that he's suffering from feelings of unrequited love for Jude—a rare feeling for Willem, whose good looks and personality have never left him without ample attention.



Andy, as Jude's doctor, knows more about Jude's condition than Willem does; he knows about Jude's STDs and, by inference, the sexual abuse that caused them. This is what Andy is warning Willem about here, albeit carefully, so as not to breach his and Jude's doctor-patient confidentiality agreement. In this scene, Andy's dual roles in Jude's life become clear. He is Jude's doctor, and so cannot disclose all he knows (or suspects) about Jude. On the other hand, he cautions Willem as much as he can, wanting, as Jude's friend, to protect Jude from suffering more shame and disappointment.



In a symbolic gesture that shows how clearly Jude and Willem are meant to be together, Willem declares his love for Jude as akin to coming home: "He was home, and home was Jude." Homes symbolize security and safety for Jude, so Willem saying this is highly significant. It suggests that he and Jude will find happiness and security with each other—or, at least, that this is what Willem wants them to have.



The narrative switches to Jude's perspective. Jude wakes and swims two miles every morning. Then he makes breakfast and reads the paper. This morning, though, he comes across a disturbing headline in the obituaries section of *The New York Times*: Caleb Porter, 52, Fashion Executive. He died of pancreatic cancer. Jude vomits his breakfast. He wants his razors but lately has been trying not **cut** himself during the day.

These days, Jude's morning routine has a new step: he enters the bedroom and crawls in bed beside Willem for five minutes before he "kiss[es] Willem somewhere near, but not on, his mouth" and then leaves for work. But he doesn't do this today—he can't. He writes Willem a note instead, and then he tries to drive to work—but then he breaks down and cries and reads Caleb's obituary another time. He reads that Caleb had a partner, and he wonders if Caleb beat his partner like he beat Jude. Jude is about to start the car when Harold calls him. He's read the paper, too, and he's glad that Caleb's death was painful.

Jude arrives at work and is grateful that he has a lot to do. Andy texts him and, like Harold, expresses gratitude that Caleb suffered before he died. Later, Jude gets a text from Willem to say that he'll be held up late at a meeting with a director and won't be home until 11:00. Jude is relieved. He leaves the office early. When he arrives home, he goes straight to the bathroom and **cuts** himself more than he has in months.

The narrative flashes back to the night Willem told him about his feelings for him. Jude can hardly believe Willem at first—he thinks he's joking. Jude has always pictured Willem with someone beautiful and smart and female, and Jude is none of those things.

With no transition, the narrative jumps from Willem, just before he declares his love for Jude, to Jude learning of Caleb's death. The narrative explicitly leaves the reader hanging, then, regarding whether Willem told Jude about his love, and whether Jude returned Willem's feelings. It remains to be seen how this unsettling news will affect Jude—will hearing Caleb's name, even under such circumstances, resurface painful memories? Jude's sudden desire to harm himself suggests that this is the case.



This passage makes it clear that Jude has indeed accepted Willem's feelings for him—and seemingly returns them himself. (It's not clear how far back this happened, though, since the narrative jumps forward an unspecified amount of time.) And yet, as is so often the case with Jude, nothing good can happen to him without something bad and painful happening, too. Here, he learns of Caleb's death, and it deeply unsettles him. Whereas Harold feels that Caleb deserved to die a young and painful death, Jude's shocked reaction suggests that his feelings about the news are more complex. Harold sees the world as essentially fair: a bad person was punished. Jude, who has seen no shortage of punishment and pain throughout his life, isn't so sure that this is how things work.



Andy, like Harold, conceives of the world as essentially fair: it's a place where bad people deserve punishment, and good people deserve reward. But, again, Jude's failure to join in his friends' morbid celebration—combined with his self-harm—suggests that he has more complicated, nuanced thoughts about Caleb's death.



Jude's response to Willem's admission here is the same as it was when Willem told him a friend of Robin's was interested in him—one of disbelief. Jude's self-image is so warped by unresolved trauma that he cannot fathom why anybody would deem him worthy or desirable.



Jude tells Willem he needs to really think things through. After Caleb, Jude swore he'd never put himself through this again. On the other hand, Willem has never done anything to hurt or betray or humiliate him. Jude agrees to give it a try. And when he approaches Willem in the kitchen and tells him, Willem runs to him and kisses him. Jude instantly sees Brother Luke's and Caleb's faces in his head, and he apologizes to Willem for not being better. But Willem isn't angry, and Jude tries to relax.

Jude swore off love after Caleb because, ever since Brother Luke (and as affirmed by Caleb), he's known that the only people he's capable of attracting are cruel people who aim to hurt and betray him. It's a big step for Jude, then, when he agrees to give things a chance with Willem. Yet, the traumatic flashbacks to Luke and Caleb that Jude experiences just from kissing Willem suggests that it won't be an easy path ahead for the two of them.



Jude is constantly afraid that he'll disappoint Willem, even about small things, like his aversion to coffee—he can't stand tasting it on Willem's mouth, because it reminds him of Brother Luke. Willem understands and promises not to drink it anymore, even though Jude doesn't explain why it's a problem. Jude also tells Willem that it's going to take a while for him to feel comfortable enough to have sex. Willem promises Jude that he will wait for him.

Already, it's clear that Jude's unresolved trauma will drastically affect his ability to have a healthy, functional relationship with Willem. Jude's aversion even to coffee, which reminds him of Brother Luke, demonstrates how viscerally present his nightmarish, abusive past remains. It remains to be seen if Willem's compassion and kindness will be enough to help Jude work through these issues—or if it ultimately turns out, love simply isn't enough.



Jude has learned that he likes when Willem presses himself against Jude in bed and swaddles him, wrapping his arms around Jude's torso, and his legs around Jude's legs. He likes the feeling of his touch. But it's been months now, they still haven't had sex, and Jude worries that Willem is getting impatient. It took him three months to even take his clothes off in front of Willem. And one night, when Willem reaches his arm underneath Jude's shirt without warning, Jude recoils so fiercely that he flings Willem off the bed. Jude apologizes profusely, but inside he's so scared that if Willem sees him naked, he'll think he's disgusting, just as Caleb had.

Jude's anxieties stem from his misguided belief that he has to earn people's respect, love, and compassion. His abuse at the hands of Caleb, Brother Luke, the other monks, and whoever else has abused Jude taught Jude that love was conditional and could be taken away at a moment's notice. But Willem, unlike these others, shows Jude that he deserves patience, kindness, and to have his boundaries respected. Will a kind person in his life be enough to put Jude on a path toward recovery? Will Willem be able to get through to Jude in the way Ana did so many years before?



The next night, Jude quickly removes his clothing and crawls into bed, flinging the blanket over his body. When Willem gently places a palm on Jude's back, Jude sobs; he feels so exposed. Jude tries to go to the bathroom to **cut** himself, but Willem holds him down.

Jude is trying to open up, but the problem is that he's not doing it for himself, to confront his unresolved trauma—he's doing it to please Willem. In so doing, he only feeds one of the self-destructive behaviors that his history of abuse has conditioned him to do.



The next morning, Jude walks out to the kitchen and finds Willem sitting there, looking tired. Willem sees him and apologizes; he didn't know that touching Jude's bare back would be so traumatic. That morning, they lie in bed together, and Jude tells Willem about how he got various **scars**—how he'd been beaten when he ran away from the home once, and then the wounds on his back had gotten infected. When Willem asks when the last time anyone saw Jude naked was, Jude lies and says that Andy is the only person who's seen him naked since he was 15.

Increasingly, Jude seems willing to confide in Willem about details of his past he's kept hidden for decades. Though Jude seems to be doing this to appease Willem rather than to help himself, it's at least a step toward recovery and might foreshadow additional milestones ahead.



Every night, Jude tries to take off his clothes. Sometimes he succeeds, and other times, he fails. He's amazed at how casually Willem can be naked. He still can't believe that Willem would actually want to be with him. One night, he dreams that Harold is paying Willem to be with him.

Just as Jude's scars—and the way he hides them—symbolize Jude's unresolved, suppressed trauma, Willem's nakedness symbolizes Willem's mental wellness and openness to being vulnerable and honest around others. Jude wishes he could be as comfortable being naked as Willem, but more than this, he wishes he could be as forthcoming and comfortable with others as Willem. Finally, Jude's nightmare about Harold reflects Jude's lingering doubts about the relationship: it seems like Willem loves him, but Jude's trust issues make him doubt the sincerity of Willem's love.



The night that Jude finds out about Caleb's death, Willem comes home late. He and Jude talk about Willem's meeting with the director and the new film he's shooting (*Duets*), which is about a closeted gay man and closeted gay woman, both music teachers in a small town, who spend decades married to each other before coming out. Then they begin to kiss (Jude still has to keep his eyes open, or else he pictures Brother Luke or Caleb). Jude finally tells Willem about Caleb. Willem is shocked to hear that Jude was in a relationship. After some prodding, Jude finally comes clean to Willem about Caleb. He confesses to lying about the injuries he supposedly got in a car accident all those years ago.

On the one hand, it's a huge step for Jude to confide in Willem about his relationship with Caleb, given how much shame, humiliation, and sadness Jude associates with that period of his life. On the other hand, though, Willem seems taken aback at Jude's admission—he hadn't even known that Jude was seeing anybody then. So, this passage suggests that Jude's pathological secrecy may become (if it isn't already) a major source of tension in their relationship. Jude simply isn't able to return Willem the honesty that Willem gives Jude, and this could complicate things.



Willem runs from the room after Jude tells him about everything Caleb did to him. Jude waits in the bedroom. When Willem enters, Jude can tell he's been crying. Willem composes himself and then tells Jude that he needs for Jude to share things like this. Then he leaves to make drinks for them both.

Willem is clearly upset by Jude's admission—though whether he's upset to learn that somebody hurt Jude, that Jude lied, or some combination of the two (i.e., that Jude's lies prevented Willem from being there for Jude in his hour of need) remains unclear. What is clear, though, is that Jude's secrecy is driving a wedge between Jude and Willem.



After Caleb beat Jude, Jude never heard from Caleb again, but he looked Caleb up on the Internet every so often. He'd see photos of Caleb smiling at work events and art shows and markets. He wonders if Caleb also kept tabs on him. Thinking about this now, Jude wonders why he can never leave the past in the past—why can't he move on and just enjoy the present? Willem returns with two glasses of whiskey. Jude sips from the glass. The drink warms him. Jude kisses Willem. It's the first time he's initiated a kiss, and he keeps his eyes closed this time, too. He hopes the kiss will tell Willem everything he can't say aloud.

Jude's meditations on leaving Caleb in the past may as well extend to Jude's broader history of abuse. It's framed as a step forward that Jude is thinking about how his past is making his present miserable, but he still tends to blame himself, as if he's irrationally choosing to hang on to his trauma. Jude's kiss to Willem, the first kiss he's initiated, is a major development in their relationship and, in a broader sense, Jude's ability to be intimate. It's effectively a peace offering Jude extends to Willem: an action that tells Willem he's trying to be more forthcoming, even if it doesn't happen all at once.



Usually, when Kit is in town, he and Willem go out to eat. So Willem knows that Kit will be wary when Willem invites him to have lunch at **Greene Street**, but he does it anyway. Willem doesn't think that his relationship with Jude is bad, but he knows that Kit might not see it that way. Still, they've told only a handful of people about their relationship. Everyone is incredibly supportive, though JB takes things a little harder and feels as "betrayed" and "neglected" as they suspected he would feel—Jude remarks to Willem that JB has always been in love with Willem.

At Jude's suggestion, after the initial reveal, Willem invites JB over to **Greene Street** so they can discuss the relationship. JB stays for dinner, and over the course of the meal, he gradually comes around. He asks Willem if Willem plans to go public about it (Jude thinks Willem shouldn't, but Willem wants to). When JB asks how the sex is, Willem lies and says it's great, though he and Jude have yet to have sex.

After JB leaves, Willem examines Jude, who is sleeping. He looks at the "miserable terrain" of Jude's **scarred** body. Some nights, when Jude is deeply asleep, Willem turns on the lights and examines Jude's body more closely. He's amazed at the body's capacity to heal itself. Jude's body reminds him of the lava fields he once saw while shooting a film in Hawaii.

The sex remains an issue. Willem remembers how once, after they'd been together for six months, he placed his hands down Jude's underwear, and Jude made a noise that sounded like a suffering, dying animal. This moment, Willem realizes, was the first time he was afraid. He'd always thought that Jude would, with time, overcome his aversion to sex, or that Willem could heal Jude if he was gentle and patient enough. And Willem's desire for Jude grows more intense every week. But what if things never change?

Kit arrives for lunch the next day. Willem gets right to the point and tells him about Jude. Kit groans; this is what he'd thought Willem was going to tell him. He processes things for a minute. Kit tells Willem he's happy for him, though he cautions him that being openly gay will mean that Willem will be typecast from now on. Willem says he doesn't consider himself gay, though. Regardless, his career doesn't matter to him: Jude does. Jude also isn't supportive of Willem going public with their relationship. They've fought over it often: Jude fears that Willem will grow to resent him if his career suffers because of their relationship.

Once more, Willem demonstrates that he prioritizes his relationships over his ambition. The novel never states the year(s) in which it is set, but Willem seems to anticipate that Kit will disapprove of Willem publicly seeing a man, thinking it will hurt his chances of winning leading (heterosexual) roles. JB's unhappy response to news of Willem and Jude's relationship shouldn't be a surprise to the reader at this point—his feeling "betrayed" is comical, but it also underscores the underlying selfishness that defines his personality.



Willem could be lying about his and Jude's sex life simply to avoid any ridicule that JB might respond with if he were to discover that Willem and Jude haven't had sex yet. On the other hand, though, it's also possible that Willem himself is ashamed and disappointed at his and Jude's sexless relationship—either because he misses sex, or because he thinks it's his fault that Jude has yet to feel comfortable enough to be intimate with him.



Willem looks at Jude's body's physical ability to heal and, perhaps, thinks that Jude's mind is capable of this same degree of healing. But is this a reasonable comparison for Willem to make? Or has the trauma Jude experienced inflicted wounds that are too deep to heal?



Willem seems to realize that Jude isn't recoiling to his touch, specifically, but to the sensation of touch itself. At the same time, though, it seems hard for Willem not to take Jude's aversion to intimacy personally. Willem wants to believe that his love and patience should be enough to heal Jude, but this is turning out to be untrue, and it's driving a wedge between the two of them.



Kit, as Willem expected, isn't happy about Willem's news—or Willem's intention to go public with his relationship with Jude, and what this will do to Willem's career. Also note that though Willem claims that his decision to go public is about him loving Jude more than his career, he fails to consider how the public relationship will affect Jude. He assumes that Jude's reservations have to do with how the publicity will affect Willem's career—not Jude's own.



Kit keeps the story under wraps for a couple weeks, but eventually a magazine story breaks the news. It happens while Willem and Jude are vacationing in Hong Kong. Jude is mentioned by name, as well as his profession and high-ranking position at Rosen Pritchard and Klein. For the first time, Willem realizes that Jude may have wanted to keep their relationship public for his own reasons, as well. Willem feels awful. He knows he should comfort Jude, but he can't. He goes for a run instead.

Willem runs through the city and agonizes over his thoughtlessness. How had he not considered Jude's feelings about going public? This makes him think about their relationship more broadly. What if the things that Willem has enjoyed aren't enjoyable for Jude, too? The other day, for example, they took a shower together for the first time. Jude was silent afterward, and his eyes looked dead. Willem remembers Andy's cautionary remark when Jude told him he would be telling stories about his past to Willem in lieu of going to therapy: "Willem's not a health-care professional [...] He's an actor."

When Willem returns to their hotel room, Jude hugs him and tells him it's going to be okay. Jude seems confident, and this comforts Willem more than Jude's words themselves. Jude's confidence reminds Willem that their relationship isn't so one-sided: for as often as Willem has saved Jude, Jude has been there for Willem to listen about his anxieties and frustrations with his career.

Jude interrupts Willem's reverie to announce that he's ordered breakfast. Willem thanks him. Then he asks if they can sing together—they've been practicing every morning for the past two months to help Willem prepare for his role in *Duets*. Willem struggles with keeping the right pitch, but Jude is a patient teacher. This morning, Willem finally feels like he'll hit the right note, and he does. He also realizes that his voice sounds better with Jude's than it does on its own.

Willem seems so determined to show Jude how worthy and loveable he is that he's lost sight of Jude himself, failing to account for Jude's opinion on how visible their relationship is. Willem thinks he's acting in Jude's best interest—but he's only doing what he thinks is best for Jude, not what Jude has determined is best for Jude. This is a small-scale version of the way well-intentioned friends treat Jude in general: they're so driven to "fix" or heal him that they fail to consider what Jude wants (or doesn't want) out of life.



There are a number of reasons Jude might not have enjoyed the shower—for instance, earlier in the novel, it's revealed that Caleb once sexually assaulted Jude in the shower. As Willem considers Andy's cautionary remark, it seems that he's finally acknowledging that his relationship with Jude is a bigger challenge than he initially thought it would be. Though Jude has begun to open up to Willem about his past, simply talking isn't enough. For someone who's been through as much as Jude has, professional help may be needed—in other words, love, on its own, won't fix everything.



Willem is right: his and Jude's relationship isn't completely one-sided. Still, though, Jude's unresolved trauma, combined with Willem's unrealistic expectation that he can "fix" Jude on his own, puts immense and unhealthy pressure on both of them. It seems plausible that this pressure will only continue to build unless something drastic changes.



Willem, sitting beside Jude at the piano and admiring the way that Jude's voice supports his own, seems convinced more than ever of their relationship's underlying foundation of equality. He seems not to regard caring for Jude as an undue, extra burden. As Willem sees it, his willingness to care for Jude is no more admirable than Jude's willingness to help Willem with his singing. Whether this is a reasonable or rational assessment remains to be seen; Jude's condition is severe and, perhaps, not something he'll ever overcome—and it's quite possible that Willem is more in over his head than he realizes.



PART 5: THE HAPPY YEARS: CHAPTER 2

The first time Willem left Jude, it was to travel to Texas to shoot *Duets*. This was 20 months ago, and it was a disaster. Jude immediately had two episodes with his back, and then with his feet and legs. For the first months of his and Willem's relationship, his health was stable. Now, it's mid-September, and Willem is getting ready to leave again. As has become a tradition with them, they have a Last Supper at a fancy restaurant on Saturday, and then they spend Sunday talking about logistical things that Jude will need to tend to while Willem is away. Their relationship has "become both more intimate and more mundane," and Jude loves it all.

This Sunday, Jude and Willem discuss what they need to do for the **house** they're building upstate—Malcolm is designing it. It's the first place they'll have created together since Lispenard Street all those years ago.

The night before Willem leaves, Jude lies beside him in bed and wonders if he'll have to have sex tonight. This is the one thing he doesn't mind about Willem being away. They've been having sex for 18 months now—the first time they had sex was 10 months into their relationship. Jude wasn't ready, but he knew that Willem wouldn't be patient forever, so, the night after Willem returned from shooting *Duets*, he finally let it happen. Willem seemed hesitant when Jude told him, but Jude lied and said he was ready, and Willem believed him. First, though, Jude had to tell Willem about all the diseases he had—diseases that could "share his filth with another."

*Note that the narrative has skipped ahead a significant amount of time—at the end of the previous chapter, Willem was just preparing for his role in *Duets*. Willem and Jude still appear to be going strong, though Jude's health has suffered unpredictable setbacks. Though their relationship has "become both more intimate and more mundane," as one might expect of a long-term relationship, Jude, on his own, hasn't undergone the same positive developments; his health remains in flux.*



The new house symbolizes the strength of Willem and Jude's relationship. From a practical standpoint, it's the product of the economic successes that have allowed them to build it. Symbolically, the house is a testament to the strength of Willem and Jude's relationship and the life they have built together.



Jude starts having sex with Willem, even though he doesn't want to, for fear that Willem (like everyone else before him) will abandon Jude if Jude no longer has anything to offer him. Thus, although Willem isn't forcing himself on Jude, Jude isn't exactly a willing participant in their shared intimacy, either. His trust issues and feelings of inadequacy coerce him into sex, and then unresolved trauma resulting from childhood sexual abuse prevents him from enjoying sex. Also note that Jude thinks of his diseases (STDs) as "his filth," implying that the diseases originated within him due to some moral or physical flaw. In reality, the diseases were given to him—by Brother Luke, maybe, or by some other person who abused Jude. But Jude still can't accept that he was a blameless victim of abuse, and so he believes that the resultant diseases are his fault, too.



Jude desperately hoped that sex with Willem would be different than it's always been before, but it wasn't. That first time, Willem turned to him—Willem, whose face he so loved—and asked him how it was, and Jude lied and said it was good. He hoped that maybe the next time this would be true. But it never has been. Jude has since created some rules for himself. 1: He'll never say no to Willem, who has given up so much to be with him. 2: Just as Brother Luke had instructed so many years before, he'll "show a little life, a little enthusiasm," and act like he likes sex with Willem. 3: He will initiate sex once out of every three times that Willem does, so that Willem doesn't suspect that he doesn't like it.

Jude knows it's not fair, but in the back of his mind, he dislikes how obviously Willem enjoys sex with him. Jude lies to Willem and claims that the accident he was in as a child has made it impossible for him to get an erection, but this isn't true—according to Andy, there's nothing physical that's standing in Jude's way. Caleb hadn't minded, but Willem does: he wants Jude to enjoy sex, too, and for a while, he pesters Jude about seeing if there's a pill or shot he can take to help him.

Still, despite all these roadblocks, Jude hopes that one day, he'll start to enjoy himself. He even orders self-help books about surviving sexual abuse (though he doesn't think this term applies to what happened to him) which he reads late at night, locked inside his office. But so far, nothing has seemed to work. Jude tells Willem that he won't mind if Willem has casual sex with women, but Willem insists that he doesn't need this. Meanwhile, Willem has been pressuring Jude to talk to him about his childhood sexual abuse.

It's heartbreaking for Jude to realize that sex—even with someone he genuinely loves—will (at least for now) always remind him of his childhood sexual abuse. In this regard, Willem's love is not enough to overpower the hold Jude's unresolved trauma has over his mind and body. Jude hopes and wants things to get better in time, but it doesn't seem like this will happen. Also note how Jude is using advice that Brother Luke—Jude's former abuser—gave to him to navigate his sex life with Willem: "show a little life, a little enthusiasm," Brother Luke told Jude to ensure that the "clients" Luke forced on Jude would enjoy their time with him. When Jude heeds this advice in the present, then, there's little difference between the sex he has with Willem and the sex (rape) he had with his clients as a young boy. Sadder still is that Willem seems to fall for Jude's act as readily as Jude's former clients, pedophiles who actively exploited and harmed Jude. This passage aptly illustrates how Jude's unresolved trauma causes his past to meld with his present, causing him yet more suffering, even as his circumstances have, on the surface, improved.



Jude's (admittedly subjective and unfair) distaste for Willem's sexuality is further evidence of how Jude's unresolved past trauma bleeds into (and poisons) his present. Jude sees Willem as someone who uses him for sex, and in this way, Willem appears no different than Caleb or the many people who abused Jude as a young child. Meanwhile, Willem's suggestion that Jude might find a pill to help him achieve an erection underscores how superficially Willem understands Jude's problems: he believes Jude's issues with sex are purely physical, not the complicated, painful manifestation of unresolved trauma. He underestimates Jude's condition, even if he doesn't mean to. For as supportive and helpful as Willem is, and although Jude has begun to open up to Willem about his past, the fact remains that there are limitations to how well they can empathize with each other's struggles.



Though there are serious issues in their relationship, Jude is making real efforts to confront them—this passage, which occurs several hundred pages into the novel, is the first time Jude has picked up a self-help book. It's a small step, admittedly, and not a pursuit Jude seems to find terribly helpful, but his actions suggest a shift in his thinking. He seems more confident in his ability to get better and enjoy life.



Once, while lying beside each other in bed, Willem asks Jude if he likes having sex with him. Jude lies and says yes, but he wonders what would happen if he said no. Jude starts **cutting** himself more. At first, he's disciplined and only cuts once a week. But over the past several months, things have gotten out of hand. It's become a major source of tension in their relationship. Jude can never tell when Willem will be mad about the cutting and when he'll let it go. Sometimes, Willem asks Jude if Jude considers how it makes him (Willem) feel to see the person he loves hurt himself. Other times, he asks Jude how he'd feel if Willem started cutting himself.

Since being with Willem, Jude has shown signs of improvement—or at least, signs that he's more hopeful about his theoretical ability to heal. But once Jude and Willem start having sex, Jude's wellness starts to decline, as evidenced by his more frequent cutting. Not only is sex triggering for Jude, but it also seems that Jude is disappointed in himself for being triggered: he thought everything would fall into place over time because he loves Willem, and that's turned out not to be true. Another thing that being with Willem doesn't improve is Jude's self-harm. Now, whenever Jude cuts, he has to weight the relief that cutting brings him against the hurt that his self-harm causes Willem.



Some nights, Willem won't let Jude go to the bathroom alone. Jude accuses Willem of infantilizing him. Willem pleads with Jude to at least try to stop—if not for himself, then for Willem. Over time, their old morning ritual (where Jude, dressed for work, would lie beside Willem for just five more minutes) is replaced by a new one, where Willem examines Jude's hands for more **cuts**.

Willem's pleading is evidence of his worldview. He believes that there is logic and rationality to Jude's struggles: that if Willem only says the right thing or makes the right bargain, then Jude will stop hurting himself and improve. But in reality, things are not so simple.



One time, when Jude thinks Willem is asleep, he goes to the bathroom and starts to **cut** himself. Then he looks up and sees Willem standing in the doorway, watching him. Willem silently walks toward Jude and takes the razor from his hand. Then, without warning, Willem slashes himself across his chest. He cries out, and then he slashes himself twice more. "You see what it feels like, Jude?" Willem asks him. He only stops after the sixth cut. They sit side by side against the bathroom wall. Willem wonders how Jude can do this to himself—it's so painful. Then he starts to cry. If Jude were happy with him, Willem says, he wouldn't be cutting himself.

This painful scene is further evidence of Willem's rational view of pain and suffering. He wants to believe that coerced empathy can cause Jude to stop cutting himself: that if Jude can only understand the pain that Willem feels when he watches Jude hurt himself, then Jude can be convinced to stop his self-harm. He also tries to analyze Jude's self-harm empirically, reasoning that there's a positive correlation between Jude's happiness and Jude's compulsion to harm himself; therefore, thinks Willem, Jude's self-harm is evidence that Jude is not happy. But in reality, there is no neat formula to apply to Jude's pain and suffering, nor any guarantee that Willem can fix it.



Things are weird after this. Willem and Jude say good morning and good night to each other, but they don't talk about anything real. This continues for four nights. After this, Jude begs Willem for forgiveness. Willem sighs and says he's not mad—he sees that Jude is trying to get better—but he wishes that Jude didn't have to try at all. He wishes things could be easier.

This moment marks a major development in Jude and Willem's relationship. This seems like the first major fight they've had. And the seriousness of the fight shows that Jude's issues aren't something that Willem can fix through love, patience, and compassion; indeed, it's unclear if Jude is capable of healing at all. Willem finally recognizes the unfairness of their predicament, too. He sees that he and Jude are both trying—and he sees how unfair it is that they have to try at all. Jude's abusers have left him with unwieldy psychological baggage, and it's unfair that he must carry this burden—but this is the way it is.



Jude tries some tactics of his own to stop himself from **cutting**: he swims, or he bakes, or he cleans. Willem suggests another method: every time Jude feels tempted to cut himself, Willem says, he should wake him (Willem). Jude does this late one night. Willem holds Jude tightly, and he orders Jude to do the same—they'll pretend that they're falling through the air and are "clinging together from fear." Jude does this, and he imagines himself sinking through the mattress, down to Richard's apartment below, and finally to the layers of fossils and oil that lie at the earth's core. He feels his and Willem's body melding together as one. That morning, he feels good and clean: like "he is being given yet another opportunity to live his life correctly."

Despite his and Willem's major argument, Jude continues to fight for his relationship. He busies himself as best he can to fend off the urge to harm himself. He distracts himself with chores. Willem tries to lift some of Jude's unfair burden onto himself by inviting Jude to wake him up whenever Jude has the urge to cut. This allows Jude to confront his pain with Willem beside him. And though Willem can't totally empathize with Jude's pain, he can at least be by Jude's side, just as he was the night Jude had a painful episode so many years ago in college. Willem's strategy seems to work: eventually, Jude's urge to harm himself passes, and he awakens the next morning feeling restored and ready to take on life. So, once more, the novel teases the notion that Willem's love and support might be enough to help Jude work through his unresolved trauma.



Then it's time for Willem to leave again to film a new movie. Jude is glad, since he knows how anxious Willem had been since they went public with their relationship. Malcolm comes by the Saturday after Willem leaves. He and Jude drive north to Garrison, where Willem and Jude's new **house** will be. Malcolm and Jude reach the house, and Malcolm confers with the contractor about everything that needs fixing. Jude likes watching Malcolm in his element—it's clear how much he cares about houses. And he knows what houses mean to Malcolm: they're a way he can control the world around him.

Jude and Willem's new house is symbol of the life they've built together. The fact that Malcolm is designing the house infuses the house with more symbolic meaning, too. The house symbolizes Jude and Willem's lifelong friendship with Malcolm. It also reflects Malcolm's passion and creativity—and the way this creativity allows him to shape his life into something meaningful. Design gives him a sense of control and meaning and balance that life so rarely affords him—or, within the world of the novel, anyone.



Less than a month before Willem is set to return from his shoot, Jude wakes up and thinks he's in the trailer of a semitruck being driven along the highway. He panics and runs to the piano and plays all the Bach partitas he knows in rapid succession. The music blocks the memories.

This scene offers another glimpse into part of Jude's past that the novel has yet to explore. It's still not clear how Jude got his injuries, and maybe this scene with the semitruck offers a clue into this mystery.



Jude remembers his first year in law school. It's that year that his life starts to come back to him—that the memories appear. He'll be in the middle of some mundane task, like frosting a cake at Batter, or working at the library, when all of a sudden he sees Brother Luke on top of him, or the pattern of a client's sock, or the first meal that Dr. Traylor gave him when Jude arrived in Philadelphia. The memories seem to say to him, "Did you really think we would let you abandon us?" Over time, Jude also realizes how much of his past he's edited—for example, a movie he remembers seeing about two detectives who visit a college student to tell them that the man who hurt him has died in prison wasn't a movie at all: it was his life. These were the men who arrested Dr. Traylor.

This passage demonstrates how Jude's trauma comes back to him in uneven and unpredictable waves. So, the triggering incidents that Jude is experiencing now (for instance, seeing Brother Luke's face when he kisses Willem) have occurred throughout his life. With this, the novel suggests that though Jude has had high and low periods over the years, he is very much in the same space, psychologically, that he's been his entire life. In other words, he has not improved. Also note Jude's mention of Dr. Traylor. It's unclear who, exactly, this is, but given Jude's negative associations with him and that he was arrested, the reader can assume that he's one more person who has hurt or abused Jude in some way.



Jude adopts a highly structured schedule to try to keep the memories at bay. Two weeks before Willem returns, just as the memories seem that they're ready to fade into nothing, "the hyenas return," or maybe they haven't left ever since Caleb brought them into Jude's life. Finally, Jude can't hold back any longer, and he opens the door to the back emergency staircase, which he hasn't opened since the night Caleb attacked him. He wants to throw himself down there and knows it "will appease the hyenas," but he holds off for now. Somehow, it's too degrading and extreme, even for him.

But Jude's compulsion to **hurt himself** grows stronger. Not wanting to break his promise to Willem, who was so pleased when Jude told him that he's hardly cut at all while Willem's been away, Jude devises a new plan: he'll pretend that he's burnt himself in a cooking accident. A voice inside Jude's head tells him that "this planning is something only a sick person would do," but Jude tries to ignore it. The next day, he changes into a short-sleeve T-shirt and rubs an olive oil-soaked paper towel into the space above his palm, and then he lights a match and brings it to his skin. The pain is excruciating. A sequence of scenes from his past flashes inside his head. Jude smells flesh cooking, and at first, he thinks he's left something on the stove. Then he comes to and realizes he's smelling his burning flesh. He panics and runs the faucet over his arm. Then he passes out.

When Jude awakens, he's on the kitchen floor. He feels feverish, and he sees the hyenas licking their snouts behind his closed eyes. He has a fever the next day. The pain comes in heavy, unbearable waves. By Monday, it's clear that the burn has gotten infected. Jude changes the bandage. He tries not to scream as clots that are thick and black as coal fall from his arm. The pain is so bad the next day that he goes to see Andy. Andy gasps when he sees the wound. For a moment, Jude is worried that he's finally hurt himself badly enough that Andy won't be able to fix him.

Jude has managed to stay afloat for decades, just barely keeping his trauma at bay. But Caleb's abuse broke something inside of him, and it seems he's no longer able to suppress "the hyenas." Jude never explicitly states why Caleb has affected him so intensely, but it seems that, for much of Jude's life, he's only had to grapple with memories of his history of abuse. Being with Caleb, however, forces Jude to physically relive his past trauma—and to endure additional abuse. With this, everything that Jude kept suppressed and hidden beneath the surface suddenly bubbles over, and everything becomes too much for him to manage—even with Willem by his side to love and support him.



Jude borrows this excruciating exercise in pain from Father Gabriel who, many years before, burnt Jude's hand as punishment for stealing. Jude's reasons for recreating this childhood punishment are unclear. On the one hand, there is a practical explanation: it will be easy enough for Jude to justify the resultant injury to Willem (by lying that he burnt himself while cooking). Beyond this practical reason, Jude seems (somehow) to find burning himself less degrading than throwing himself down the stairs. This reaffirms the notion that Caleb's abuse has affected him more intensely than other abuse he's endured in the past. Also note the out-of-body experience Jude has upon lighting himself on fire—when he smells his burning flesh, he initially thinks he's left something on the stove. This illustrates one of the ways Jude's self-harm functions as a coping mechanism: it allows him to abandon his body, which carries the physical and psychological weight of years of abuse.



The burn is a more serious injury than Jude thought it would be, as it's incredibly painful and infected. This guide presents a pared-down description of Jude's wounds presented in the novel, but the visceral, nauseating quality of that description still comes through. These graphic details underscore the depth of Jude's pain: if his self-harm injuries symbolize his unresolved trauma and inner struggle, then it's clear, by the severity of Jude's latest wound, that he's in a dark place, maybe the darkest place he's ever been. Indeed, Jude reinforces this theory when he worries that he's finally hurt himself badly enough that Andy won't be able to fix him.



Andy works on Jude for an hour. When he finishes, he asks Jude how Jude managed to get a perfectly circular third-degree burn on his hand. Jude lies and says he had a cooking accident. Andy doesn't believe him. He tells Jude that he'll tell Willem if Jude doesn't. He's done lying for him; Jude is sick and needs to get help. Andy also warns Jude that if Jude keeps lying to Willem, it really will be his own fault if Willem leaves him. He accuses Jude of being selfish. Jude spends three nights in the hospital. He returns home on Friday. Willem will be back later that evening, but Jude still hasn't decided what to tell him. He got Andy to extend his deadline by nine days, so he'll have until next Sunday—the Sunday after Thanksgiving—to decide.

The narrative shifts to Willem's perspective. Willem thinks about how happy he is to come home to Jude. He also considers how going public with their relationship has affected his career. After the news dropped, Willem experienced insecurity he hadn't felt in years. He considers, now, all the times he's had to reinvent himself over the years, refashioning himself after he was no longer a brother or a son. And then he was a high-profile gay actor, and now, somehow, he's "a high-profile traitorous gay actor," a title he earned after he declined to make a speech on behalf of a gay-rights organization.

Willem is highly protective of his relationship with Jude for a number of reasons. First, Jude told Willem that he and Caleb hadn't told anyone about their relationship. Willem knows that Jude's secrecy was at least in part motivated by shame, but he also wants their relationship to exist for them alone. Second, Willem has only recently gotten the hang of this relationship, which is so much more difficult than he imagined it would be. Despite this, he's never thought it an option to leave Jude. He also struggles to not "repair Jude," since it seems immoral to see a problem in a person "and then not try to fix that problem."

Sex has been a major issue for them—it took 10 months for them to be intimate for the first time. Then this issue had solved itself when Willem came back from shooting *Duets* and Jude announced that he was ready. Willem enjoyed himself so much, and Jude seemed so "sexually dexterous" that Willem felt, once more, that everything would be okay.

Andy has tried to balance his role as Jude's friend with his role as Jude's doctor; that is, he's tried to respect Jude's boundaries while also honoring his obligation, as a medical professional, to keep Jude alive and well. But this injury forces Andy to reconsider his strategy, and so he finally tells Jude that he'll no longer respect Jude's privacy if Jude continues down this path of self-destruction. Another important detail to note: Andy spells out how Jude is hurting others besides himself when he self-harms: he's also hurting the friends who care about him and want him to be well. Jude's self-harm hurts them because they hate to see him in pain. But it also hurts them, perhaps, because it's a visual reminder of their failure to help Jude.

In this passage, Willem ruminates on the fluid nature of identity. Throughout his life, his shifting circumstances and relationships have forced him to reevaluate who he is and what responsibilities he must honor. The idea that a person's identity changes as they assume different roles throughout their life, much like an actor becomes different characters throughout their career, is one of the book's central ideas. This passage illuminates one aspect of Willem's personality that has been on the backburner for much of the novel: Willem's insecurities about his career. Willem is often content to be a good friend and companion and could care less about his success as an actor. But his thoughts in this passage show that he's not immune to the pressure to succeed professionally.



Shame fuels much of Jude's secrecy, and so Willem wants their relationship to be the rare happy secret that Jude hides from the world. This passage also reinforces how Willem, like Andy, struggles to balance his desire to respect Jude's boundaries with his moral (and selfish) drive to keep Jude alive and well.



Willem mistakes Jude's apparent sexual adeptness with enjoyment—he thinks that Jude's "sexually dexterous" performance is proof that he enjoys and has sought out sex in the past. In reality, Jude's "dexter[ity]" is the consequence of years of sexual abuse. Willem doesn't seem to know that Jude (presumably) hasn't had sex of his own volition, and his ignorance leads him to subject Jude to additional discomfort and trauma.



One night, though, Willem has a dream that Jude is lying awake next to him after they've just had sex, and he's crying. The dream upsets Willem, and the next night he asks Jude if he likes sex with Willem. He waits, unsure of what Jude will say, and when Jude says yes, Willem feels reassured once more. Still, every so often, whenever Willem asks Jude a question with only one "acceptable" answer, he worries that Jude has only given him the answer he thinks Willem wants to hear.

Willem also knows that Jude's **cutting** is connected to their sex life. He struggles with how little he understands it. It makes him wonder if the person he enjoys isn't the real Jude at all—that the self-destructive Jude is.

Willem gets occasional "progress reports" from Andy and Harold, who reassure him that he's not imagining the heightened self-confidence he sees in Jude—that Jude really is getting stronger and better. Sometimes Willem fears his "optimism" hides his true fears about the relationship. And sometimes he worries they're just "playing house." But at the end of the day, he knows that Jude is the person he wants to be around, and he's happy.

Still, it's odd to think that Willem, who is so simple, ended up with Jude, who couldn't be more complicated. Once, Willem told Jude that all he wanted was work he liked to do, a roof over his head, and a person who loved him—he was a simple person. Jude laughed and said that that was all he wanted, too. "But you have that," observed Willem.

Now, in bed, Jude confesses that he's been trying really hard not to **cut** himself, but sometimes it's hard not to; he wants Willem to understand if he messes up. Willem says he will.

Willem, if only subconsciously, has doubts about Jude's honesty in their relationship. This passage further illustrates how Jude's secrecy and unresolved trauma hurts not just himself but the people who care about him. Willem is clearly making an effort to be mindful of checking in on Jude and gauging his comfort level, but his efforts are only so useful if Jude can't be honest with him.



Willem realizes that Jude's struggles aren't some parasite he can cut out of Jude's body. They are an integral part of his personality—and they might always be, no matter how hard Willem tries to get rid of them.



Willem's fear that he and Jude are simply "playing house" expands on Willem's realization that Jude's dark side is (and might always be) part of who Jude is. Willem wants to tell himself that, with time, the happy, confident person Jude is when they are "playing house" might replace the self-destructive, suffering Jude. At the same time, though, he fears that Jude's good days aren't a sign of progress—they're simply Jude faking happiness to please Willem.



This passage illustrates Willem's misconceptions about the relationship between suffering and misfortune, and happiness and fortune. Willem believes that Jude, because he has everything he wants—a good job, a home, and a person who loves him—ought to be happy. Jude's experiences show that this isn't true: in reality, good fortune doesn't guarantee personal fulfillment or happiness.



Jude is implicitly preparing Willem for when he confesses to burning himself. It's clear that Jude has taken Andy's warning seriously and wants to make the effort to be more honest with Willem.



The next day, Jude and Willem drive to Harold's for Thanksgiving. They're happy. But then, as Willem waits in the car while Jude pays for something at the gas station, Andy calls Jude's phone. Willem picks up. Without waiting for a hello, Andy says, "Have you told Willem yet?" Andy stutters when he realizes that it's Willem who answered. Before hanging up, Andy orders Willem to ask Jude about the **burn**. Willem is puzzled; Jude told him he burned his hand when he was cooking fried plantains with JB. They had an argument about it—the burn was bad—but Willem didn't think Jude was lying.

Jude returns to the car and senses something is off. Willem asks him about the **burn**. Jude is evasive, but then Willem yells, and so Jude tells him the truth. Willem is angry and demands to know why Jude did it. Jude says he promised not to cut himself, but this just makes Willem angrier. He's also angry because Jude still hasn't told him about Brother Luke, even though he promised he would.

Willem yells, and as he does this, he's ashamed. He knows he's scaring a person he loves. He also remembers something he yelled at Andy in a fit of rage once before: "You're mad because you can't figure out how to make him better and so you're taking it out on me." Willem knows he needs to stop, but he can't. Jude, on the verge of tears, says that Brother Luke was a brother at the monastery, and Jude ran away with him. Willem presses Jude to go on, even though he's crying now. They don't speak for the remainder of the drive.

Jude and Willem arrive at Harold and Julia's **house**. Willem is exhausted and naps all day. He comes down for dinner—it's just the four of them—and tries to act normal, but Jude is very silent. After dinner, Jude excuses himself and goes straight to bed. It's obvious to Harold and Julia that something is wrong. Willem joins Jude in the bedroom later and can tell he's only pretending to be asleep. Somehow, Willem manages to sleep.

Andy's phone call alerts Willem to Jude's dishonesty before Jude has the chance to tell Willem about the burn himself, so the reader (and Willem) will never know whether Jude would have told Willem about the burn of his own accord. The previous passage implies that Jude has been preparing to tell Willem, but there's no way to know if Jude would've gone through with it. By extension, there's no way to know how seriously Jude is taking Andy's threat to start being more honest or expect Willem to leave him. At any rate, Andy's gaffe likely will create tension between Willem and Jude.



Jude's evasive response to Willem's question suggests that he might not have told Willem about the burn if Andy hadn't called. This is a huge setback for Jude and Willem, then: it shows that Jude has broken his promise to Willem not to hurt himself. In addition, it shows that Jude isn't making all that much progress in his efforts to be more honest with Willem. Willem's reference to Brother Luke suggest that his anger isn't even about the wound: it's about the strain that Jude's secrecy puts on their relationship.



Willem knows that he's not really mad at Jude: he's mad at himself for failing to be someone that Jude feels comfortable opening up around. He's mad that his love isn't enough to "make [Jude] better." At the same time, though, Jude's suffering—even if it's not his fault—places an enormous burden on Willem, and it's clear that Jude's inability to get better and start to confront his unresolved trauma is creating an unstable dynamic in Jude and Willem's relationship.



Willem and Jude's inability to act normal shows how serious this fight is. Throughout the novel, houses symbolize security and possibility of self-invention. Harold and Julia's house, for instance, has often been a place where Jude can feel protected and like he's part of a family. But this fight with Willem totally shatters this sense of security, revealing its underlying fragility. Willem's rage proves to Jude that everyone in his life—even people like Willem, with whom he's come to feel (relatively) safe and secure—is capable of hurting him.



Willem wakes up and sees that a light is on the bathroom. Jude isn't in bed. Willem frantically runs to the bathroom. He finds Jude in there, fully dressed and looking stricken. Willem pins Jude down and starts removing his clothes. He's looking for a razor, but he knows that to an outsider, it would look like rape. Willem pulls down Jude's underwear and sees fresh **cuts** on his leg. Then he loses it. He calls Jude "crazy" and says he needs to be hospitalized—he knows how stupid it is to cut himself on his legs, where he is so likely to suffer an infection.

Jude fights back, though. He demands that Willem stop trying to fix him—he's not Hemming. He's "not going to be the cripple [Willem] gets to save for the one [he] couldn't." Willem tells Jude he can go ahead and **cut** himself to pieces, then, since it's clear he loves that more than he loves Willem. Willem returns to the bedroom and screams into his pillow. After a while, Jude returns to the bedroom and cautiously lies down in bed, like some wounded animal.

The next morning, Willem walks downstairs and joins Harold in the kitchen. He lies about having to be back for a meeting in the city later that day. Jude comes downstairs and announces that he'll leave, too. In the car, they do not speak. Willem wonders if what Jude said about Hemming is true. They arrive at **Greene Street** before noon and still aren't speaking. Jude plays the piano. Willem gets his things to leave the apartment and tells Jude not to wait up. It's the day after Thanksgiving and most places are closed, so he just wanders around. And then it's night. He wants to be alone, so he takes a taxi to his old apartment on Perry Street, which he's been subleasing to a friend.

Willem cautiously enters the apartment and lies down on the bed. Then his phone rings. He picks up, thinking it might be Jude. But it's Andy. Willem breaks down and tells Andy about everything that happened on Thanksgiving. Andy tells Willem he messed up and urges him to go home and talk to Jude—and to make Jude talk to him in return.

Willem does this. When he returns to the **apartment**, Jude is huddled inside a corner of the closet, and Willem joins him there. They both apologize. Jude pauses and then asks Willem if he's going to leave him. "No," says Willem. But Jude needs to get help. And if he doesn't, then Willem will leave. Jude asks if he can just tell Willem about his past instead of a psychiatrist, but Willem says this won't be enough; Jude needs to get help.

In comparing Willem's efforts to find fresh cuts to rape, the novel explores morally the shifty task of helping someone who doesn't want to be helped. Willem feels a moral and personal obligation to stop Jude from hurting himself, yet doing so requires him to hurt Jude even more, by ignoring Jude's boundaries and depriving him of bodily autonomy. In addition, Willem's concern for Jude, when it reaches its boiling point, transforms into anger (i.e., Willem calling Jude "crazy") that further hurts Jude.



Willem's angry response to Jude suggests that Jude has hit the nail on the head in suggesting that Willem is treating Jude as a second chance "to save" someone after failing "to save Hemming." Jude's self-disparaging remark (calling himself a "cripple") hints at another key idea: that his suffering is just as incurable as Hemming's terminal illness was, and that Willem is no more capable of saving Jude than he was Hemming.



Up until now, Willem has thought that his relationship with Jude was based on love alone. But Jude's accusation about Hemming has forced him to consider if that's really true—if he could in fact be using Jude to absolve his guilt over failing to save Hemming. This raises a bigger question: is it even possible to sustain a relationship on love alone? Can a person love someone else without wanting (and getting) something from them in return? Finally, Willem and Jude's home together has symbolized their relationship, so when Willem packs his things and leaves, it reflects the current turmoil in their relationship.



Andy believes that Willem and Jude can get past this major rift if they just open up to each other. But is it really so easy? Jude has made progress in opening up to Willem, however minor that progress may be, and still, Jude's inability to work through his unresolved trauma puts a huge amount of stress on them both.



Willem's return to the apartment figuratively and literally expresses his desire to make amends and restore harmony in his and Jude's relationship. Willem's insistence that Jude get help shows that Willem no longer has any illusions about his ability to help Jude on his own: love, Willem understands, is not enough to fix Jude, and it's only hurting them both to pretend it is.



They fall asleep for a time, and then Willem wakes to Jude telling him about his past. They cling to each other as Jude speaks and Willem listens. After Jude tells Willem about Brother Luke, Willem asks him again if he enjoys sex, and Jude says no, he doesn't—not ever. He says it's just "too late" for him. They're in the closet for over 24 hours. They emerge on Saturday afternoon, and Willem listens as Jude calls and leaves a message for Dr. Loehmann. When Jude hangs up, Willem asks him to pick up where he left off: what happened after Montana?

This is a major development in Willem and Jude's relationship. Jude's past is full of horrors, but it's clear that Brother Luke is a subject that's most painful for Jude to think about and that's had the biggest impact on his life. This is because, unlike Jude's other abusers who abused him out of hatred and disgust, Luke "loved" Jude, even as he abused and manipulated him. That is, Luke showed Jude that people who love him are also capable of hurting and betraying him. Jude's actions in this passage are contradictory. He insists that it's "too late" for him to recover from his trauma, yet he then calls Dr. Loehmann to start therapy sessions for the first time in his life. Has Jude had a change of heart? Or is he merely putting on a show for Willem's sake, all the while knowing that the therapy sessions will be useless?



Jude hardly ever thinks about this time of his life. At the time, it felt like an out-of-body experience. The narrative flashes back to Jude's time at the home in Philadelphia, when he first experienced this "dreamlike" state. At night, the counselors at the home would often wake Jude, take him to the office, and do things with him. Then they'd lock him back inside the small room he shared with a disabled boy (whom the counselors also abused).

This section begins what seems to be the last piece to Jude's mysterious past. Thus far, the novel has shed light on Jude's early childhood at the monastery, his experience being sex trafficked, his brief time at the boys' home before his mysterious accident, and his time with Ana afterward. But how the accident itself happened has remained a mystery—until now.



In March, a few months after the Learys rejected him, Jude tries to run away after a counselor drops him off at the community college where he takes classes, but he's found and returned to them. Rodger, the cruelest counselor, hits Jude so hard his nose bleeds. At night, after Jude returns to the home, they take him to the barn and beat him almost until he blacks out. It's this beating that gives him the back wounds that get so badly infected that he must be hospitalized.

Jude's life after the police rescued him from Brother Luke isn't much of an improvement; in a twisted way, it's possibly worse. Luke abused Jude but also claimed to love him, and Jude was young and naïve enough to believe this, even if it wasn't true. Now, he's in an environment not unlike the monastery he fled years ago, surrounded by authority figures who abuse their power to hurt and deride Jude. This reinforces his pre-existing feelings of worthlessness and shame.



Jude returns to the home. His back heals and **scars** into a lumpy, distorted mess. The other kids make fun of him, and Jude, for the first time, sees himself as disgusting and deformed. He thinks back to Luke's promise (though he knows it was a lie) that everything would end when he's 16, and he can't help but hope that this is still true: that his misery will end and his new life will begin on his 16th birthday.

This passage explains the origins of Jude's body-image issues. Before, Jude practiced self-harm to reclaim agency over his body and manage his pain (physical and emotional) on his own terms. As such, his scars symbolized his strength and will to survive. Now, though, as the kids tease him for his scarred, distorted appearance, his scars are no longer empowering: they are another source of shame and evidence of his brokenness. Also note, though Jude is in a dark place, he still holds out hope that his circumstances will improve. This is so different from the person he becomes as an adult, especially after Caleb.



Months pass, and Jude's injuries heal. He attends classes at the community college again. One of his professors is kind to him, and impressed with his work, and he asks Jude if he's considered attending college. Jude is suspicious of the professor's kindness, though—Luke had been kind, too—and mumbles that he won't be going to college.

The novel has shown how, many years later, Luke abuse has led Jude to develop trust issues. This passage offers an earlier example of the effects of Luke's abuse: Luke taught him that even people who love him are capable of betraying and hurting him, and this makes Jude suspicious of the kind professor's intentions to offer help.



When Jude returns to the home that night, the counselors take him to the barn, and one of them, Colin, rapes him. Jude imagines himself leaving his body and soaring silently through the night sky. When he returns to his body, he sees that Colin has fallen asleep on top of him. Jude grabs Colin's coat and jeans and wallet, and he runs into the night. He reaches the road, and from there he catches rides with truck drivers. He says he's headed to Boston, which is where Luke used to say Jude would attend college. Jude has sex with many of these men in exchange for rides. He feels shameful, but he tells himself that he's sacrificing himself to save himself. Years later, Jude will wonder why he didn't simply run away and buy a bus ticket and not deal with the truck drivers. But the thought hadn't even occurred to him.

It's unclear exactly why Jude chooses to engage in sex work to escape to Boston when he could simply buy a bus ticket. One might interpret Jude's actions as an exercise in self-harm, not unlike his cutting. Before, Jude would cut himself to reclaim ownership of his body, something he lost when he became a victim of human trafficking. Voluntarily engaging in sex work, then, allows Jude to exercise agency over his body. In addition, Jude, at this point, is still hopeful that he can have a happy, better future—from this perspective, engaging in sex work, even if he finds it shameful, is worth the reward of a happier life that might lie ahead.



Jude reaches Philadelphia and decides to rest awhile. The last thing Jude remembers is walking to a gas station and falling asleep. When he awakens, he's in the backseat of the car, and there is Schubert playing over the stereo. A stranger is driving. He's got half-rimmed glasses and a toneless voice. Jude falls asleep again. When he awakens, he's in a **house**, in a warm room with a fireplace. The man emotionlessly orders Jude to come to the kitchen and eat something, and Jude obeys. In the kitchen, he eats a burger and fries. He thanks the man. The man asks if Jude is a "prostitute," and Jude says yes, and that he has been for five years. The man disgustedly tells Jude that he can smell Jude's venereal diseases on him. Luckily for Jude, though, the man is a doctor and has some antibiotics that will help Jude.

The strange man mentions he's a doctor, so it's possible that he is Dr. Taylor. (Earlier in the novel, it's mentioned in passing that Dr. Taylor was arrested for the role he played in Jude's leg and back injuries.) At any rate, the reader should be wary of this man. He gives Jude something to eat and promises to give Jude antibiotics to heal his infection, but Jude has been let down by practically every adult figure who should have helped him, and the disgust that the man has for Jude's history of sex work certainly raises a red flag.



The man leads Jude down a ladder to a basement. To Jude's surprise, the basement is finished, and there's a furnished bedroom there. The man gives Jude some clothes to change into. As the man turns to leave, Jude stops him. Then he starts to unbutton his shirt. But the man tells Jude he has to recover first.

Jude unbuttons his shirt because he assumes the man will demand sex (rape—Jude is still underage) in exchange for the food and shelter he's provided Jude. Jude's long history of abuse has taught him to be skeptical of kindness. He believes that he doesn't deserve kindness and compassion unless he can offer something—usually his body—in return.



Jude sleeps. In the morning, he walks up the stairs. The door is locked, but somebody has passed a tray of food and some pills through the small, cat door-like hole at the base of the door. He calls out, but nobody responds. Jude eats the food and takes the pills, then he returns to his bed and sleeps the entire day. He wakes to the man standing over him. "Dinner," says the man. Jude follows him upstairs. But before he does, he notices that his own clothes are missing—including the money he had in his pants pocket.

Upstairs, the man feeds Jude meat loaf and mashed potatoes. He explains that he's a psychiatrist. He asks Jude if he likes being a "prostitute"; Jude doesn't, he explains, but it's the only thing he knows how to do. After dinner, the man leads Jude back down to the basement. He keeps looking at Jude. Before they part ways, Jude introduces himself to the man as Joey. The man replies that he is Dr. Traylor. Then he shuts the door behind him, leaving Jude alone in the basement.

Jude feels a little stronger the next day. He scans the bookshelves in the basement and selects a book, [Emma](#), and reads for a while. In the afternoon, he walks upstairs and finds a new tray, this one labeled "Lunch." He joins Dr. Traylor for dinner that night. Afterward, he offers to help Dr. Traylor wash the dishes, but Dr. Traylor says that Jude is "diseased," and he doesn't want him touching his food. He asks Jude where his parents are and gets angry when Jude takes too long to respond. Jude says he doesn't have any parents. Dr. Traylor asks how Jude "bec[a]me a prostitute," and Jude flinches before explaining that someone else "helped" him get into sex work.

Jude tries to find something sharp to **cut** himself with that night, but he can't. So, instead, he presses his fingernails into his legs until he punctures the skin. Jude continues to improve. On his third morning there, Jude walks upstairs and tries to wriggle through the cat door, but it's too small. He pokes his head through the door and examines Dr. Traylor's **house**. He can see that the front door has many locks on it. The house is impersonal but still fascinates him: it's only the third house he's ever been in his entire life. The first house was a client's house in Salt Lake City. The man was very wealthy and important, Luke had explained, and the house was enormous. Later, in adulthood, Jude will fetishize houses and always dream of having a place of his own.

That the man has locked the basement door, effectively imprisoning Jude in the basement, raises another red flag. The man is feeding and housing Jude, yes, but it's fairly clear that something else—likely something nefarious—is going on. This is further evidenced in the fact that the man seems to have stolen Jude's money and clothes, effectively making Jude dependent on the man's generosity for his survival. This is a technique Brother Luke used: he cut off Jude from the outside world and made Jude rely on him for everything.



Joey was the name that Luke gave Jude to use with clients. Jude uses the name now to distance himself from the shameful (to Jude) acts he expects Traylor will force him to do. Also note: Jude, as an adult, is extremely apprehensive about starting therapy, and about doctors in general. Maybe this is because of the bad associations he has with Dr. Traylor. Doctors are supposed to heal people, and Dr. Traylor will eventually hurt Jude (though what exactly he does to Jude remains unknown at this point).



Dr. Traylor's question of how Jude "bec[a]me a prostitute," insinuates that Jude got into sex work of his own volition—that it's his own fault that he's "diseased" and on the streets. Jude's answer that someone "helped" him get into sex work doesn't do much to correct Dr. Traylor's incorrect assumption; Jude's response that "someone" (Brother Luke) "helped" him get into sex work completely disregards how Luke manipulated and lied to Jude to force him into sex work and keep him under his control.



Jude's life has been nothing but uncertainty, suffering, and betrayal. Self-harm, by contrast, offers him the consistency and control he hasn't been able to find elsewhere in his life. This passage also touches on another of the novel's major symbols, houses. Jude sees having a house of his own as another way he can regain control of his life: he's been taken to so many houses and forced to do so many traumatic things. If he had a house of his own, he could decide what he does there and whom he lets inside.



Dr. Traylor lets Jude out that night and they have dinner. Jude cautiously tells Dr. Traylor that he's feeling better enough "to do something" if Traylor wants—Jude knows he'll probably have to do something to repay Traylor for helping him. Traylor declines, explaining that the pills will take 10 days to fully get rid of the venereal disease.

Jude now expects to be abused by default. He assumes that people won't help him or be kind to him without expecting something in return. Granted, Traylor has given Jude every reason to be wary of his generosity, but Jude's assumptions also show how years of abuse have made him jaded and distrusting.



Jude returns to the basement that night and thinks about what he can do. He's nearly strong enough to run, but he doesn't have his clothes or shoes. He can sense that something is off about Dr. Traylor, and he knows he needs to get away. He rests as much as possible the next day to conserve his energy. But Dr. Traylor doesn't let him out that night. That night, Jude goes hungry and dreams that Dr. Traylor's house is full of other boys locked in rooms.

One main difference between young Jude and adult Jude is his willingness to fight for his life. By the time he's an adult, he's undergone so much suffering that he seems indifferent toward life at best, and at worst, and no longer invested in living. Also note that Dr. Traylor, immediately after Jude has informed him that he's feeling better, fails to give Jude food. This raises another red flag. Traylor seems to want Jude to remain weak.



The next morning, Jude finds his breakfast tray and his pills. This goes on for six more days. Sometimes food appears while he is sleeping, and sometimes there is none. On the 10th day, Dr. Traylor appears before Jude, a fire poker in one hand. He orders Jude to remove his clothes. Then he orders Jude to remove his pants. He makes Jude perform oral sex and threatens to beat him with the fire poker if he resists. This pattern repeats itself for days. Jude can't help but think that things are only going to get worse. After one session with Traylor, Jude pleads with Traylor to let him leave. But Traylor says Jude must repay him for his "ten days of hospitality."

Traylor's insistence that Jude must repay him for his "ten days of hospitality" helps explain why Jude is so skeptical of kindness and compassion later in life. His abusers have conditioned him to believe that he has to earn their kindness and respect—that he doesn't deserve kindness and respect as he is.



On the sixth day, Jude decides to try to attack Dr. Traylor with a book as he unbuttons his pants and then escape. He selects a copy of *Dubliners* as his weapon. When the time comes, Jude smacks Traylor across the face. Traylor screams, and Jude scrambles up the stairs. Jude manages to open the front door's many locks and escape outside, but he's very weak (Traylor has been starving him) and there are no houses in sight. Traylor catches up with him and beats him with his belt. Then he brings Jude back to the house.

Again, it's striking to see Jude struggle so fiercely to survive. By the time he's an adult, a lifetime of suffering, grief, and hardship have left him disillusioned with life and doubtful that anything good awaits him in the future. Alas, Jude's determination doesn't do him much good; he's beaten into submission, and this might help explain why adult Jude behaves so passively around people who hurt him, like Caleb.



The beatings continue until one day—12 weeks later, Jude will later learn—Dr. Traylor tells Jude that he's disgusting, and he wants Jude to leave. Traylor says he'll decide how Jude leaves. Nothing happens for a few days. One day, Jude realizes that it's his birthday: he's 15. More days pass. Then Dr. Traylor comes downstairs with his fire poker and tells Jude to get up: it's time for him to go.

The novel revealed in an earlier section that Jude was 15 when he received his leg and back injuries, and that Traylor was somehow involved in the incident. Also note Traylor's odd remark about deciding how Jude leaves. Does Traylor's cryptic remark have something to do with Jude's accident? Does he have something planned? At any rate, it's clear that Traylor is doing everything in his power to crush Jude's spirit.



Jude obeys. He follows Dr. Traylor outside to Dr. Traylor's car. Traylor motions for Jude to get into the trunk. They drive a ways, and then the car stops. Traylor opens the trunk. They're in a remote field, and it's freezing outside. Dr. Traylor tells Jude to run, since Jude "like[s] running so much." Jude takes off, the car right behind him. At first, it feels good to stretch his legs and run. But Jude's energy quickly diminishes, and soon he starts to fall. Each time, Traylor yells at him to get up. Then he says, "The next time you fall will be the last." Jude gets up, but he can't run anymore: he can only stumble along. He feels the car bumping against his back. He can't go on anymore and resigns to die. The next time he falls, he doesn't get up, even as Dr. Traylor yells at him. Then, he hears Dr. Traylor rev the engine, and he sees the headlights flying toward him, and then Dr. Traylor runs over him with his car.

Jude "bec[o]me[s] an adult" after the accident. Ana once told him that everything would get better. She meant Jude's legs, but she meant life in general, too. And things did get better. Just as Luke had predicted, Jude's life changed when he turned 16 and attended the college of his dreams. And every year that Jude doesn't have sex, he feels cleaner and stronger and healthier. Looking back, Jude sees how his life has completely switched course: he's gone from having nothing to having everything. He remembers how Harold once told him that "life compensated for its losses," and so he gradually lets his guard down.

One night, at a party at Richard's place, JB remarks, jokingly, that Jude really has it all: "The career, the money, the **apartment**, the man." Willem always gets upset at what he sees as JB's jealousy. But Jude knows JB is both joking and sincerely applauding him for everything he's earned. And so Jude only laughs, and he tells JB, "I've been lucky all my life."

Finally, it's revealed how Jude gets his life-altering leg and back injuries. Traylor carries out this violent attack to punish Jude for disobeying him. By extension, then, the injuries Jude suffers as a result of the attack are the consequence he must face for exercising agency over his life and challenging his abuser. In this light, adult Jude's tendency to shut down in response to abuse (as he does with Caleb, for instance) makes more sense. He's been conditioned to feel powerless against his abusers, and so shutting down and waiting for the abuse to stop is the last defense mechanism he has left.



Following his accident, Jude "bec[o]me[s] an adult" and gains a fresh perspective on life. He tries to reinvent himself, on his own terms this time, and focuses on the elements of his life he can control. Abstaining from sex allows him to regain control over his body, which his many abusers have taken from him. Being extremely secretive about his past allows Jude to regain control of his mind and heart. This highly defensive Jude is the Jude that's introduced at the beginning of the novel, and it's only after Harold's advice about "life compensate[ing] for its losses" resonates with Jude that he considers how his present coping mechanisms might actually be hurting him. He resolves to let others into his life, and this brings readers to the novel's present day; recall that this flashback to the incident with Dr. Traylor began as Jude prepared to tell Willem about his life after Brother Luke.



Jude's remark about "be[ing] lucky all my life" is a bit of wry humor, but there seems to be some truth in it. In the previous passage, it's revealed that Jude begins to let his guard down following Harold's advice that "life compensate[s] for its losses," and his humor in this passage reflects his relative ease.

PART 5: THE HAPPY YEARS: CHAPTER 3

Willem starts having sex with Claudine, a jewelry designer who is an acquaintance of his. It's purely physical, and Willem always goes home to **Greene Street** after they are together. Tonight, as Willem gets up to leave, she pleads with him to stay five minutes more. He does so, then he showers and leaves.

Willem returns to **Greene Street** and gets into bed with Jude. He feels guilty, even though Jude has said it's okay for Willem to have sex with other people. Willem hasn't told Jude about Claudine, but he can tell that Jude knows. This is the summer after the awful Thanksgiving where Jude finally told him about everything. Afterward, Willem didn't know how to handle everything Jude had told him. One night, during dinner, Jude sadly noted that Willem couldn't even look at him anymore. Willem apologizes, but he's so scared he'll say the wrong thing.

After that Thanksgiving, they also discuss how to handle their sex life. Jude tells Willem he can do whatever he likes, but Willem doesn't want this: he doesn't want to force anything on Jude, and he doesn't want Jude to feel that he owes Willem sex. It's difficult, though. Willem still wants to have sex with Jude, but he can no longer do something that he knows Jude doesn't want.

That was eight months ago. Things have gotten better: Jude is more affectionate and relaxed, and he's not **cutting** himself as much. Willem is particular about his sexual partners. He picks women he knows are only interested in the physical side of things. He tries to keep this life separate from his life with Jude, but a story about him appears in a gossip column. Jude doesn't see it, but JB does, and so Willem lies and says that their relationship has been open from the start. Willem is sad that his home life and sex life must exist separately, but he's come to understand that every relationship is unfulfilling in some way.

The "five minutes more" line mirrors the ritual Jude and Willem have (Jude, dressed for work, approaches the bedside to say goodbye to Willem, Willem pleads with Jude to stay for five more minutes, and then they lie next to each other in bed until Jude has to leave). It's unclear whether Willem is cheating on Jude with Claudine, or if he and Jude have an arrangement of some kind. At any rate, having their special ritual play out with someone so uncomplicated and so well-adjusted to intimacy only underscores the severe problems that exist in Jude and Willem's relationship due to Jude's unresolved trauma.



Once more, the novel teases that Jude is on the cusp of breakthrough and recovery—only to immediately backtrack and leave Jude in a worse place than he was before. Earlier, it seemed that confiding in Willem would initiate Jude's healing and recovery. However, Jude has confided in Willem and not much has changed. In fact, things have gotten worse: Willem now realizes the full extent of Jude's trauma, and it's a huge burden on him. He seems to realize that knowing and loving Jude isn't going to erase Jude's past.



Knowing the full story of Jude's past makes it morally impossible for Willem to have sex with Jude. He understands now how Jude's learned assumption that love is conditional sometimes makes Jude do things he doesn't want to do, and Willem refuses to cause Jude additional suffering.



Willem realizes that while a relationship can offer respite from many of life's hardships, it will never be a catch-all solution. Everybody is broken or hurting in one way or another, and so everyone is limited in their means to alleviate all suffering in others and in themselves. One step toward feeling fulfilled, then, is to accept the necessity of compromise. Willem forgoes sex with Jude in order to alleviate Jude's suffering. In turn, Jude forgoes exclusivity in their relationship so that Willem can satisfy his physical needs elsewhere. It's not perfect, but the novel has repeatedly shown that life is never perfect nor rational.



Willem thinks about a play he was in in college, which was about an unhappy married couple. In one scene, the husband argues that relationships can give you some things, but they can't give you everything: you can't have sexual chemistry, conversational chemistry, financial stability, intellectual chemistry, and loyalty. You can pick three of those aspects, but you must look elsewhere for the fourth. Willem hadn't believed this when he was younger, but now, he does. Malcolm chose reliability with Sophie. And what has Willem chosen? Friendship, he supposes.

Willem's memory of the college play underscores the idea that no relationship is perfect and powerful enough to give a person everything they need to feel fulfilled and free from suffering. Relationships alleviate suffering and loneliness—but they don't eliminate them entirely. A person has to decide what's important to them and go from there. And this is exactly what Willem and his friends have done: Malcolm has chosen reliability; Willem has chosen friendship; JB has chosen ambition. What Jude has chosen remains a little murky, but perhaps it is enough that he has chosen to live.



Lately, Willem has started to lose faith in therapy. His “shrink” of many years now, Idriss, tries to get him to talk about his sex life. But Willem realizes he doesn't want to see his relationship as full of problems that need fixing. He wants to believe that it works as it is. Willem doesn't discuss his disillusionment with therapy with Jude, though, since he wants him to continue going to Dr. Loehmann; Jude has finally admitted that he is ill, and Willem wants Jude to heal.

This passage marks another key moment in the development of Willem and Jude's relationship. Now, Willem is more focused on meeting Jude where he's at and making their relationship work, rather than trying to “fix” Jude. It's crucial that Jude has admitted that he's ill. For so long, he's been too ashamed of his body and his past to reclaim ownership of them, but confronting these things is an essential step in the healing process.



When Willem is in London for a shoot, Jude calls him to confess that he's actually missed the past four sessions with Dr. Loehmann: he goes to the doctor's office, but then he sits in his car and reads for an hour instead. Willem smiles at first, but then he hears Dr. Idriss's voice in his head: how does Willem feel about Jude not doing the thing he promised Willem he'd do? Lately, though, Jude's shortcomings haven't fazed Willem. He's come to accept that “he would never be able to cure him,” and that he must focus on alleviating Jude's suffering, instead.

Compromise in relationships only works if it goes both ways; Willem laughs off Jude's admission in the moment, but it's possible that Jude's resistance to therapy will create problems for the couple somewhere down the line. For now, though, Willem is content to accept Jude as he is, do what he can to help him, and take things one day at a time. He's focusing on all that he and Jude have instead of all that they lack.



Willem has sex with a woman that night. He brings her to the **flat** in London that he and Jude bought recently. When they bought it, they realized that, by coincidence, there was an orthopedic surgeon's office on the ground floor of the building. They joke, but they both know that Jude's legs and health will only worsen over time. One day, he won't be able to walk or even stand. They buy the flat on Harley Street because it has wide hallways and large doors.

In a way, the reality of Jude's declining physical health seems to help Willem be more practical about Jude's mental health—Willem is now more capable of healing Jude's mind than his legs, and this is okay. The homes Willem and Jude build together often symbolize the status of their relationship; the flat, thus, symbolizes Willem's decision to accept Jude as he is and adjust his own life to accommodate Jude's needs.



Now, Willem and Jude are driving to their **house** upstate, which they call Lantern House. Harold and Julia join them there. It's late July, and Willem has convinced Jude to take a day off work—Jude has been in a chipper, energetic mood lately, singing to himself as he works in the kitchen. During times like these, it's easy for Willem to slip back into his old habit of seeing Jude as inherently fixable. He knows Idriss would tell him he's "dreaming of miracles," but isn't all of life a miracle? Willem could have stayed in Wyoming and been a ranch hand. Jude could have ended up in prison or died. And yet, here they both are.

Willem is sitting beside the pool, talking with Harold and Julia, when he suddenly thinks about Hemming. During those last days, he'd call Hemming and the nurses would hold the phone to Hemming's ear. Willem would beg Hemming not to leave him, even though the nurses had told him to say the opposite. He realizes that he hasn't been able to let Jude go, either. After Jude's suicide attempt, he stood beside Jude's hospital bed and listened to Jude beg him to let him die. But Willem couldn't do it.

Jude is 46 the last time he walks on his own. It's Christmastime, and he and Willem are vacationing in Bhutan. Jude has to use his **wheelchair** more and more, and he's always in pain. When Jude and Willem return to **Greene Street**, Jude finds that he can't lift himself out of bed. Jude can get out of bed the next day, but he still can't walk. In January, he finally sees Andy. Andy explains that there's nothing particularly wrong with Jude—he's just getting older.

Willem's career continues to flourish. His performance in *The Poisoned Apple* earns him a nomination for a prestigious award. Jude is in London on a business trip the night that Willem wins the award, and he watches on TV as Willem thanks Julia and Harold—his in-laws—and Jude, his "best friend" and "love of [his] life." In his meetings the next day, Jude's coworkers congratulate him and ask why he didn't attend the ceremony. Jude says he doesn't like things like that. But this isn't the full truth.

It's easy for Willem to fall into the trap of oversimplifying Jude's condition. He wants to believe that a good day is irrefutable evidence that Jude is getting better—that they mean the bad days are forever behind them. But Jude's trauma runs deep, comes in waves, and is far too complicated for Willem to make sense of on his own. At any rate, Willem seems to have settled on a balance between pragmatism and hopefulness regarding his future with Jude and Jude's capacity to heal.



Willem raises a complicated question: is it appropriate to compare Jude's mental health issues to Hemming's terminal illness? Is wanting to prolong Hemming's physical suffering as immoral as wanting to prolong Jude's psychological suffering? Willem seems to think so. Willem's recollection of Jude's suicide on this otherwise happy day also shows that Willem is always worried that Jude might attempt suicide again—that Jude's mental health is more precarious than Willem's optimism in this chapter's opening passage might have made it seem.



Forced to use his wheelchair more frequently these days, it's becoming harder for Jude to ignore his illness the way he used to. And his visit with Andy implies that Jude shouldn't expect many improvements from this point forward: as Andy has warned Jude all along, Jude's condition will only grow worse with age.



This scene plants some doubt in the reader's mind regarding the how stable Willem and Jude's relationship is. Thus far, it's seemed that they've settled into a rhythm that, while not ideal, works for both of them. But the fact that Willem can publicly call Jude his "best friend" and the "love of [his] life"—but Jude can't bring himself to appear at Willem's awards ceremony—suggests that things aren't quite so harmonious as they seem.



Jude remembers JB's fifth show, "Frog and Toad," which features blurred, abstract photos of Jude and Willem together. This show was what really showed all their friends and colleagues and the public that they were a couple. Neither Jude nor Willem caught the reference to Lobel's children's books, so they'd had to buy them. Afterward, they debated who was Frog and who was Toad. They laugh about how Willem has a jacket that looks like Toad. But Jude knows that he's Toad. And he knows "how distorted a couple" he and Willem are, and so he tries to avoid appearing with Willem in public to spare Willem the embarrassment and shame.

Jude is also afraid that someone from his past will recognize and try to reconnect with him. Someone claiming they were at the home with Jude sends him a postcard when he first starts working at Rosen Pritchard—a Rob Wilson, though Jude can't recognize the name. The postcard terrifies Jude. What if this person had contacted Willem instead, and told him all about the things Jude did when he was younger? Later, Jude receives an email and letter from two people who claim to be from his past. The email is innocuous enough, but the letter contains a blurry photo of a young, undressed boy on a bed. Jude mails the letter and photo to the FBI. Every so often, agents come to his office and show him pictures of men, asking if he recognizes any of them.

Time passes. In April, Jude turns 47. In May, while Willem is filming abroad, wounds appear on Jude's calves and don't heal. These days, he's seeing Andy twice a week. There are days where Jude can't walk at all. Injuries that once took weeks to heal now take months. In July, Willem returns from Istanbul, and the wounds still haven't healed. Standing has become too difficult for Jude. He's lost a lot of weight, and he can't swim every morning the way he used to. Jude stops his sessions with Dr. Loehmann (which are mostly silent anyway) to free up time to go to the hospital for sessions in a hyperbaric chamber, which is supposed to speed up his healing.

But as his wounds refuse to heal, Jude knows that amputation is the only remaining option. He tries to be casual about it, but he's terrified. He pleads with his body to hold out, if only for a few more years. By late summer, his situation still hasn't improved. He's sick all the time. Jude and Willem plan Willem's 49th birthday, and Jude jokes about not being alive then; Willem doesn't find this funny.

Frog and Toad, an illustrated children's series, follows the antics of best friends Frog and Toad. Frog is (for a frog) conventionally handsome and charming, whereas Toad is comparatively homely and curmudgeonly. In declaring himself Toad, Jude is expressing his fear that he's not good enough for Willem, and that Willem might one day recognize this and abandon Jude. Jude's fear of experiencing future hurt, though, prevents him from fully enjoying the happiness he has with Willem in the present.



Even though Jude has already confided in Willem about his childhood sexual abuse, he hasn't made peace with his past himself. That Jude feels he behaved shamefully, presumably referring to sex acts he was forced to perform as a minor, shows that he can't yet identify as a victim of sexual abuse. He still blames himself for the bad things that happened to him. The illicit photograph Jude receives in the mail symbolizes Jude's inability to reinvent himself entirely. That he receives the photo at work shows Jude that all the time, wealth, and professional success combined won't ever erase the past.



All at once, whatever progress Jude has made these past few months comes crashing down: Jude's physical health drastically declines, and he stops going to therapy (though his admission about not talking in his sessions suggests that he's never taken therapy very seriously in the first place).



Jude, despite Andy's repeated warnings to the contrary, seems to hold out hope that some miracle will happen and his legs will stop getting worse, even if they don't get better. It's another way for him to deny the reality—or at least, the severity—of his condition. If Jude undergoes a leg amputation, though, he'll have no more illusions about his capacity to heal. He'll have to accept his disability in a very serious way—something he's never done before.



And then it's September. Jude's wounds still haven't healed. One night, he wakes up and finds that he has a high fever. Jude begs Willem not to call Andy. Willem reluctantly agrees. Jude feels better by Saturday and goes to work while Willem meets with a director. He texts Willem on his way out and asks him to invite Richard and India to meet them at a sushi restaurant. Dinner is pleasant, and Jude eats well. But then Jude leans against Willem and passes out.

Jude awakens in a bed and thinks he sees Harold next to him. Then Harold lunges at Jude and tries to rip his clothes off. But then, Harold morphs into Willem. Willem is speaking, but Jude can't make out his words. He pleads for help. And then there's a black emptiness for some time. When Jude comes to, he realizes that he's hooked up to IV bags. Willem is there. He tells Jude that Harold was never there—Jude has been delirious with fever. Eventually, Andy informs Jude that he has a bone infection. Jude stays in the hospital. Harold and Julia come by for a time to look after Jude while Willem is away filming. Andy warns Jude that he could lose his legs. Jude agrees to be hospitalized.

Harold and Julia return to Cambridge to teach, and Jude remains in the hospital. Everyone he interacts with is serious and reserved. But Jude feels weirdly optimistic. A while back, he and Willem started referring to the hospital as "Hotel Contractor," after Andy. These days, though, Willem refuses to joke along with Jude. Things have gotten too serious. Jude is finally released after 10 days. Willem's assistant has hired a driver for Jude, Mr. Ahmed. He also has a nurse, Patrizia, who comes to Rosen Pritchard each day to give Jude an IV drip. And every Friday, Jude sees Andy to have X-rays and track the infection.

Months pass. Harold and Julia join Willem and Jude at **Lantern House** for the holidays. One day, while Willem and Julia are out horseback riding, Jude is feeling stronger than usual and asks Harold to take a walk. Harold hesitates but agrees. Jude loves the quiet peacefulness of the outdoors and feels restored at first. He and Harold set off toward the forest, but it's not long before Jude realizes he's made a huge mistake. He feels dizzy and unsteady. Then he collapses. He hasn't felt pain so intense since he was in the hospital in Philadelphia. Harold tries to lift Jude, but he's 72 now and it's difficult. He tells Jude he's going to run back to the house to get Jude's **chair**—he'll be right back.

Jude's refusal to go to the hospital despite his high fever shows that he's in denial; his poor health is likely the result of his leg infection, but if he accepts this, he'll have to accept the inevitability of amputation, and he's not yet ready to do this. He's not ready to let his disability—and the traumatic experience that caused it—define who he is.



Jude's rapidly declining physical health, combined with a fever, combined with his lingering fear that everyone he loves might one day leave him, results in this nightmarish hallucination in which Harold lunges at Jude as though to attack and violate him. It's clear that Jude is putting his life at risk by putting off the amputation, yet he can't bring himself to do it.



Willem's refusal to play along with his and Jude's old "Hotel Contractor" joke reflects the seriousness of Jude's condition—and Jude's inability to accept the seriousness of his condition himself. Is this a typical case of Jude minimizing the parts of himself he's ashamed of, or is something more serious going on, such as another plan to attempt suicide? Recall that in the days leading up to Jude's earlier suicide attempt, he felt optimistic and relieved (this is a common warning sign in people at-risk for suicide).



Recall that Andy has never approved of Jude's frequent walks, even a decade ago, when Jude was much stronger and stabler than he is now. Thus, it's clearly a bad idea for Jude to go for a walk, and Jude likely knows this. So, why does he insist on walking anyway? Could he really be so in denial about his condition? Is it so painful to acknowledge that he has a disability? Is he trying to overexert himself until he dies?



Harold leaves, and Jude vomits. He's freezing, and he fades in and out of consciousness. The next thing he knows, Willem is beside him. He scoops Jude up and carries him back into the house. Jude can hear Willem yelling at Harold for being so irresponsible. Then, Willem puts a pill in Jude's mouth and forces him to swallow it.

For a while, Willem seemed committed to taking a step back from micromanaging Jude's health and accepting Jude as he is. When he forces a pill in Jude's mouth, then, it shows that a shift has occurred: Willem no longer trusts Jude to know his limits and take care of himself. He's worried that Jude is barreling toward total destruction, and this is his way of, as before, begging Jude to stay.



When Jude wakes, he's in bed beside Willem. Jude apologizes. Then he opens up to Willem about how he struggles to accept his injury. He explains that most people who become disabled probably feel a bitterness at being robbed of something. Jude believes that if he can think of himself as able-bodied, it gives him some power of Dr. Traylor. But now, Jude tells Willem, he sees how selfish it has been for him to pretend that things are okay when they're not. He promises Willem that he'll be more realistic from now on.

Jude's denial of his disability is a coping mechanism he developed to try to work through the trauma of the attack. It's comparable to his self-harm: in continuing to think of himself as able-bodied, Jude can reclaim the legs he effectively lost when Dr. Traylor ran him over in his car. Now that Jude sees how this coping mechanism is effecting Willem, perhaps he'll finally be ready to live with his disability in a healthier manner.



By March, two new wounds open up on Jude's legs. The pain is unbearable, and Jude stays in his **wheelchair**. Another birthday passes. Jude is in and out of the hospital. Then it's July, and the leg wounds still haven't healed. When Jude comes home one afternoon, Andy and Willem are there waiting for him, and they deliver the speech Jude has long anticipated. Andy explains that the tissue in Jude's lower legs will likely never heal, increasing his chance of succumbing to a lethal infection. Andy sees amputation as the only way forward.

Jude's response to Andy and Willem's speech will determine whether or not Jude is ready to come to terms with his disability. If he refuses to amputate, he's putting his health—not to mention Willem's emotional wellbeing—at risk. If he agrees to amputate, it shows that he's making progress in his long journey to make peace with himself and his childhood trauma.



Jude thinks about it for a few days. He worries about Willem seeing him without his legs. Then a few nights later, Jude wakes up with a fever that sends him to the hospital again. On Jude's first night home, he decides to go through with the amputation.

From a practical standpoint, amputation is the obvious solution to Jude's current health problems. But symbolically, Jude's decision marks a major development in his journey to confront his childhood trauma and live with the person he's become.



On Sunday, the night before the operation, Jude and Willem walk around their neighborhood so that Jude can use his legs one last time. The pain is unbearable, but Jude makes it. The next morning, Harold and Julia meet them at the hospital. Jude is prepped for surgery, and then Andy (who will perform the surgery) marks out the relevant spots on Jude's legs. Willem comes in and holds Jude's hands in his. Then he starts to cry, pleading with Jude not to leave him.

This scene with Willem pleading with Jude not to leave him recalls the aftermath of Jude's suicide, in which Jude pled with Willem to let him die, but Willem wouldn't let him. Once more, Willem is pleading with Jude not to leave him. These parallel scenes reinforce how little progress Jude has made over the past few years, and what little power Willem's love has to heal Jude.



Three months after the surgery, it is Thanksgiving. This year, Jude and Willem host at **Greene Street**. Jude has had a harder recovery than anticipated. He got infections twice and had to be on a feeding tube. He's still weak and tired, but he feels the phantom pains less often. At dinner, Jude tries to give a toast, but when he tries to thank Willem, he can't find the right words and everyone starts to cry, so he stops. Dinner is a happy affair. When Jude gets too tired, Willem pushes his **chair** to the bedroom, where Jude hears their guests continue to laugh, eat, and drink. Jude thanks Willem for the good day.

Jude falls asleep and has nightmares. He dreams that Harold is Dr. Traylor. He has bad dreams often these days. Sometimes, they feel so real that he wakes up screaming: "Where am I?" or "Who am I?" Always, Willem is by his side. And Willem whispers in Jude's ear all the things Jude is—a lawyer, a New Yorker—and all the people who call him a friend. "You were treated horribly. You came out on the other end. You were always you," Willem tells him.

It's the Saturday before Labor Day, two years after Jude's legs were amputated, and Willem and Jude are spending the holiday at **Lantern House** with their friends. They've seen so little of them lately: everyone's busy with work. Willem thinks that each new summer is the best one yet. As he's gotten older, he's come to consider his life "a series of retrospectives," sorting it into eras. So far, he's had The Ambitious Years, The Insecure Years, The Glory Years, and The Hopeful Years, among others.

Willem and Jude know that The Awful Years are behind them—it's been two years since Jude's operation. Willem is normally an optimist, but Jude's recovery tested his optimism. Jude was so thin and frail that Willem was afraid to touch him. Many times, Willem would think that this was the end: Jude was finally dying. People think that healing is a "predictable and progressive" line, but it's not; Hemming's healing hadn't been that way, and Jude's wasn't, either. One night, after Jude was strong enough to go back to work, Jude started seizing, and Willem was sure he would die. By Thanksgiving, things were stable. By April, Jude's 49th birthday, he was walking again. And by Willem's birthday in August—nearly a year after Jude's surgery—Jude's gait looked more natural than it had before the amputation.

Another Thanksgiving comes and goes. Jude's tearful thanks to Willem suggests that at least some part of Jude is happy that Willem has fought so furiously to keep him alive. Though Jude's recovery is harder than he anticipated, he is recovering, and his pain is growing less severe. All in all, Jude's prospects look good: he's surrounded by friends who love him, and he's undergone a procedure he was horribly afraid of and come out on top. But will Jude's relative happiness and stability last, or will they eventually give way to suffering and agony, as has happened so many times before?



Willem encourages Jude to consider his identity in a new, more positive light: Jude isn't lesser because he "w[as] treated horribly." He's the same person he's always been, and the mere fact of his existence is proof of his strength, not his brokenness.



Willem's exercise in retrospectively grouping his life into eras illustrates how critically self-reflection and self-invention factor into a person's identity, or, in this case, the cumulative meaning of their life. That work keeps Willem and Jude's close-knit group of friends apart reinforces the idea that ambition often forces a person to sacrifice other important aspects of life, such as friendship. Lantern House, though, is a place they can go to escape the pressures of work and life, figuratively and literally.



Jude's recovery from his amputation, which was the opposite of "predictable and progressive," speaks to the illogical, unfair nature of human suffering and the fragility of human life. As Willem recalls the events of "The Awful Years," it reminds the reader of all that Willem and Jude have been through together and of Willem's tireless dedication to Jude. And the journey Jude undergoes during those years, from near-death to walking more naturally than he did before the amputation, marks the most significant (if not strictly linear) period of progress Jude has had yet. Perhaps, as this section's title suggests, these will be "The Happy Years" for Willem and Jude after all.



That fall, Willem goes to Spain to shoot a new film about two men who traverse the Camino de Santiago, a medieval pilgrimage that ends in Galicia. Jude has always wanted to walk the Camino de Santiago. He and Willem even made hypothetical plans to walk the pilgrimage themselves. As the years went by, though, it became apparent that Jude would never be able to walk the pilgrimage route. Each day that Willem films along the route, he collects pebbles from the roadside to bring back to Jude.

Filming wraps a couple weeks before Christmas, and then Willem flies to Madrid, where Jude is waiting for him. The next day, they take a car to the **Alhambra**; Jude, through a client connection, has arranged for a private tour to celebrate Willem's 50 birthday. (Willem is 51 now, but Jude's long recovery from surgery has put them behind schedule.) Then Jude hands Willem his other present, a book divided into chapters, each containing handwritten notes and illustrations by Malcolm, who'd written his thesis on the Alhambra. At their hotel room that night, Jude says they can have sex if Willem wants to. Jude lies and says it's fine, but Willem can tell it's not, so he doesn't move forward. "I'm sorry, Willem," says Jude. Willem wants to reassure him, but he drifts off to sleep before he can speak.

That night is the only sad moment from this period, though. Sometimes, Willem wonders how Jude might have turned out if he hadn't been sexually abused—if he could've found sex on his own terms. But for the most part, these years are happy. Jude's health scares and the operation are still so fresh in their minds that they're still grateful for each day.

One night in February, Willem proposes that they call this period "The Happy Years." Jude wonders aloud if this might be "tempting fate." Plus, *The Happy Years* is the title of Willem's latest project, which he's going to leave to film next week. Willem doesn't like the title—the film is about the last years of Rudolf Nureyev's life, beginning with his HIV diagnosis and ending a year before his death, and Willem thinks the title is ironic. Jude understands, but, he argues, *couldn't* those years have been happy? After all, Nureyev had a job and partner he loved. And he'd accomplished more than he'd ever hoped he would as a young person. But, Willem argues, Nureyev was sick. Jude counters that this doesn't matter—just because Nureyev had been dying doesn't mean those final years hadn't been happy.

That Jude doesn't attempt to walk the pilgrimage in his condition shows that he's grown more accepting of his disability since his amputation. Plus, he's able to live vicariously through Willem, whose sweet gesture of picking up pebbles to bring back to Jude reaffirms his commitment to supporting Jude through thick and thin.



The Alhambra is a palace located in Granada, Spain. Its construction began in the early-13th century, and it's one of the most well-known examples of Islamic architecture. Throughout the novel, houses have symbolized the life that Jude and Willem have built together. That they celebrate Willem's 51st birthday in such a majestic fortress symbolizes the strength and magnitude of their devotion to each other. Malcolm's book adds another layer of significance, acting as an homage to their friendship. It's notable that JB isn't included in this special occasion, though, suggesting that their relationship has never quite gotten back to where it used to be.



Sex is still a difficult subject for Willem and Jude. Willem's attitude toward it has shifted over the years, though. Now, he's less upset about how Jude's intimacy issues affect their relationship. Instead, he's sad to think of everything that Jude's abusers have prevented Jude from discovering about himself.



Throughout the novel, Jude's periods of hopefulness are repeatedly dashed by horrific incidents of abuse, betrayal, and tragedy. Thus, Jude's worry that Willem might be "tempting fate" by daring to call their present era "The Happy Years" is indeed warranted—though of course, in the world of the novel, there is no such thing as fate, only arbitrary, relentless suffering. Rudolf Nureyev was a celebrated Soviet-born ballet dancer, regarded by many to be the most influential of his generation. He died in his 50s of HIV/AIDS. With its mention of cell phones, the novel seems to take place after the AIDS crisis (though notably, the novel contains no references to years or other cultural/historical events), but Jude's poetic ruminations about Nureyev's final years being happy despite his illness certainly mirrors Jude's own life.



Willem leaves for Paris to shoot *The Happy Years*. It's one of his most difficult roles yet—he has a stunt double for the elaborate dance sequences, but he's had to learn some ballet for shorter scenes. Jude visits Willem in Paris at the end of April. He'd made Willem promise not to do anything special for his 50th birthday, but Willem invites their closest friends for a surprise dinner. The next day, Jude visits the movie set to watch Willem work—something he's rarely done. The scene they're shooting that morning depicts Nureyev working with a dancer. In the film, Nureyev has just been diagnosed with HIV, and when he demonstrates a jump to the dancer now, he falls and lands on his face, and everyone is silent. The final shot, a close-up of Nureyev's face, conveys his recognition that he will soon die—and then, his decision to ignore this knowledge.

Jude and Willem return to New York in June. In bed one morning, Jude examines Willem's body and sees that he has a dancer's body now. Later, they have dinner with Richard and India on the roof of their building, and Willem, rather self-consciously, shows his friends the ballet skills her learned for his recent project. Richard is impressed. "Willem is full of surprises, even all these years later," notes Jude.

But they're all full of secrets, and none more than Jude, whose secrets are so "real." This used to frustrate Willem, but over time, he has learned that he can love Jude despite his secrecy. At the same time, Jude is always showing Willem new parts of himself. That July, Jude brings him to a Rosen Pritchard function for the first time, for the firm's annual summer barbeque. Willem is happy to be there, and he enjoys watching Jude interact with people in this separate life of his. It's obvious that everyone here respects—and maybe even fears—Jude a great deal.

The barbecue was two months ago. These days, Willem spends most of his time at **Lantern House** in Garrison. Jude drives up every weekend. Now, Willem is at the grocery store to pick up limes, lemons, and seltzer for their friends' arrival. He meets Malcolm and Sophie at the station; Malcolm, annoyed, explains that JB has just broken up with his boyfriend and decided to stay in New York until tomorrow. Malcolm and Sophie haven't eaten yet. Willem calls Jude to tell him about JB and ask him to start boiling some water for pasta.

The novel continues to foreshadow someone's death, though it's unclear who will die, Willem or Jude. The way that Willem-as-Nureyev manipulates his facial expression to recognize—and then to reject—the realization that he will die certainly mirrors Jude's own struggle to come to terms with his disability.



This scene reverses Willem and Jude's typical roles: Willem is the one who is self-conscious of his body, while Jude is the one who notes his partner's many "surprises, even all these years later[.]" This scene frames Willem's capacity to surprise Jude as a good thing: it's a nod to the complicated but rewarding experience of getting to know somebody and sharing a life with them.



Jude's secrets are different from Willem's. They're not delightful bits of information Willem has yet to stumble upon—they're "real" details Jude has purposefully and shamefully kept hidden from Willem. But even Jude's secrets don't seem to matter as much as they once did. And the most important thing to Willem is that Jude is making an effort to share more of his life with him, even if this only happens a little bit at a time.



The novel seems to have been foreshadowing a death since the start of this chapter. Houses—and Lantern House, in particular—symbolize Willem and Jude's changing relationship and the life they've built together. It seems significant, then, that Jude should be alone in the house near the end of this chapter. It's plausible that his aloneness foreshadows his and Willem's imminent separation.

Willem puts his friends' luggage in the backseat. They drive, and they talk about how nice a day it is. It's only a 30-minute drive to the **house**, but Willem takes his time because it's so nice out. When he crosses the final major intersection, he does not see the truck that has blown through the red light. He feels the crunch of the truck as it strikes them, and then he's flying through the air. For a moment, he sees Jude's face. But the last face he sees is Hemming's. He thinks of his family's house atop the hill in Wyoming. He sees Hemming sitting in his **wheelchair**, "staring at [Willem] with a steady, constant gaze, the kind he was never able to give him in life." Willem calls to Hemming, "Wait for me!" Then he runs to his brother, his feet hardly touching the ground.

Willem is flung from the car. The most important people in his life, Hemming and Jude, flash before his eyes, so it's safe to assume that Willem has died. Up until now, the novel has taken the form of a slow, relentless dirge toward Jude's death, and so it's a huge twist that Willem precedes Jude in death. Also note that it's Hemming's face, not Jude's, that Willem sees last. This might suggest that Willem's failure to save Hemming has been the defining moment of his life, and that all of Willem's subsequent efforts to save Jude have been a response to that initial moment. It also resonates with the idea that though a person might reinvent themselves and gain new experiences and travel to faraway places, they never really escape the formative experiences from their youth.



PART 6: DEAR COMRADE: CHAPTER 1

One of Willem's first starring roles was in an adaptation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, *Life After Death*. This year is the 20th anniversary of *Life After Death*, and Jude is shocked when he walks outside and sees Willem's young face plastered all over the sides of buildings and bus shelters. Jude planned to go walking, but he turns around and goes inside. Jude receives an invitation from MoMA to speak on a panel after a screening of the film. They apparently invited him once before, but he doesn't remember. Then again, he doesn't remember a lot of things these days.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is about a poet, Orpheus, who travels to the underworld to recover his beloved, Eurydice, from Hades, the king of the underworld. Hades allowed Eurydice to follow Orpheus back to the world of the living, but only if Orpheus walked in front of her and didn't turn back. Orpheus disobeys and looks back, and so Eurydice remains in the underworld. The basic point of the story is that mortals are powerless against the laws of the gods and must obey them. The myth resembles Jude's romance with Willem somewhat: Jude repeatedly doubted that he was good enough for Willem or deserved the happiness that being with Willem brought him. He felt that he would be punished for having things he supposedly didn't deserve—and with Willem's tragic death, Jude's fears come true.



Before Jude goes to bed that night, he goes to Willem's side of the closet. All his clothes are still there. Jude grabs a shirt Willem used to wear in the spring and ties the sleeves around his front. He pretends the sleeves are Willem's arms embracing him, and then he climbs into bed. Sometimes, he pulls down the shirt's collar so that he can smell Willem's scent, but the scent grows fainter every day.

This brutal scene illustrates the depth of Jude's grief. He feels lost and uprooted without Willem by his side to give his life meaning and purpose. This is exactly the thing Jude spent years closing himself off from others to avoid, and the minute he let his guard down and finally allowed himself to love and be loved, that love was ripped away. The world of this novel is truly a relentlessly cruel place.



It's taken months for Jude to figure out how to survive. For a while, he watches all of Willem's movies. But Willem's acting is so different than the way he was in life. Next, Jude tries pretending that Willem is just away filming. This is hard to sustain, though, since Jude and Willem were always in contact whenever Willem was away. Jude is glad he still has all of Willem's old e-mails. For a while, he reads them and pretends he's just received them. Next, Jude creates a fantasy where Willem is shooting a spy movie funded by a Russian billionaire and actually filmed in space, which make it impossible for Willem to call or text or email. The fantasy is ridiculous, but it's just plausible enough for Jude to believe it. He names the movie *Dear Comrade*, because Willem addressed some of their emails this way when he was shooting a spy trilogy.

Jude was only able to face the reality of Willem's absence last November. He remembers hardly anything of the preceding months, and very little of the night Willem died. He remembers tearing leaves of basil into the bowl of pasta salad. It was getting late, but Willem liked to take back roads. After a while, he called JB to ask if Willem, Malcolm, or Sophie had contacted him. JB prattled on about his breakup. He assured Jude that everything was fine—that they'd be there soon. Jude called Willem's phone, then Malcolm's, then Sophie's. He called JB again. Then the doorbell rang. It was the police, and when they removed their hats, Jude understood.

Everything after this is a blur. Later, Jude learns that he identified Willem's body by a mole on his calf—they didn't let Jude see Willem's face, which had been destroyed. Sophie died on impact. Malcolm was declared braindead, but his parents kept him on life support long enough to donate his organs. The driver who hit their car had been drunk. Jude returns to work at the end of September. He's glad he has practical matters to take on: he sues the car manufacturer and the rental company. He sues the drunk driver. When he learns that the driver has a terminally ill child, and that the suit will bankrupt the family, he does not care. He wants everything destroyed. He doesn't even care about the money.

In November, Harold calls Jude and asks about Thanksgiving. Jude tries to get out of it, but Harold says he shouldn't spend the holiday alone, so they go to London and have a terrible time. Then, they return. In December, Jude wakes up and realizes that Willem is gone, and that he will never see him again. He cries for the first time since Willem's death. He doesn't know how he'll go on. The entire life he built after his early traumas had Willem in it. Harold insists that things will get better, but Jude knows they won't.

Willem's death has been a horrifically traumatic experience for Jude. The way he pretends that Willem is simply away for a film shoot suggest that he's in denial about the death. This is a coping mechanism Jude has used before, as with his denial of his disability or his refusal to identify as a victim of sexual assault.



All alone in Lantern House, the vacation home he and Willem built together, a major symbol of the life they built together, Jude feels the full force of Willem's death—the police officers don't even need to say the words aloud, and Jude knows he's lost Willem forever. It's also worth noting, though, that Jude also loses Malcolm, one of his best friends. Now Jude is more alone than ever, given that his relationship with JB is still somewhat rocky.



This passage reveals that Malcolm and Sophie died in the car accident, as well. Now, of the four friends, only JB and Jude remain. At this point, the narrative takes on a shifting, surreal quality as Jude pieces together the months that followed Willem's death. The fragmented quality of the prose reflects Jude's immense grief and mimics the way Jude blocks out reality to cope with the trauma of Willem's sudden death. The ruthlessness with which Jude attacks the family of the drunk driver is completely out of character for Jude. Normally, Jude assumes that he deserves the bad things that happen to him. Now, he seems to want revenge.



The only life that matters to Jude is the life that he built from the ruins of his own traumatic past. Willem was at the center of that life, and now that he's gone, Jude is as adrift as he was at 16. Can any person, much less someone like Jude who has already endured so many hardships, be expected to recover from such an enormous loss? And is it right to force them to recover from that loss? Harold cares about Jude and wants him to stay alive, but this sentiment ultimately selfish?



Jude starts staying at the office until sunrise. He takes pills to stay awake, and other pills to sleep. On good nights, he dreams of Willem. He knows that his friends are watching him, and that they are concerned. Even he is wondering why he hasn't killed himself. For now, he lives in denial, though he knows that his fantasies will one day fade. In January, he has a dream about Willem but can't hear Willem's voice. He wakes up and scrolls through his computer until he finds a few of Willem's old voice messages.

Another day, Jude goes through Willem's old files in his study. He finds old photos of Willem with Hemming. Then, inside an accordion file, Jude finds all the birthday cards he has ever given Willem, and every email he has ever sent him. There's a card from Harold, sent just after Jude's adoption. Jude has never bothered to document his life, but it turns out that he didn't need to: Willem did it for him.

Jude recalls a time just after his surgery when he was still in recovery and tired all the time. Willem was lifting him out of bed, and Jude said he wished he could stay in bed forever. Willem asked Jude why he didn't just quit, then. Was there any reason to work? Willem listed all the things Jude could do instead: he could play the piano, or volunteer, or go to shoots with Willem. They'd laughed together, but now, Jude wonders, why didn't he quit? Why had he gone to Rosen Pritchard every day instead of enjoying those years together with Willem?

Jude heads home from work and checks his phone. There are texts from his friends. The last one is from JB. Jude hates JB. On some subconscious level, Jude blames JB for Willem's death, though he knows this makes no sense. And though he hasn't voiced his feelings aloud, he knows that JB can sense them. He's seen JB only two times since Willem's death. JB texts Jude twice a week to check in. Jude sends him the same generic message back (thanking him for caring, making an excuse about being busy, and promising to reach out soon), but Jude has no plans to reach out. Jude would trade JB for Willem. In fact, he'd trade any of any of his friends for Willem.

One Sunday in April, Jude wakes to the sound of banging at his door. Then Richard is by his side. Richard apologizes, then he explains that Jude hadn't been answering his phone, so he thought he'd check in. He asks Jude to have dinner with him downstairs. Jude tries to make excuses, but Richard insists.

Jude knows that his fantasies won't sustain him forever; his inability to hear Willem's voice in his dream is evidence of this. Inevitably, Jude must decide whether he can reinvent himself and find meaning in a life without Willem, or whether such a life isn't worth living, and such a reinvention not worth the trouble.



That Willem kept such a detailed record of Jude's life proves that Willem has always believed that Jude mattered—even when Jude couldn't believe these things about himself. Now, Jude sees himself through Willem's eyes—and the picture is more flattering than the one Jude usually sees.



Jude has never turned to work to give his life meaning like JB has. More often, he's turned to work to impose order and control on his life—to keep his suppressed traumas at bay, and to curb his impulse to harm himself. Now, in the aftermath of Willem's death, he wishes he had turned to Willem for these things instead. But now, it's too late.



Jude's irrational thoughts following Willem's death—his ruthless desire to punish the drunk driver's family or the way he blames JB, for instance—mark a shift in the way Jude grapples with suffering. Normally, he blames himself for the bad things that happen to him. Now, just as irrationally, he wants to blame others. Tension builds in this passage as the reader is left to wonder whether Jude will try to reconcile with the only of his three best friends still alive, or whether he will continue to write JB off.



Richard, like Harold and JB, seems to feel obligated to check in on Jude and make sure he remains alive. It's evident from Richard's remark about Jude not answering his phone that Jude has been isolating himself from his friends rather than going to them for comfort.



Downstairs, Richard refuses to let Jude help with the cooking. Jude sits alone at the table as Richard cooks. Richard pours them both a glass of wine, then he wishes Jude a happy birthday. Jude hadn't realized it was his birthday; he's 51. Richard tells Jude he loves him, though he knows it won't help. Jude breaks down and cries. He used to be too embarrassed to cry, but now, he'll cry in front of anybody. Jude and Richard eat dinner and then dessert. Jude is relieved when Richard tells him he can go back upstairs. He hasn't socialized in so long, and he's exhausted. Then Richard hands Jude a package and tells him that Willem wouldn't want to see him so unhappy. Before Jude leaves, Richard encourages him to call JB—JB might not have loved Willem the way Jude did, but he's grieving him (and Malcolm) too.

Jude returns to his apartment and unwraps Richard's present. He nearly cries when he sees a bust of Willem carved out of wood. Next, Jude opens the box of things that Malcolm willed to him. Flora sent it over weeks ago, but he hasn't been able to open it. Inside is a model of **Lantern House**, along with Malcolm's other designs. Next, there's an envelope of old photos from college. The last item is most special of all: a scale model of Lispenard Street. In retrospect, those years weren't very special. But at the time, it seemed like life couldn't be better. Sometimes, Jude and Willem would imagine what life would've been like if they'd never left—if they'd never moved forward in their careers, in their friendships, in their lives. Jude sits in silence for a while. Then he turns on his phone and calls JB.

PART 6: DEAR COMRADE: CHAPTER 2

One Saturday each month, Jude leaves the office early and goes to the Upper East Side. First, he visits Lucien, who recently had a massive stroke. Lucien can still speak, but his memory is gone and he's lost control of his left side. Jude thinks Lucien likes their visits, but Jude needs to reintroduce himself each time, and sometimes multiple times each visit. When Lucien's hands begin to shake, Jude takes them in his own, like Willem used to do with him. Sometimes Lucien drools or gurgles. Jude isn't embarrassed for him, but he wishes he could do more to help.

Willem didn't live past 51, so this birthday has a heavy significance for Jude. Also note how readily Jude expresses vulnerability in front of others now, when he has struggled with this for most of his life. Losing Willem has completely uprooted Jude, and it remains to be seen whether he'll find a way to ground himself—or if he even wants to. This is the second mention of JB in a short while, implying that Jude may reach out to him after all—if only because, as Richard advises Jude, Willem would have wanted him to do so.



Malcolm's models of Lispenard Street and Lantern House symbolize not just Willem and Jude's relationship, but the broader idea that a person's life gains meaning through the relationships they build with others. Life isn't about the accolades or wealth or fame a person accumulates. It's about lived experience: the time one spends with others. When Jude decides to call JB, he's deciding to leave the accumulated grievances of their fraught past behind in order to pave a path forward. All in all, Jude has undergone a major change in this chapter alone. He began beside himself with grief, isolating himself from his friends, and not wanting to go on; now, he's showing signs of wanting to live and grow.



Nobody in A Little Life can escape pain and suffering. Though Lucien, unlike Willem, Malcolm, and Sophie, manages to live to old age, he suffers a massive stroke that drastically diminishes his quality of life. Meanwhile, Jude continues to demonstrate his will to live. In Willem's absence, Jude grows stronger, not weaker—he shows his strength when he takes Lucien's shaking hands in his own, just as Willem used to do for him.



After Jude's visit with Lucien, he walks to the Irvines' house. At first, Jude avoided them. But on the one-year anniversary of the accident, they invited Jude, Richard, and JB for dinner, and Jude knew he should go. The dinner happened the weekend after Labor Day. Jude had just returned from a trip to Beijing for work. He'd wanted to take his mind off things by going to Beijing. But while he was being driven back to his hotel one night, he saw a billboard of Willem's face being painted over, and he'd broken down and **cut** himself horribly.

JB, Richard, and Jude arrived at the Irvines' together. The Irvines served all of Malcolm's favorite foods. Mrs. Irvine suggested that everyone share a favorite memory of Malcolm. JB told a story about breaking into Hood before classes resumed after Thanksgiving break. Jude told of how Malcolm had built Jude and Willem a bookcase for **Lispenard Street**. The dimensions were wrong, though, and the edge of the bookcase extended into the hallway. Malcolm fretted over this, even though they told him it was fine. But Malcolm couldn't be convinced, and so he remade the bookshelf. Jude told everyone that his story showed how much Malcolm respected space and his friends. What Jude didn't say is that he overheard Willem and Malcolm talking and learned the real reason Malcolm wanted to fix the bookcase: he was worried that Jude would trip over it and hurt himself.

On their way out, Mr. Irvine pulled Jude aside and asked to talk to him. Jude agreed, and he and Mr. Irvine sat down in the living room. Mr. Irvine started to cry. He's usually so intimidating, but that night, he wasn't. He told Jude that he loved Malcolm; hadn't Jude known that? Jude replied that he had. This is what Jude always told Malcolm. It caused a fight between them once, when Malcolm replied, "Like you'd know anything about that, Jude." Malcolm was immediately horrified at his cruelty and begged Jude to forgive him. As Jude sat beside Mr. Irvine that night, he wished that Malcolm could've been the one to share this moment with his father.

Back in the present, Jude arrives at the Irvines' house. They have a short visit today, since Mr. Irvine isn't feeling well. Then Jude goes to an expensive bakery and buys a loaf of walnut bread. He returns to his apartment, slices the bread, and sits down to eat. But, as usual, he has no appetite.

In this passage, it's revealed that at least a year has passed since Willem's death. In the time since, Jude has made a significant effort to be a part of the world and find solace in his friends. This is a stark contrast to his early days of grief, when it seemed uncertain if he'd emerge from his state of denial at all. In keeping with one of the novel's main ideas, that recovery isn't necessarily linear or guaranteed, Jude experiences setbacks too, as evidenced by the self-harm he does in Beijing.



Note that this scene isn't happening in the novel's present—it's Jude's memory of the one-year anniversary dinner he attended at the Irvines' house. The story that Jude shares about the bookcase is a testament to the way Malcolm was able to synthesize his passion for his career with his love for his friends, a rarity in the novel, where it's more often the case that characters sacrifice their human connections for the sake of ambition. Above all, though, the most important part of Jude's story is that which he doesn't tell aloud: that Malcolm's real reason for fixing the bookcase was to protect Jude—to make sure he didn't trip on it. Jude was never able to appreciate the accommodations his friends made to ensure his safety and protection, as he was too in denial about his condition himself. And now, it's too late.



Like Jude, Mr. Irvine also regrets how he failed to show Malcolm how much he loved and appreciated Malcolm while he was alive. People get caught up in pride, or work, or appearances, and they forget that human connection is what matters most, and then they don't remember until it's too late. In their respective musings about Malcolm, Jude and Mr. Irvine gain a slight sense of closure, but it's woefully inadequate without Malcolm there to experience it with them.



Jude fights his body's urge to give up on life—he goes through the motions, eating and keeping a schedule, even though he has no drive to do so.



Still, Jude makes a real effort these days to keep a normal schedule, and eating is part of this. Some days, Jude thinks he's getting better. He keeps trying for a lot of reasons, but mostly, he tries for Harold. Jude remembers a day a little less than a year after his suicide attempt. He'd been walking along the beach with Harold at Truro, and they'd sat down, and Harold had made him promise that he wouldn't attempt suicide again. Jude agreed. Jude's thought about dying every day since Willem's death. He hopes he'll succumb to a quick, lethal infection. But since his amputation, he's been in the best health of his life. He's "as cured as he will ever be."

Given Jude's current condition, there's no medical reason for him to see Andy every week, but he does anyway. Andy, like Harold, is also worried Jude will die by suicide. Most of their weekly Friday appointments are just dinner, but every other week, they begin with an exam. Since Willem died, Jude has grown scared of being touched again, and he sees this as proof that "[p]eople don't change." Willem always said that he was changed by caring for Jude, but everyone who knew Willem knew that Willem had always been kind, compassionate, and patient. Willem's death was educational for Jude. For a time, he thought that being with Willem had changed him too, but now, he sees that he's the same broken person he's always been.

On Friday, Jude sees Andy. Andy inspects Jude's arms and finds no new **cuts**. They go to dinner afterward and catch up. Then Andy drops some big news: he's going to retire soon. Andy promises to remain Jude's doctor until the very end. He promises that he'll find someone to replace him that Jude will like.

The next week, Jude meets Linus, Andy's replacement. He thinks Linus looks disconcertingly like Willem. He likes Linus's matter-of-fact demeanor. There's nothing wrong with him at all, but he knows he'll never be able to remove his clothes in front of Linus. Jude thinks of all the conversations he will have to have with Linus to get him up to speed, all the pages of Jude's history Linus will have to read.

In an ironic twist, Jude's body is in the best shape it's been—but this only happens after Jude no longer has anything to live for. That Jude does all this just to keep his promise to Harold is a testament to their friendship. At the same time, though, the situation raises an important issue: is Harold's wish for Jude to live more important than Jude's wish to die? Malcolm's parents let Malcolm go once Malcolm's body could no longer support life; does Harold, perhaps, owe Jude this same mercy?



Andy, like Harold, takes it upon himself to monitor Jude, ensuring that Jude stays alive—even though it's clear that Jude has no desire to do so. Another critical detail in this passage is how Jude has once more grown resistant to touch, which he sees as proof that "[p]eople don't change." In other words, Jude now regards the happiness he experienced with Willem as a fluke—as reflective of something in Willem's personality, rather than Jude's. With this, Jude once more sees himself as the monstrous, deformed creature his abusers taught him he was.



Already, Jude is barely hanging on to life. In the aftermath of Willem's death, Jude's appointments with Andy—even if they're only a formality at this point—are one of the few things Jude can turn to for comfort and predictability. Without these visits, Jude will be thrust once more into uncertainty.



Andy is the only doctor that Jude has been able to remove his clothes in front of. This, combined with the major regression Jude has undergone following Willem's death, makes it unlikely that Jude can make things work with this doctor. With this, yet another thing that Jude had come to depend on crumples beneath his feet, and Jude no longer has the energy to establish trust with a new person.



Jude remembers what Ana said to him all those years ago: “You have to tell someone.” Jude told Willem, but then Willem died. He doesn’t think he has the strength to tell another person. Jude doesn’t want to go to dinner with Andy after his appointment with Linus, but he does anyway. They’re silent for a while. Andy asks what Jude thinks of Linus. Jude says he doesn’t think it’ll work, and Andy starts rattling off a list of other possible candidates. This frustrates Jude, and he tells Andy to just get out of his life altogether if he’s not going to look out for him anymore. Andy tries to run after Jude, but Jude is already out the door.

Jude returns home that night and turns off his phone so he doesn’t have to talk to anybody. Andy calls and texts all week, but Jude ignores him. The next night, Jude sees Harold, who is in town for an unannounced visit. Jude is exhausted and doesn’t want to see Harold. At **Greene Street**, Jude watches Harold eat and realizes how old he is. He wonders how much longer he can realistically expect Harold to live. “Don’t leave me,” he thinks.

Harold tells Jude that he and Julia are thinking of moving to New York; Harold is thinking of teaching at Columbia next semester, and it would be nice to be closer to Jude, too. Jude isn’t sure what to make of this. Harold and Julia’s life is in Cambridge. He suspects that they’re only moving to New York for his sake. He tells Harold as much and insists that he’s fine. Harold is doubtful. Jude says that he’s 51 years old and can take care of himself. Harold reminds him that a person never stops needing help. Jude gets agitated and tells Harold to leave. Harold hesitates, but then he does as Jude tells him to do.

On Wednesday, Jude goes to the Whitney Museum, where JB’s retrospective is being hung. Jude examines the paintings from “The Boys” series and sees Malcolm, Willem, and himself. There’s one of Jude and Willem in their bedroom at **Lispnard Street**. There is *Jude with Cigarette*, and *Jude, After Sickness*. On another floor, Jude sees the series “Everyone I’ve Ever Known Everyone I’ve Ever Loved Everyone I’ve Ever Hated Everyone I’ve Ever Fucked,” and “Seconds, Minutes, Hours, Days.” Jude enters another room and, once more, sees his face: Jude in his **wheelchair**, Jude and Willem.

In Jude’s eyes, Willem was his one and only chance at recovery and redemption. And so, when Willem died, Jude’s capacity to heal died with him. Upon realizing this, all the progress that Jude saw throughout his relationship with Willem melts away, and he becomes as closed-off, untrusting, and hopeless as he was before Willem entered his life. As Jude continues to make these realizations and regress, it looks increasingly unlikely that a happy ending is in store for him.



Jude and Harold are basically grappling with the same fear: what will happen to me if the other dies first? But while Harold has made Jude promise not to leave him, Jude keeps his plea to Harold to himself. Harold and Jude’s similar situation raises an important question: is it any more realistic for Harold to make Jude promise not to die by suicide than it is for Jude to make Harold promise not to die of old age?



Jude is upset because he sees Harold’s move as crossing a major boundary. It’s clear, to Jude, that Harold and Julia are only moving to New York keep watch over him, and he resents them for it. Such behavior is characteristic of Jude as a younger person, as when he resented Malcolm for trying to implement ADA-compliant design elements into the Greene Street blueprints, for example. In a flash, all the inner work Jude has done to allow himself to accept help from others has gone out the window, and Jude’s recovery narrative comes to a screeching halt.



An important thing to note is the new meaning JB’s work has acquired following Malcolm’s and Willem’s deaths. Suddenly, “The Boys” series, especially, becomes both an homage to friendship and an homage to loss. JB once prioritized these paintings over his friends, and now, these paintings are all he has left (of Willem and Malcolm, at least).



JB sees Jude and says hello. Jude hugs JB and tells him how proud he is. They stand in silence for a moment, and then JB drags Jude to a far side of the gallery. He unwraps a canvas to reveal a painting of Willem. It's the most realistic of JB's paintings Jude has ever seen; it looks exactly as Willem had right before his death. From the way Willem is smiling in the photo, and the way he is leaning forward, Jude knows that the image depicts Willem looking at someone he loves. JB gives Jude a sad smile, and then he shows him the title card: *Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story, Greene Street*. Suddenly, Jude feels faint. JB helps him around the wall to a place where he can sit. He explains that the painting is for Jude, once the show is over.

Jude thanks JB and means it. Jude's woozy feeling won't leave him, though, and he hears a voice inside his head say, "Take me, take me." Before Jude can understand what's happening, JB has grabbed him and kissed him on the mouth. Jude recoils and pulls himself away from JB. "What the hell are you doing?" he snaps, then he turns to leave. JB apologizes repeatedly, but Jude tells him to leave him alone. He marches toward the elevators as the world around him spins. He steps inside the elevator. Jude sees Willem's face as it appears in the painting. He imagines Willem's face, alone in the museum, waiting all night for Jude to tell him a story. JB pleads with Jude to stop, but Jude ignores him. The elevator doors close, and then Jude is alone.

PART 6: DEAR COMRADE: CHAPTER 3

Jude is lifting himself out of the pool after his morning swim when "the world disappears." When he wakes, he finds that only 10 minutes have passed. The same thing happens after he returns from the office a few days later. He lies down on the sofa to rest. When he opens his eyes, it's tomorrow. Jude knows what's happening: he's not eating enough.

Two days later, Jude comes home from work and sees Willem emerge from a vapor before him. Then he blinks, and Willem is gone. The same thing happens the next day. Jude realizes that when he doesn't eat, he hallucinates; and when he hallucinates, sometimes, he sees Willem. That Friday, Jude cancels his appointment with Andy to stay home and experiment with the hallucinations. That night, though, Willem doesn't appear. Soon, Jude is cancelling all his plans to stay inside and hallucinate Willem. He hasn't spoken to so many of his friends in weeks, but he no longer cares.

Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story, Greene Street, has such an intense effect on Jude for multiple reasons. First, and most obviously, it depicts a hyper-realistic rendering of Willem as he appeared just before he died. Second, the painting's subject—not just Willem, but Willem listening to Jude tell him a story—gets at the heart of what was so special, painful, and irreplaceable about Willem and Jude's relationship: Willem was the only person around whom Jude felt comfortable to divulge the secrets of his past. And seeing this uncanny rendering of Willem now, as though poised to take in all of Jude's secrets, is a direct, unfiltered reminder of all that Jude has lost in Willem's death, and all that he believes he'll never experience with anyone else.



When Jude feels JB's mouth on his, it feels all wrong; this wrongness shows Jude that it wasn't simple human connection that made his life better for those happy years he spent with Willem—it was Willem himself. When Jude imagines Willem's face, alone in the museum, waiting for Jude to tell him a story, he is projecting: he is really imagining what it will feel like to spend the rest of his life in silence, waiting for Willem to listen to him, and knowing that Willem will never come. In this moment, Jude seems to really come to terms with how unbearable and empty his life will be without Willem in it.



If Jude is eating so little that "the world disappears," he's probably experiencing severe and dangerous malnourishment. It's even possible that he's attempting to starve himself to death, though he hasn't consciously voiced that this is what he's doing.



These hallucinations are evidence of Jude's extreme starvation; it's possible that if somebody doesn't interfere—and soon—Jude may die. That Jude is willing to starve himself to "see" Willem again all but confirms that Willem's death has caused Jude to lose the will to live. This is reaffirmed by the way Jude repeatedly prioritizes seeing hallucinations of "Willem" over his real, living friends.



Jude has never cared about his legacy. Unlike his friends, he has no paintings or buildings or films to leave behind. The only thing he's ever made is money. The spring before Willem died, they'd had a small dinner party at **Greene Street**—just the four friends, plus Richard and Asian Henry Young—and Malcolm had talked about his regret that he and Sophie had never had children. What, Malcolm wondered, was the point of living? Willem interjected then and explained that he knew Malcolm's life meant something because Malcolm is a good friend who loves and cares about his friends and makes them happy. Everyone was quiet for a moment, and then they all raised their glasses to him.

Though Jude hasn't always worried about whether his life is meaningful, he has wondered what the point of living is. Why does anyone go on living when the world is so full of misery and suffering? Ever since his suicide attempt, though, he has known "that it was impossible to convince someone to live for his own sake." Jude thinks it's more persuasive to convince people to live for other people. This is how he found the will to live.

These days, though, it's becoming harder to want to live, and Jude grows weaker every day. He knows he can't go on forever, and this makes him feel guilty, since it means that he'll "cheat[] on his promise to Harold." But he cheats all the time in little ways, like when he uses the excuse of having too much work to cancel plans with friends. (It is true that he has a lot of work—he has an appellate trial next month that he's funneling all his energy into.)

The Friday before the trial, Andy comes to see Jude at his office. He asks Jude to stand. Jude says he can't because his legs hurt, but Andy calls him out on the real truth: he's lost too much weight, and now his prostheses don't fit right. This confrontation doesn't faze Jude; he and Andy have had this interaction so many times, and it never changes anything. He'll agree to improve himself in some way that makes Andy happy, Andy will lecture him, he'll lie to Andy, and then they'll repeat the cycle. Jude lies to Andy that he has the flu. Andy is skeptical but leaves when Jude promises to see him next week.

Jude goes to trial, and it doesn't go well. He goes home and sleeps all weekend. Reality starts to slip away from him. He thinks he sees Brother Luke and Dr. Traylor. He feels very weak. He can't hallucinate Willem anymore. He tries to tell himself that things will get better.

Willem's philosophy of life underscores the importance of human connection. So much of life is uncertain: it's impossible to know how much fame or recognition or wealth a person will amass over the course of their lifetime, or whether they will have children who will carry on their legacy. The point of life, Willem suggests, isn't to reflect back on what one has done or amassed. The point of life is to live, and the best way to live, in Willem's mind, is to love and care about being and find comfort in togetherness.



Jude's philosophy of life is rooted in his belief that misery and suffering are fundamental parts of human experience. It's a distorted version of Willem's philosophy of life. Life is full of so much suffering already, Jude thinks, and so a person has an obligation to alleviate suffering in those they care about where possible. The only reason Jude goes on living is to alleviate the misery and suffering of someone like Harold, who would be heartbroken if Jude died.



Jude knows he has an obligation to Harold to stay alive, but he also knows that people let others down all the time. And Jude's life matters so little to him that breaking his promise to Harold to stay alive is hardly a bigger deal than cancelling weekend plans. Increasingly, it seems inevitable that Jude will die by suicide before the novel's end.



Jude's longing to die has started to manifest physically: his thin, weak limbs are evidence of the weeks he's spend starving himself. This is yet another way that Jude's body has betrayed him over the course of his life: it carried the scars of his trauma, it prevented him and Willem from having a satisfying physical relationship, it became infected when Jude wanted to heal, and it refused to succumb to infection when Jude wanted to die. Now, his body is attracting unsolicited concern from his friends.



Jude continues to deteriorate. Starving himself, at first, was a way for him to reclaim control over his life and body in the wake of Willem's death. Now, as Brother Luke and Dr. Traylor force their way into Jude's starvation-induced hallucinations, his body has betrayed him once more.



Then it's Harold and Julia's move-in day. When Jude arrives at their apartment, it's immediately clear that he's walked into an intervention. All his friends are there, and he learns that everyone has been monitoring his food intake for weeks. Andy explains that Jude is at a Grade Two weight loss, which is when people are typically put on a feeding tube. Desperate for relief, Jude turns to Harold and pleads with him, "Release me from my promise to you. [...] Don't make me go on."

Jude's friends take him to the hospital, and he fights until someone sedates him. When he wakes, he's strapped to a hospital bed. He thinks it's going to be the same process it always is. But this time, they don't give him any choices: they hook him up to the feeding tube, and they make him see Dr. Loehmann. They watch him constantly to make sure that he eats and keeps his food down.

This is Jude's new life. With it, "he has moved past humiliation, past sorrow, past hope." Even at work, he has no relief, since Sanjay is watching him constantly and will text Andy, who will have Jude committed, if Jude tries anything. Jude starts seeing Dr. Loehmann again, though he resents being there and refuses to talk to him. He goes to Harold and Julia's for dinner Thursday nights and is rude to them, too. Tonight, he tells Harold the chicken stew they made him "tastes like dog food." He is daring Harold to tell him to get out and not come back. If Harold insists that Jude stay alive, then Jude will show him what a monster he is: what a "monster" Brother Luke and Dr. Traylor have made him become.

Jude stands at the table and announces he's leaving. Harold is angry. He tells Jude he can't leave until he's eaten, and Julia pleads with Jude to stay. Then, inexplicably, Jude remembers the first time Harold saw one of his episodes. Jude had gone into the pantry to wait out the pain. Harold found him there. Harold crouched beside Jude, and for a moment, Jude thought Harold would unzip his pants and make him do what all the others made him do. But Harold only stroked Jude's head and sang a lullaby to him. Jude knew that after that episode, he and Harold would either grow closer or more distant. He wanted his episode to continue forever so that he'd never have to learn how Harold's song would end.

Jude is torn between his desire die and alleviate his suffering, and his desire not to break his promise to Harold. Jude believes that he's spent his entire life disgusting and disappointing people, and he doesn't want disappointing Harold and knowingly causing Harold to suffer to be the last thing he does, but he's out of ideas.



Jude's friends, by this point, are effectively holding him hostage. He has no desire to live, and yet they keep him alive nonetheless, prolonging his suffering. If, as Jude previously put forth, people have an obligation to live for others, might it also be true that people have an obligation to let others die, especially if the mere fact of existence causes them undue suffering?



Jude goes through the motions, but "he has moved past humiliation, past sorrow, past hope." He resorts to punishing his friends in retaliation for the hell that they have put him through by keeping him alive. He unleashes the "monster" that he has spent his life trying to conceal from them, fearing they would abandon him if they knew of his monstrosity. Ironically, the thing that Jude used to fear most is now the thing he wants most: for all his friends to abandon him, so that he can finally die in peace.



Jude has long avoided close relationships with others. He's done this out of self-preservation: if Jude doesn't let anybody inside, he'll spare himself the pain that will come when they inevitably betray, disappoint, or abandon him somewhere down the road. But Jude's attempt to shield himself from pain has in fact caused him to suffer, as it's robbed him of the opportunity to give and receive love. As Harold sings to Jude in the pantry, Jude realizes the error in his ways. When Jude states that he never wants his pain episode to end so that he doesn't have to hear the end of Harold's song, he's proposing that he's been going about things the wrong way all along: in shutting people out, he's simply substituted one pain (the pain of abandonment and rejection) for another (the self-inflicted pain of self-imposed loneliness).



And now Jude is back in the present, in Harold and Julia's New York apartment. Jude picks up his plate and throws it against the wall. Harold moves toward Jude, and Jude waits for Harold to strike him—but Harold only wraps his arms around Jude. Julia hugs him too. "My poor Jude. My poor sweetheart," says Harold. Jude starts to cry, then, because the only other person who called him "sweetheart" was Brother Luke. Willem would try, but Jude always made him stop. It felt "filthy" to him. But this time, Jude lets Harold continue. He wants and doesn't want Harold to stop; he wants to feel what it's like to "believ[e] that to someone he is special despite all the mistakes and hatefulness, because of all his mistakes and hatefulness."

The spell breaks when Julia goes to the kitchen and returns with a new sandwich for Jude, which he eats. When he is finished, Harold and Julia kiss him good night, and he returns to his apartment. He wonders if time is regressing: if he might experience what it's like had Harold and Julia been his parents from the start. Maybe he could be a normal kid. Maybe he'd "be a better person," or "a more loving one." Maybe "it isn't too late."

Jude is still thinking these things when he sees Dr. Loehmann next week. In their session, Jude tries like he has never tried before. He answers the doctor's questions, even though they are difficult, and he tries to tell the doctor his story. But he can't tell this story without thinking of Willem, and he breaks down.

Suddenly, Jude can't breathe, and he runs out of Dr. Loehmann's office and into the bathroom. Then "he plays his old game of 'If,'" imagining all the ways his life might have turned out differently if he hadn't gone with Dr. Traylor or Brother Luke. But Jude realizes that if these horrible things hadn't happened to him, then he also wouldn't have met Harold, or Andy, or Willem. Jude calms himself, and then he wheels his chair out of the bathroom and back into Dr. Loehmann's office, where the doctor has been waiting for him. Jude tells him, "I've decided to stay."

Something breaks in Jude the minute Harold calls him "sweetheart." Normally, when something in Jude's present triggers a memory of Brother Luke, the memory of Brother Luke overpowers the present, as when Jude had to make Willem stop calling him "sweetheart" because it felt "filthy" to hear Brother Luke's word on Willem's lips. Now, though, something is different: Jude lets Harold continue to comfort him like the father Harold has tried to be to Jude all these years, who loves Jude "despite" and "because of all his mistakes and hatefulness." Brother Luke recedes into the background, and Jude almost seems to believe that Harold's fatherly love for him might be true.



Jude has had moments of clarity like these before; he's repeatedly entertained the notion that "it isn't too late" for him to change into the "better" and "more loving" person his abusers stopped him from becoming. One wants to believe that maybe, just maybe, Jude has finally seen the light and recognized that he is capable of change, recovery, and redemption—but Jude has been down this path so many times before, and it's never stuck. Still, that Harold's compassion triggered—and the overpowered—Jude's memory of Brother Luke is a huge breakthrough for Jude and suggests that recovery might still be possible.



Jude appears to be taking therapy seriously for the first time in his life. He even attempts to tell his story to the doctor—something he has done only twice before, first with Ana, and then with Willem. This continues to suggest that Jude may be on the road to recovery.



Throughout the novel, Jude has oscillated between hopefulness and hopelessness about his capacity to heal and find life meaningful in the aftermath of betrayal, abuse, and devastating loss. Now, though, he seems to have undergone a major change of heart. "I've decided to stay," taken literally, means that Jude has decided to stay at Dr. Loehmann's office and resume their session. Taken figuratively, though, it conveys Jude's renewed appreciation for life: he's "decided to stay" alive. He reaches this decision upon realizing that, maybe, all the suffering he's endured has been worth it, since this suffering eventually gave way to fleeting moments of happiness and meaningful human connection.



PART 7: LISPENARD STREET

Harold, speaking in the first person in the novel's present, addresses Willem and recalls the events that happened after Willem's death. On the second anniversary of Willem's death, Harold, Julia, and Jude go to Rome. They attend Malcolm and Sophie's memorial. After the memorial, there's a nice meal, but everybody is too sad to speak or eat.

A couple days later is the day that "you" (Willem) died. Jude leaves a note that he's gone walking, and nobody sees him until breakfast the next day. He doesn't say where he was yesterday, and nobody asks. The next evening, Jude, Harold, and Julia meet JB and Richard for dinner. Then Harold and Julia head to Florence, and Jude returns to New York. He says he'll see them in two days. As Harold waves goodbye to Jude, he remembers thinking: "Don't you dare." Jude has been mostly stable lately, but he's experienced two setbacks over the past year. Harold has always thought "that life tethered life," that the longer one lives, the more one is "anchored to [the world]." But after Caleb, Jude became untethered, like a balloon whose cord was cut.

But Harold and Julia return home, and Jude has not died, and things return to normal. Jude comes over for dinner the next day, and as he's washing dishes, he drops and breaks a plate. He apologizes profusely. Though Harold tries to calm him, Jude insists that he "mess[es] up everything."

Then a few weeks later, at **Lantern House**, Harold goes to Jude's room to see if he wants anything from the store. The door is cracked open, and Harold watches Jude putting on his prostheses. Jude is still underweight, and so the prostheses are too large for his body. And when he tries to stand, he loses his balance and falls onto the bed. He rips off the prostheses, and to Harold, it looks as though he is ripping off a piece of himself.

Harold knows it's hard "to keep alive someone who doesn't want to stay alive." Even if you can use logic or guilt to convince them, it doesn't change the fact that they don't want to be there. One night, Jude shows up to Thursday dinner, and there are bruises all over his neck and face. He claims he fell, but Harold doesn't know. Jude misses Willem, and Harold does too. And Harold misses seeing Jude and Willem together. JB's painting, *Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story*, depicts what they had so perfectly.

Note that the scene Harold is describing takes place some time before the therapy session that concluded the previous chapter. This builds tension, as the last chapter left the reader uncertain as to Jude's fate. He told Dr. Loehmann that he wanted "to stay," implying that he wanted to live, but Harold gives no indication as to Jude's condition just yet.



Harold continues to send mixed messages as to whether Jude is alive or dead. On the one hand, Jude seems to handle the anniversary of Willem's death stoically, though he maintains his characteristic secrecy and doesn't tell anybody what he did or where he went on the anniversary. In addition, Harold's observation that Jude is no longer "anchored to [the world]" and no longer invested in life itself is cause for concern. When Harold thinks, "Don't you dare," he's pleading with Jude not to end his life. This scene illustrates the agony of having Jude in his life: it's a constant battle between constantly worrying about him and setting aside that worry to be present in the friendship.



Jude is showing more signs of distress and self-loathing. It's concerning that he equates dropping a dinner plate with "mess[ing] up everything." Harold, in the aftermath of Willem's death, seems to consider Jude at high risk for suicide, and so even the slightest warning signs are cause for major concern.



This is another red flag for Harold. The violence with which Jude rips off the prostheses, a piece of himself, shows Harold what little regard Jude has for his body and life. It's clear to Harold how much Jude is suffering.



Not only does Harold see how much Jude is suffering, but he also recognizes that's he's the person who has caused it: he is trying "to keep alive someone who doesn't want to stay alive." He is prolonging Jude's suffering, and for what? For Jude? For the principle of it? For himself? Harold seems to be finally questioning whether he's doing the right thing in this regard.



Still, there are happy times after Willem's death. That fall, Harold suggests that Jude teach him to cook. Jude agrees, and they have a lesson every Saturday. They go walking after their cooking lessons. When they are upstate, they walk along the path that Malcolm designed. They admire the **house** from afar, and Harold tells Jude that it is beautiful. He hopes that Jude catches his meaning: that he is proud of the life that Jude built for himself.

In February, Harold and Jude have a cooking lesson at Greene Street, and then they go for a walk. Jude shares that he's been asked to be his firm's chairman—and he's going to turn down the offer. Jude explains that he's going to leave the firm soon anyway. He might travel instead. Harold quietly offers to join Jude in his travels. Jude agrees—Harold and Julia could meet him in some places—and this reassures Harold.

Jude and Harold continue walking, and Harold realizes that they're approaching Lispenard Street: "The Worst **Apartment** in the World," Harold proclaims. Jude laughs. Jude says he has good memories of the apartment, and the mood shifts: they're both thinking of Willem. Then, Jude asks Harold if he ever told him the story of how he jumped off the fire escape. Harold is shocked—no, he says, he's not heard that one.

Five months later, in June, JB calls Harold to say that Jude has died by suicide—he injected an artery with air and gave himself a stroke. Andy lies to Harold and says the death would have been painless, but Harold researches and discovers that Jude's death would have been horrifically painful.

Harold and the others go to Jude's apartment. All his letters and documents are laid out on the dining room table. Everyone wonders if they could have done something differently. Andy takes the death horribly—he thinks it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't told Jude he was retiring. They both agree that it's good that Willem isn't here to see this—but, they also wonder, wouldn't Jude still be alive if Willem were here?

When Harold tells Jude that Lantern House is beautiful, he is telling him that his life is beautiful. Jude survived a horrible, abusive childhood and went on to build a meaningful, beautiful life for himself. The house is a symbol of that life, and of Jude's capacity to change, evolve, and heal.



Harold seems quiet and pensive here because Jude's announcement about turning down the chairman offer and quitting the firm worries him: Jude's work has been his life in the aftermath of Willem's death. If Jude is thinking of quitting his job, it's highly plausible that he has plans to die. Jude's agreement to meet Harold and Julia is Jude's indirect way of reassuring Harold that he has no plans to end his life, but Harold can't be so sure. Increasingly, Harold wonders whether it's right to keep Jude alive at all, given all Jude must endure.



That Jude and Willem's thoughts immediately shift toward Willem in this scene reinforces houses and apartments as symbolizing Jude and Willem's relationship. The Lispenard Street apartment might have been ramshackle, but it was the place where Jude and Willem first began to build a life together.



The entire narrative has been building up to the moment of Jude's suicide, and now it's finally happened. Note that while the novel has consistently described Jude's abundant suffering—his sexual abuse, his cutting, and his grief—in graphic, painful detail, it announces his suicide only briefly and plainly. The strikingly different style with which the narrative reveals Jude's suicide casts Jude's suicide as opposite his suffering—as though Jude's suicide, however painful it would have been in the moment, is an expression not of Jude's suffering, but of his relief.



Everyone feels that they have failed Jude: that there was something they could've done to prevent his death. Such thinking attempts to rationalize Jude's pain and suffering. In reality, though, Jude's suffering—and suffering in general—evades explanation.



Everybody dies so young: Andy dies of a heart attack three years later, and Richard dies of brain cancer. In the end, only JB remains. He has a serious boyfriend now, Tomasz. Harold and Julia like Tomasz and know that Willem would have, too. Now, JB is 61. Harold is 84. It's been six years since Jude's death, and nine years since Willem's. JB's latest series is called "Jude, Alone," and it features paintings of Jude in the years after Willem's death. Harold tries but can't bring himself to look at the paintings.

In the end, there was so much Harold never knew about Jude. In the days after Jude's death, he and Jude's other friends go through his things at **Greene Street** and at Lantern House, and they cry each time they find a photo nobody has seen before. One day, Harold finds the CD and letter Jude tucked inside Harold's bookcase the day of his adoption. He listens to the CD and cries when he hears Jude's voice. It takes him longer to read the letter. But he eventually does, and he learns about everything that happened to Jude. Jude apologizes for "deceiv[ing]" Harold. Harold has always wanted the answers the letter gave him, but now, with Jude gone, "those answers only torment." Most of all, he hates that Jude died alone, thinking he owed everyone an apology.

Harold often goes downstairs at night and stares at *Willem Listening to Jude Tell a Story*, which hangs on his wall. He asks Willem if he (Harold) made Jude happy. Jude—and everyone—deserves happiness. But we don't always get it. For Harold, the worst thing isn't Jude's death—it's "what he died believing."

Nobody in the novel, it seems, can escape death or grief. In particular, the fact that so many characters die young underscores the novel's central claim that pain and suffering are fundamental elements of human experience. Meanwhile, JB continues to use Jude in his art. After Jude's death, though, JB become a more sympathetic character: he's the only one of his close friends to survive to old age. And tragically, the fierce ambition and resultant paintings that once alienated JB from his friends are all that he has left.



Going through Jude's houses is so sad for Harold because it shows him all the life that Jude had left to live—but now never will. Harold learns many upsetting things about what happened to Jude in the letter. But most disturbing of all is the realization that Jude felt he needed to apologize for "deceiv[ing]" Harold. Harold tried, as Jude's adoptive father, to make Jude feel loved and protected, and this letter proves that Harold failed at this task: he couldn't make Jude understand how blameless he was, and how good. With Jude, Harold thought he would have a second chance to save a son—but in the end, he was no more capable of saving Jude than he was Jacob.



Finally, the context of Harold's multiple first-person addresses to Willem is revealed: he's been talking to JB's painting of Willem, finding solace in the artwork in the aftermath of Jude and Willem's deaths. Harold's ritual of speaking to "Willem" reinforces the importance of human connection. Recall that this painting depicts Willem looking lovingly ahead, as though Jude, mid-story, is situated behind the viewer. It gives Harold some solace to see, in Willem's happy expression, the delight that Jude inspired in others on the rare occasions he felt comfortable enough to open up to them. At the same time, it's hard for Harold to see Willem's happy expression, since it reminds Harold of all the good Jude failed to see in himself: of "what he died believing," which is that he inspired disgust and pity in people rather than happiness.



But back when Harold and Jude were standing before, Harold didn't know anything about Jude's past, or what Jude believed about himself. As they looked up at the old building, Harold was pretending that Jude was done hurting and scaring him, and Jude was letting Harold believe these things. They both pretended that the future would be happier than the past. So, when Jude asked Harold if he'd like to hear the story about the fire escape, Harold said yes, and Jude told him the story.

Harold resolves to remember Jude for the stories Jude did tell—not everything Jude left unsaid. This proposes that people generally must give people the benefit of the doubt and live with the possibility that they might one day leave, disappoint, or betray them. Jude was too afraid of experiencing more hurt and betrayal, so he shut others out, and this brought him more suffering—not less. A certain degree of blind optimism, the novel suggests, is essential to surviving a world full of so much pain and suffering: life is unfair and suffering unavoidable, so it's inevitable that we will one day experience hurt, fear, and agony. So in light of this sad truth, people must open themselves up to happiness and human connection when they get the chance, even if this makes losing loved ones all the more difficult.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Charles, Carly. "A Little Life." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Sep 2022. Web. 29 Sep 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Charles, Carly. "A Little Life." LitCharts LLC, September 29, 2022. Retrieved September 29, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-little-life>.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Little Life* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Yanagihara, Hanya. *A Little Life*. Anchor. 2016.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Yanagihara, Hanya. *A Little Life*. New York: Anchor. 2016.