

# Call Me By Your Name



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANDRÉ ACIMAN

André Aciman was born into a multilingual family in Alexandria, Egypt in 1951. Growing up speaking French, Italian, Greek, Judeo-Spanish, and Arabic, Aciman left Egypt with his family in 1965, when it was unsafe for Jewish people to live in the region. After a brief period as refugees in Italy, he, his mother, and his brother moved to New York City in 1968, where Aciman eventually earned a degree in Comparative Literature from Lehman College. Later, he received a PhD in the same field from Harvard. In 1995, he published a memoir entitled *Out of Egypt*, which garnered wide acclaim. He has also published two essay collections and four novels, including *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Enigma Variations*. He is currently Distinguished Professor at the CUNY Graduate Center and lives with his wife in New York City.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The piazza at the center of the Italian town in which Elio lives with his family boasts a small statue commemorating the soldiers who gave their lives in the Battle of the Piave during the First World War. The Battle of the Piave was fought during the summer of 1918 between the Italian Army and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Despite the fact that the Italians' victory made a significant impact on the future of the war, most Italians failed to recognize its historical importance. Although Aciman doesn't specify what town Elio lives in, he lightly infuses the area with this sense of history, mentioning this memorial statue during a scene in which Elio and Oliver finally speak frankly about their feelings for one another. As such, he subtly infuses the setting of *Call Me By Your Name* with history, suggesting that although Elio and Oliver's relationship seems all-consuming in the context of their everyday lives, they are not the first people to have undergone transformative experiences in this otherwise sleepy Italian town.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because of its examination of a man embarking on a relationship with another man after presenting himself as a heterosexual, *Call Me by Your Name* is similar to James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. Both novels analyze the process of coming to terms with one's sexual identity, narrating this development using the first-person point of view, which enables both Aciman and Baldwin to usher readers into the experience of exploring new romantic possibilities. *Call Me by Your Name* is also related to a number of other literary works

because of the fact that Elio, Oliver, and Mr. Pearlman are so well-read. As a result, they often discuss the writing of (for example) the German poet Paul Celan, whose poem "Nachts, wenn das Pendel der Liebe schwingt" ("Night, When the Pendulum of Love Swings") factors into the narrative itself. What's more, Elio's father provides a quote from the French writer Michel de Montaigne's essay "Of Friendship"—a reference that brings itself to bear on how Elio thinks about his relationship with Oliver.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Call Me by Your Name
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction, Realism
- **Setting:** A small town in Northern Italy
- **Climax:** Elio has sex with Oliver for the first time
- **Antagonist:** The inability to accept oneself
- **Point of View:** First-person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Sequel Drama.** Although the film adaptation of *Call Me By Your Name* was widely-acclaimed and won multiple awards, James Ivory (the film's screenwriter) has said that he won't work on a sequel, which would be based on the novel's final chapter. Despite the fact that the actors and even the director are all onboard, Ivory objects because he doesn't want to see actor Timothée Chalamet—who plays Elio—dressed up to look like an older version of himself.

**Oliver's Voice.** Armie Hammer, who plays Oliver in the film version of *Call Me By Your Name*, is the voice of the novel's audiobook.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Elio spends each summer with his academic parents in the small Italian village of B. Each year, the family hosts young American scholars who come to live in Italy while working on a book project. When Elio is seventeen, his family invites a twenty-four-year-old Columbia professor named Oliver to live with them for six weeks. Upon Oliver's arrival, Elio is drawn to him but doesn't quite understand why, taking special care to give him a nice tour of the town and paying close attention to the way he presents himself. He's impressed by Oliver's "billowy" shirt that opens onto his chest and the casual, confident way he

moves through the world. At the same time, he also begins to resent Oliver's relaxed attitude, which seems insulting. For instance, whenever Oliver leaves the house, he says "*Later!*"—a way of saying goodbye Elio has never heard and dislikes for its "indifference."

Elio and Oliver make a habit of working together in the mornings by the pool. While Elio works on a musical score at the outdoor table, Oliver makes changes to his manuscript on a blanket in the grass. After lunch, he moves to the edge of the pool to read, saying, "This is heaven." As such, he dubs this spot "heaven," or *the orle of paradise*. Each day, Elio watches him luxuriate, periodically asking if he's asleep. When Oliver isn't dozing, he makes conversation with Elio, asking what he's thinking about or talking to him about complex academic ideas, always impressed by Elio's ability to engage in sophisticated intellectual conversations. Often, their conversations take sudden turns and become emotionally charged, as Elio constantly tries to determine the best thing to say and is sometimes offended by Oliver's mood swings—one moment, Oliver will be playful and encouraging, and the next he'll be cold and uninterested, gazing at Elio with a "chilly" look.

Eventually, Elio comes to understand that he's attracted to Oliver, but he can't bring himself to act upon his feelings. Instead, he tries to hide his emotions while simultaneously hoping Oliver will do something to acknowledge the energy flowing between them. At the same time, though, he balks whenever Oliver gives him an opportunity to reveal his feelings. One day, for instance, Oliver comes up behind him on the tennis court, throws an arm around him and with the other massages his shoulder, saying he seems tight. Elio is instantly overwhelmed and shrinks from Oliver's touch. "A moment longer and I would have slackened," he notes. Taken aback, Oliver apologizes, saying he must have pinched a nerve, though Elio later realizes that he must have seen through this act. "Knowing, as I later came to learn, how thoroughly trenchant was his ability to sort contradictory signals, I have no doubt that he must have already suspected something," he writes.

Elio's preoccupation with Oliver continues throughout the summer. Before long, Oliver starts partying with locals. He even strikes up a romantic relationship with a girl named Chiara, who's closer in age to Elio. Around this time, Elio starts paying such close attention to Oliver's moods that he ascribes different "personalities" to each of his four bathing suits: red means he's "bold, set in his ways, very grown-up, almost gruff and ill-tempered"; yellow means he's "sprightly, buoyant, funny, not without barbs"; green means he's "acquiescent, eager to learn, eager to speak, sunny"; and blue is the color he has worn whenever he has showed Elio affection and attention, like when he massaged his shoulder or stepped into his bedroom from their shared balcony or picked up a glass Elio dropped in the grass and said, when Elio told him he didn't have to do that, that he did it because he wanted to.

While hanging out in town one night with friends, Elio sees Oliver and Chiara walking arm-in-arm. Although Elio and Oliver have been avoiding each other at home—the tension between them palpable—they have a short conversation, disguising their feelings through small talk that they refract through Chiara and the other people present. Despite this roundabout way of communicating, Elio is delighted when Oliver delivers a veiled compliment to him before leaving. Later that night, Elio spends time with a girl named Marzia, who is very obviously attracted to him. "You're not with me because you're angry with Chiara?" she asks as they skinny dip in the dark ocean. "Why am I angry with Chiara?" he replies, and she says, "Because of him." He assures her he doesn't know what she's talking about, and when they put their clothes on again, he kisses her and tells her to meet him at this spot the following night. She agrees and leaves, though not before instructing him not to tell anybody about their plans.

"We almost did it," Elio tells his father and Oliver the following day during breakfast. His father asks why they didn't, and Elio says he doesn't know, so Oliver says, "Try again later." Then he adds, "If not later, when?" This phrase haunts Elio, as he applies it to their own relationship, ultimately adding a sense of urgency to their situation. As he turns the sentence over in his mind, he wonders if Oliver has "found [him] out and uncovered each and every one of [his] secrets with those four cutting words."

Finally, when he can't take it any longer, Elio expresses his feelings for Oliver. "Do you know what you're saying?" Oliver asks. "Yes," Elio replies, "I know what I'm saying and you're not mistaking *any* of it." Having spoken so directly, he waits as Oliver runs inside to visit his translator. When he returns, though, it's as if the conversation has died away. "I wish I hadn't spoken," he says after a while. "I'm going to pretend you never did," Oliver responds, eventually saying they "can't talk about such things."

On the way back from town, Elio leads Oliver to one of his favorite places: Monet's Berm, where Monet used to paint. Putting their bikes down, they continue their conversation, though they avoid speaking straightforwardly about the fact that they're attracted to one another. Nonetheless, Oliver eventually admits he has known how Elio feels for a long time, despite how hard Elio has tried to hide it. Then, as if testing the waters, Oliver slides close and gently kisses Elio. "Better now?" he asks, but Elio doesn't answer because he's "not so sure" he enjoyed the kiss as much as he'd "expected," so he decides to "test it again," this time pressing his lips more passionately to Oliver's. After a moment, Oliver pulls away and says they should go. "So far we've behaved. We've been good. Neither of us has done anything to feel ashamed of. Let's keep it that way," he says. Considering this, Elio places his hand on Oliver's crotch, but this doesn't change anything, and the two ride home for lunch, during which Oliver slides his foot over Elio's beneath

the table. As he presses his sole against the top of Elio's arch, Elio suddenly gets a nosebleed and has to leave the table. Later, Oliver visits him in his room and asks if the bleeding was his fault. "Are you going to be okay?" he asks. "I thought I was," Elio says. "I'll get over it." That night, Oliver goes out and doesn't come home until late; Elio is convinced he's had sex with somebody else.

The following days are tense between Oliver and Elio. Nothing sexual happens between them, and Oliver spends a considerable amount of time with ten-year-old Vimini, a lovable young girl who lives nearby and has leukemia. Meanwhile, Elio advances his relationship with Marzia. At one point, she admits she thinks Elio will end up hurting her, though she kisses him back passionately when he presses her against a wall. Elio's struck by Marzia's simultaneous "boldness" and her "sorrow," amazed that she can speak so straightforwardly about her hesitations and then reach down his pants. Even as he enjoys this moment, he composes a note in his head that he leaves for Oliver later that night. It reads: *Can't stand the silence. I need to speak to you.* Oliver responds the next day with his own note, which says: *Grow up. I'll see you at midnight.* When the time finally arrives, Elio sneaks into Oliver's bed and they have sex. When Oliver penetrates him, the pain makes him consider stopping the entire thing. Oliver notices this and asks if he should stop, but Elio doesn't respond, and he continues. At one point, Oliver leans down and says, "Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine."

Although Elio enjoys his experience in Oliver's bed, something feels off in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Lying against the sheets, he feels disgusted and in pain, wanting more than anything to leave Oliver's bedroom. He feels as if he doesn't want to "remember" the experience—he didn't "hate it," but nor does he want to think about it. This feeling continues throughout the night and into the morning, and Elio is sure he'll never again want to sleep with Oliver, though by midday he finds himself flirting with Oliver in a way that is much more sexually charged than before. They decide to have sex again that night. Shortly thereafter, Elio and Marzia go to the beach and have sex.

Elio and Oliver's relationship intensifies in the last weeks of his stay in Italy. When it's finally time for Oliver to leave, he invites Elio to come with him to Rome, where he will stay for several days in order to finish his book and meet with his publisher. Elio's parents allow him to go, and the trip turns into a romantic getaway for the two young men, who relish their last few days together by having sex and partying with a group of vibrant intellectuals they meet at a reading. When Elio returns to B., he's devastated to have said goodbye to Oliver, but he tries to "neutralize" this pain by "anticipating" it. Sensing this, his father—who has picked up on his feelings for Oliver—advises him to embrace the emotional pain. "To feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what a waste!" he says.

Over the next twenty years, Elio thinks only periodically of Oliver. When Oliver and his wife and kids visit Elio's parents in Italy for Christmas one year, his mother calls him and puts Oliver on the phone. After only a moment, Oliver starts crying and hands the phone to Elio's mother, and Elio's surprised to find that he too is choked up. On another occasion, Elio visits the New England college town where Oliver teaches. Oliver insists that he come over for dinner, but Elio says he can't—it's too emotionally painful. Instead, they go for a drink at Elio's hotel and discuss their past, both of them revealing that their relationship remains the most important love they've ever had. During yet another encounter, Oliver visits Italy and Elio takes him on a tour of the house, guiding him past *the orle of paradise* and other spots that remain the same. "I'm like you," Oliver says at one point. "I remember everything." Hearing this, Elio pauses and thinks that if Oliver truly remembers everything, then he should turn to him the next day before closing the taxi door and leaving, look him in the eye, and call him by his own name.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Elio** – Elio is the novel's seventeen-year-old narrator and protagonist. The son of intellectuals, Elio himself is an intelligent young man who is bilingual, well-read, and a talented musician. He spends his summers working on classical scores, playing the guitar and piano, reading, swimming with friends, and playing tennis. When he meets Oliver, though, his attraction eclipses his other interests. During Oliver's stay in his family's house, Elio tries to spend as much time as possible in the presence of this alluring man. Although he understands he's attracted to Oliver, it takes time for Elio to decide if he wants anything to happen between them. Soon enough, Elio feels tortured by the idea that his attraction might slip by unnoticed, so he tells Oliver how he feels. In doing so, he shatters the indecision and relational calculations that have been tormenting him for weeks, though even when he and Oliver finally kiss, he isn't sure what to make of their connection. Similarly, he feels confused after they have sex, ultimately experiencing something like shame even though he's glad to have acted on his feelings. It doesn't take long for this shame to dissipate, leaving him with nothing but desire and, eventually, love. All the while, though, Elio knows that to fall in love with Oliver is to invite emotional pain. When Oliver leaves Italy after six weeks, Elio tries—as per his father's sage advice—to accept and embrace his heartache because doing so is better than feeling "nothing at all." Twenty years later, Elio feels as if he never thinks about Oliver anymore, but when they get together one last time, he sees this isn't the case—his relationship with Oliver has colored every romance he's ever had.

**Oliver** – Oliver is a twenty-four-year-old professor at Columbia

University who travels to the Italian town of B. to live for six weeks with Elio's family with the goal of finishing a book project. Oliver is a quick-witted intellectual whose charm never fails to win people over, even when his "Americanisms" make him seem brusque and indifferent. A master of insinuation, Oliver nearly drives Elio crazy with his ability to act casually while saying something fraught with meaning. This kind of conversational ambiguity surfaces frequently in their interactions, as he hints at his romantic interest in the boy without fully revealing his feelings. While he and Elio spend the first weeks of his stay in Italy flirting, Oliver goes out drinking with locals and even strikes up a relationship with Chiara, who is Elio's age. When he's not lounging on the edge of the pool with his manuscript, chatting with Elio, or sneaking around with Chiara, Oliver spends time at the beach with a ten-year-old girl named Vimini, who has leukemia and who has won over his affection. When Elio finally reveals his romantic interest, Oliver tries to shut down any possibility of a relationship by saying that he "knows" himself, suggesting that they can't let anything happen between them because then he won't be able to stop himself from pursuing something more. Nonetheless, he eventually gives in and begins a sexual relationship with Elio—during this time, he's cautious about pushing Elio too far but also doesn't keep himself from pursuing his sexual desires, even when Elio seems hesitant. After his stay in Italy, he gets married to a woman and has children, but never manages to forget Elio, whom he thinks of as his *Cor cordium*—"heart of hearts."

**Elio's Father (Mr. Pearlman)** – Mr. Pearlman is a professor who invites young scholars to work on their book manuscripts at his home in Italy, where he spends his summers with Elio and Mrs. Pearlman. Elio's father is a kind and sensitive man who doesn't impose traditional rules upon his son, instead encouraging him to lead an interesting life even if this means making mistakes or getting hurt. Somebody who loves making conversation over long meals, Mr. Pearlman frequently hosts intellectuals for seemingly interminable dinners, a practice Elio refers to as "dinner drudgery." Although he picks up on Elio's feelings for Oliver, he says nothing until after Oliver has left Italy, at which point he encourages his son to welcome the emotional pain of heartbreak because this is simply part of being alive and falling in love. When Elio gives Oliver a tour of the Italian house twenty years later, he points to the garden where he buried his father's ashes and says he's sure his father would have liked to see them reconnecting like this. He explains that he spread the rest of the remains in multiple places. "But this is where I come to be with him," he says.

**Elio's Mother (Mrs. Pearlman)** – Mrs. Pearlman is an Italian woman who spent her childhood visiting the house in the village of B. that she now lives in every summer with Elio and her husband, Mr. Pearlman. Mrs. Pearlman finds Oliver's mannerisms both unappealing and charming, calling him "Il

*cauboi*" and "la muvi star." Like Mr. Pearlman, she encourages Elio to live an unreserved life, urging him to make more friends instead of hanging around the house reading all summer. Although Mr. Pearlman upholds that his wife doesn't suspect anything about Elio and Oliver's relationship, this seems unlikely, given how obvious the boy is about his heartbreak after Oliver leaves.

**Marzia** – An Italian girl who is romantically interested in Elio. Despite her feelings—and the things Elio tells her—Marzia senses he will hurt her emotionally. In fact, she seems to know that his true affections lie with Oliver, considering that she asks him one night if he's only with her because he's mad at Chiara for dating Oliver. Despite this, she doesn't resist Elio's advances and eventually has sex with him. Unfortunately, Marzia's worries come true, and Elio stops paying attention to her as soon as his relationship with Oliver begins in earnest.

**Chiara** – An Italian girl who is Elio's age. The summer before Oliver arrived, Chiara was madly obsessed with Elio. Now, though, she looks like an adult and wants nothing to do with him, instead focusing on Oliver, who—much to Elio's dismay—returns her affections. Sick with jealousy, Elio watches Chiara and Oliver as they float in a small boat, Chiara taking her bra off once they drift beyond a certain distance. Before long, though, Oliver loses interest in Chiara and stops spending time with her even though she continues to come to the house looking for him.

**Vimini** – A ten-year-old Italian girl who has leukemia. Everybody in B. loves Vimini, who is sweet and smart. She takes a liking to Oliver, with whom she begins a genuine friendship. When Elio and Oliver leave for Rome in such haste that they forget to say goodbye to anybody, Vimini is hurt. She tells Elio this when he returns, pointing out that he never told Marzia that he was leaving and suggesting that Marzia knows he doesn't care about her. Later, when Vimini dies, Elio writes to Oliver, and his return letter suggests he's quite moved by her death.

**Mafalda** – The cook in Elio's family's summer home. Mafalda is a kind Italian woman who, like everybody else, warms up to Oliver and his casual Americanisms. A caring and attentive person, Mafalda is something of a third parent to Elio, as she frequently worries about him and does what she can to take care of him. Because she's so attuned to the comings and goings of the house, though, it's all Elio can do to keep his relationship with Oliver hidden from her, thinking that she probably wouldn't approve.

**The Poet (Alfredo)** – A poet Elio first meets in a bookstore in B. while on a date with Marzia. Wandering into the store, they learn that a book release party has just finished, so Elio buys two copies of the book, which is called *Se l'amore*, or *If Love*. "Is it good?" he asks the poet, not knowing he's the author. "Pure junk," Alfredo replies. "I should know. I wrote it." Alfredo then

signs Elio and Marzia's copies, though he says, "I'm not sure this book is for you, but..." Strangely enough, Elio encounters Alfredo again several weeks later, this time in Rome. Having been invited to a reading by Oliver's publisher, the two lovers go to a bookstore only to find out that the reading is for Alfredo's collection of poetry. Alfredo reads a poem called "The San Clemente Syndrome" because Elio tells him it's his favorite in the book. Later, Oliver and Elio go out for a wild night of drinking and lavish eating with Alfredo and his many friends, and Alfredo tells a long story about the genesis of "The San Clemente Syndrome," which he frames as a poem about desire and homesickness.

**Maynard** – A scholar who stayed in Elio's house in B. two summers before Oliver came. Although nothing ever happened between them, Elio understands after his relationship with Oliver that he was attracted to Maynard, and that Maynard knew this. Before Maynard left B., he gave Elio an "antique postcard of Monet's berm." On the back, he wrote, "*Think of me someday.*" The first time Oliver and Elio speak on the phone after Rome, Oliver tells him he took something from his bedroom. Bounding upstairs, Elio sees that he stole the postcard. Years later, when Elio visits Oliver at the university in New England where he teaches, Oliver shows him the postcard, which he has framed and placed on the wall, though he has left the back open because he has given the postcard his own inscription: *Cor cordium*, "heart of hearts."

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Manfredi** – Mafalda's husband, who occupies the position of the driver for the Pearlman household.

**Anchise** – The gardener employed by the Pearlmans. Although everybody says that Anchise gives them "the creeps," Elio's father upholds that he has a "heart of gold."

**The Poet's Wife (Lucia)** – Alfredo's wife, who is kind to Elio during the reading of "The San Clemente Syndrome." Throughout his and Oliver's crazy evening in Rome, the poet's wife affectionately refers to Elio as "debauched," which he takes as a compliment.

oneself in someone else. As seventeen-year-old Elio experiences his first serious relationship, he finds himself drawn to the ways he and Oliver are the same. After all, they're both Jewish, both interested in the life of the mind, and both attracted by similar physical features. These similarities are especially significant for Elio, since he's in the midst of establishing himself as an adult and figuring out who, exactly, he wants to be. As such, part of his attraction to Oliver arises from his desire to understand himself. In turn, Aciman demonstrates that romantic attraction can be an important part of a person's identity formation, suggesting that people must understand their desires if they are to understand themselves.

Elio's attraction to Oliver is complicated by the fact that he hasn't yet come to terms with his own sexual identity. Before meeting Oliver, he's never had a relationship with a man. This is partially because he has held himself back, forbidding himself from listening to his desires because he's unwilling to conceive of himself as bisexual or gay. Three years before setting eyes on Oliver, for instance, he encountered a young man in the streets of Rome. "Did I want to get together in a nearby movie house, perhaps? I shook my head," Elio writes. "Did I want to follow him to the store—boss was most likely gone by this time in the evening. Shook my head again. Are you shy? I nodded. All this without letting go of my hand, squeezing my hand, squeezing my shoulder, rubbing the nape of my neck with a patronizing and forgiving smile, as if he'd already given up but wasn't willing to call it quits just yet." Elio won't let himself respond to this young man's romantic advances even though it's evident he would like to do so. There are a number of physical indications that he's attracted to this man—as evidenced by his willingness to be touched so intimately by a stranger—but Elio resists his urges because they don't align with the person he thinks he is: a heterosexual man.

Unlike his experience with the young Roman, Elio allows himself to honestly examine his attraction to Oliver, though at first he's slow to admit that his feelings are romantic. In the early days of Oliver's visit, Elio sits outside with him and wonders about the energy flowing between them. "What did I want?" he wonders. "And why couldn't I know what I wanted, even when I was perfectly ready to be brutal in my admissions?" This question gets at the heart of his dilemma. On the one hand, he doesn't know what he "wants," and this frustrates him. On the other hand, he knows that he's "ready to be brutal in [his] admissions," which suggests that he *does* know what he wants and would "admit" those desires under the right circumstances. In other words, he hides his desires and attractions from himself even though he knows they exist. This, it seems, is part of what fuels his attraction to Oliver, whom he thinks might help him understand himself. "Perhaps the very least I wanted was for him to tell me that there was nothing wrong with me, that I was no less human than any other young man my age," he muses. This wish to feel as if there's nothing



## 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.



### IDENTITY AND ATTRACTION

In *Call Me by Your Name*, André Aciman implies that romantic attraction often involves a recognition of

wrong with himself indicates that Elio fears his desires, thinking they might make him less human than other young men. What's more, the fact that he wants Oliver to "tell" him that he's not so different suggests that he recognizes something of himself in Oliver. Afraid to accept his identity as a bisexual man, he values the idea that Oliver is like him.

In addition to sexual preference, Elio also considers his Jewish heritage when contemplating his identity. In his family, being Jewish has never been something to broadcast (his mother even upholds that they are "Jews of discretion"). As such, Elio is astounded to see how proudly Oliver wears a **Star of David** around his neck. Elio says that looking at Oliver's necklace is like "staring at something" that exists in both Oliver *and* himself, and readers see that his attraction has a lot to do with the ways in which he and Oliver are similar. Simply put, he feels bound to Oliver because he recognizes part of himself in him. Even more importantly, Oliver doesn't hide this part of himself. Whereas Elio keeps his religion and sexual preferences secret, Oliver puts them on display. "He was okay with himself, the way he was okay with his body, with his looks [...]," Elio notes. In this moment, Elio sees a projection of himself as a confident person, someone who doesn't shy away from a man's romantic advances or tuck his Star of David beneath his shirt.

When Elio and Oliver finally have sex, they decide to call each other by their own names, so that Elio becomes Oliver and Oliver becomes Elio. This linguistic game represents the extent to which they're connected by a sense of self-recognition: each one sees himself in the other. In fact, this transference is so strong that Elio comes to see Oliver not only as a kindred soul, but as someone who literally represents him (Elio). Years later, when he thinks about his time with Oliver, he writes: "[H]e was more me than I had ever been myself, because when he became me and I became him in bed so many years ago, he was and would forever remain [...] my brother, my friend, my father, my son, my husband, my lover, myself." Tied together by their mutual attraction—and by love—Oliver and Elio are inextricably bound, so much so that their identities merge. In this way, Aciman shows readers how much romantic attraction can influence identity, suggesting that the recognition of oneself in another not only enhances a relationship, but also gives a person a more complex and comprehensive understanding of their own self.



### PAIN, HEARTBREAK, AND REGRET

Throughout *Call Me by Your Name*, Aciman presents emotional pain as valuable, inevitable, and worth experiencing. Because the circumstances of Elio and Oliver's relationship make it difficult for them to sustain their romance, Elio understands from the beginning that he's destined for heartbreak. Throughout the summer, he becomes more and more infatuated with Oliver, all the while knowing that he'll eventually leave for good. This is partially why he

doesn't pursue Oliver at first; he knows nothing good will come of it in the long run. However, his yearnings eventually become painful in and of themselves, and he finds himself heartbroken by the fact that Oliver hasn't taken it upon himself to initiate a relationship. Around this time, he begins to intuit that he'll someday regret not acting on his feelings. As such, he discards his hesitations and moves forward with reckless abandon, fully comprehending that this relationship will hurt him but not letting this deprive him of an otherwise worthwhile experience. In turn, Aciman argues that the only thing worse than heartbreak is regret, because at least a person can learn from painful experiences. Regret, on the other hand, leaves a person with nothing.

At first, Elio is disarmed by how easily Oliver can affect him. Early in Oliver's stay in the Italian town of B., it becomes clear that there's a certain electricity flowing between them. This only disconcerts Elio, whose interest in this older man is enough to make him keep his distance. After saying something intelligent at the dinner table, he feels Oliver's gaze. This delights him, as he thinks Oliver has appreciated his remark, but then he turns and sees that the look on his face is an "icy glare" that is "hostile" and "border[s] on cruelty." "It undid me completely," he notes. "What had I done to deserve this? I wanted him to be kind to me again, to laugh with me as he had done just a few days earlier [...]. He was going to be a difficult neighbor. Better stay away from him, I thought." In this scene, Elio discovers that Oliver has the power to "undo" him with just one glance. This is what puts him on guard, as he realizes how much he cares about what Oliver thinks. Sensing the dangerous nature of this relationship—which will only hurt him—Elio decides to "stay away" from Oliver despite how much he wants to get closer.

In these initial stages, Elio and Oliver try to keep their distance from one another while periodically allowing themselves to get close, testing the waters for a moment before once again drawing away. Of course, Elio's misgivings about letting himself fall in love with Oliver are completely reasonable, especially since he does end up getting hurt in the way he originally anticipated. Regarding this, he writes: "Today, the pain, the stoking, the thrill of someone new, the promise of so much bliss hovering a fingertip away, the fumbling around people I might misread and don't want to lose and must second-guess at every turn [...]—all these started the summer Oliver came into our house." Elio confirms that his tumultuous connection with Oliver did indeed affect his entire life, as the pain of this experience is now superimposed onto all his subsequent relationships and romantic forays. Despite how determined he is at first to protect himself from this potentially devastating relationship, it's clear from the beginning that this effort is in vain—his attraction to Oliver is too strong to ignore.

Once Elio gives himself over to the inevitability of a romantic relationship with Oliver, he completely immerses himself in the

experience. This is perhaps because he knows their time together is limited, and he doesn't want to let the opportunity to be with him slip away. Oliver also seems to acknowledge this, and so they spend their last weeks together in Italy holding nothing back. When Oliver finally does leave, Elio tries to "immunize" himself from the pain, sleeping away the afternoon as a way to avoid the torment. Even as he does so, though, he knows that by trying to "neutralize" his "sorrow" he risks "killing the whole thing." His father reinforces this notion during a frank discussion about the importance of letting oneself feel pain. "In your place," he tells Elio, "if there is pain, nurse it, and if there is a flame, don't snuff it out, don't be brutal with it. [...] We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and have less to offer each time we start with someone new. But to feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what a waste!" The real travesty in life is not getting hurt, Elio's father suggests, but numbing oneself to love, which is inherently volatile. And although Elio is too much in the throes of sadness to wrap his head around this idea when he first hears it, it's clear he heeds his father's advice, as he notes, "I look back on those days and regret none of it, not the risks, not the shame, not the total lack of foresight."

Elio doesn't regret his time with Oliver because the pain the experience caused him was informative and valuable, and the only alternative would have been to "feel nothing," which is an incredible "waste." In this way, Aciman insists that pain and heartbreak are worthwhile experiences in and of themselves.



### COMING OF AGE AND MATURITY

Because Elio is such an intelligent and sophisticated narrator, it's easy to forget that he's too young to engage in a love affair with a twenty-four-year-old man. Elio's assessment of his relationship with Oliver is so mature that the age difference between them often seems arbitrary or irrelevant. At the same time, though, Aciman is no doubt aware of the tension caused by the fact that Elio is a minor, something that not only adds complexity to the relationship, but also challenges readers to think about the power dynamic that exists between these two lovers. Indeed, Oliver is in an inherent position of authority, regardless of Elio's emotional sophistication. As a result, Elio's first serious relationship is about more than love and attraction—it's also about coming of age and entering an adult world that might otherwise remain closed to him for at least another year or two. As such, Aciman explores the ways in which Elio's process of growing up is affected by this formative relationship. One reason it's forbidden to engage sexually or romantically with minors, he demonstrates, is that the process of maturation takes place during an especially impressionable period of life, meaning that such encounters become uniquely complex.

When Elio first admits to himself that he's attracted to Oliver, he romanticizes the idea of being an adult. Observing the way

Oliver talks about past mistakes, he wishes he too could speak like someone with experience. "How I admired people who talked about their vices as though they were distant relatives they'd learned to put up with because they couldn't quite disown them," he notes after his father asks Oliver if he drank a lot the night before and Oliver says, "That—and other things." "[This remark] hinted at a realm of human experience only others had access to, not I," Elio muses. "How I wished I could say such a thing one day." Elio yearns to gain the "experience" necessary to speak like an adult. As a seventeen-year-old, he is on the verge of maturity, sophisticated and smart enough to recognize the difference between himself and his elders but not yet worldly enough to join this "realm of human experience." As such, Oliver becomes all the more appealing to him, as he represents the key to this "realm."

When Elio finally tells Oliver how much he cares for him, he's shocked by his own forthrightness. "This was probably the first time in my life that I spoke to an adult without planning some of what I was going to say," he realizes. This line is worth paying attention to, as it confirms that Elio sees Oliver as an "adult" and that—by contrast—he *doesn't* see himself as one. And yet, despite the fact that he desperately wants to join this adult world by becoming involved with Oliver, he also recognizes the complexity of the situation, especially when they're on the verge of kissing for the first time. Pausing, Elio realizes he isn't sure he wants to move forward; "[...] I lay there, watching him smile in a way that made me fear anything might happen now and there'd be no turning back, that this was his way of asking, and here was my chance to say no or to say something and play for time, so that I might still debate the matter with myself, now that it had reached this point," he notes. This kind of wavering between desire and hesitancy is the direct result of Elio's inexperience—having never ventured into these territories with a man, let alone an adult, he realizes there will be "no turning back" once he moves forward. In other words, he hasn't had enough sexual or romantic experiences to know with confidence exactly what he wants. By spotlighting this indecision, Aciman shows readers the complicated calculations involved in relationships between adults and minors, which are naturally unbalanced because one party lacks experience and the other does not.

While it's true that Elio and Oliver's relationship illustrates the complexities inherent in relationships between adults and minors, it's worth noting that Aciman's primary focus is on developing their love and exploring it as a more or less genuine connection. By making Elio seventeen years old, he's able to examine the tension that arises within romantic affairs in which there's an age discrepancy. At the same time, the end of the book charts Elio and Oliver's love twenty years into the future, so that their bond eventually exists without the taboo implications of a twenty-four-year-old engaging romantically with a seventeen-year-old. After all, they are only seven years

apart, a difference that becomes insignificant once Elio is no longer going through his formative years. Having said that, there's no avoiding the fact that their love began while Elio was coming of age, a reality that follows him throughout his entire adult life and most likely continues to influence how he and Oliver interact even when they're both grown men. There is no doubt that Aciman is cognizant of this tension he has created. The question, then, is does he endorse relationships between underaged boys and men? The answer is no, as evidenced by his interest in revealing the complicated ways such experiences influence Elio. But does he condemn Oliver for acting on his feelings for this seventeen-year-old boy? This is also a no, as evidenced by his treatment of their relationship as a genuine love.

Instead of providing a moral about the boundaries of love, then, Aciman allows for a sense of ambiguity, one that allows him to present Elio and Oliver's connection as both beautiful and flawed. Even still, one can argue that *Call Me by Your Name* is a cautionary tale because of how well it demonstrates the volatility of relationships between adults and minors. While Elio seems to value his experience with Oliver (even when it's painful), others might not fare so well under similar circumstances.



## LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Aciman's novel showcases the significance of language in fraught relational contexts. Especially in the initial stages of his relationship with Oliver,

Elio desperately scrutinizes the language he and his lover use, often obsessing over how Oliver has worded a phrase or how he has handled himself in a conversation. He pays such close attention to these nuances because they provide him with the only chance he has to express his feelings. Unfortunately, though, he feels ill-equipped to properly navigate the slippery linguistic landscape of his relationship with Oliver, which is always shifting. He's too young to adequately process the complex ins and outs of an adult relationship, and he hasn't yet learned how to use language to reflect the many "contradictory signals" Oliver sends him. By underlining Elio's struggle to find a language that reflects his feelings and desires, then, Aciman presents communication as an important but volatile part of understanding a romantic relationship.

From the very beginning, Elio doesn't know what to make of the way Oliver communicates. He's dumbfounded by his casual use of language, especially when he says, "*Later!*" "I'd never heard anyone use 'later' to say goodbye before," Elio notes. "It sounded harsh, curt, and dismissive, spoken with the veiled indifference of people who may not care to see or hear from you again." When Elio posits that Oliver's "*Later!*" sounds like it's spoken with "veiled indifference," readers see that he's already reading deeply into the relational implications of Oliver's words. Although they haven't yet established a romantic

relationship, Elio resents Oliver's "dismissive" tone because it makes him feel insignificant, as if Oliver doesn't care about him. In turn, it becomes obvious that Elio is someone who spends a great deal of time thinking about words and the effect they have on people.

Although Elio is attuned to the nuances of language, he hasn't yet had enough experience to confidently communicate in fraught relational contexts. His bond with Oliver is complicated, and many of their thoughts and feelings remain unspoken. As such, they use other modes of communication, like the way they touch or avoid touching. One day, for instance, Oliver squeezes Elio's shoulder, massaging it in a friendly way. Elio flinches and leans away because he fears that if he lets Oliver keep touching him, he'll surrender to the embrace and thus reveal his feelings. And although Oliver doesn't make a big deal of the situation, Elio suspects he has picked up on the subtext of this reaction. "I have no doubt that he must have already suspected something," Elio notes. This is an important moment, as it is the first time Elio senses Oliver's ability to pick up on something but act as if he hasn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. This, it seems, is the mark of a mature communicator, someone who can act one way while feeling another way. This is the kind of complexity Elio yearns to possess in his conversations with Oliver, as he often wants to hide his feelings while simultaneously revealing them in subtle ways.

Elio isn't yet able to embody the kind of communicative complexities Oliver is capable of affecting, but he *does* recognize this shortcoming. "[...B]ecause I didn't know how to speak in code, I didn't know how to speak at all. I felt like a deaf and dumb person who can't even use sign language. I stammered all manner of things so as not to speak my mind. That was the extent of my code," he writes. Interestingly enough, he uses language to avoid saying what he actually wants to say. In this way, he becomes evasive, protecting his inner thoughts even as he longs to make them known. Finally, though, this charade becomes too difficult to sustain, and he makes it obvious to Oliver that he has feelings for him. When he does this, Oliver asks, "Do you know what you're saying?" This is an interesting response, as it indicates that Oliver wants to give Elio an excuse; he clearly knows Elio has feelings for him, but he's afraid to hear him admit it, so he offers him an out by giving him the opportunity to play dumb. "Yes, I know what I'm saying and you're not mistaking *any* of it," Elio replies. "I'm just not very good at speaking." In this moment, Elio stops worrying about speaking in "code" and finally states what's on his mind. As a result, he goes from avoiding his feelings to stating them outright, once again failing to operate in the linguistic middle ground in which Oliver is so comfortable. In turn, Oliver doesn't respond to what Elio has said, instead telling him to wait in the street while he goes to pick up papers from his translator—an indication that Elio has spoken too directly.

Several days after Elio makes his feelings clear, he tries to

mitigate his blunt confession. When Oliver asks him, “Do you like me that much, Elio?” he strives to answer honestly without being entirely clear. “I worship you,” he says, thinking that this is “the safest, and ultimately murkiest, thing [he] could come up with.” He feels this way because the word “worship” can be interpreted as either a romantic obsession or a childish preoccupation. This gives Elio “a loophole for immediate retreat in case” he feels as if he’s “ventured too far.” This kind of linguistic ambiguity is exactly what he wants to achieve. Indeed, Elio is constantly looking for words and phrases that are “murky” or vague but at the same time accurate and descriptive when it comes to his feelings.

Because his attraction to Oliver is so complicated, Elio seeks a language that both reveals and conceals the inner workings of his mind—word choice, then, becomes extremely important, something he labors over in torment. He never stops trying to develop a linguistic mode that aligns with his and Oliver’s love, and this shows that Aciman believes in the importance of this effort. Finding an appropriate lexicon is a worthwhile endeavor, he suggests, even if some relationships are so nuanced that they resist language.



### TIME AND ANTICIPATION

Throughout *Call Me by Your Name*, anticipation is often cast as unbearable and torturous. This is because Elio doesn’t know whether or not

something romantic will happen between Oliver and himself. Although there are a number of indications that they will develop a loving relationship, their future remains unclear for the entire first half of the novel. During this time, Elio is tormented by the way time moves—he knows Oliver will soon be gone, but he can’t bring himself to act on his feelings, instead waiting for Oliver to make the first move. In turn, this anticipation only intensifies his longings, and it feels like he has to wait an eternity before finally kissing Oliver. Years later, however, Elio has a different conception of time, feeling as if his summer with Oliver is a distant memory and yet also so visceral and important that it seems like just the other day. By manipulating time to feel both interminable and collapsible, Aciman invites readers to experience the strange ways in which love affects a person’s sense of chronology.

Aciman uses Elio’s mixture of timidity and desire to illustrate how torturous time and anticipation can seem to a person in love. At the beginning of the novel, Elio and Oliver’s interactions are spaced out over sporadic intervals. Not wanting to seem desperate or too interested, Elio refuses to break silences, always wanting Oliver to come to him if they haven’t spoken for several days. Despite this resolve, though, he hates these periods of waiting. “What I feared most were the days when I didn’t see him for stretches at a time,” he writes, “entire afternoons and evenings sometimes without knowing where he’d been.” What bothers Elio the most, it

seems, is the uncertainty that is swirled in with his sense of anticipation. As time passes, he wonders where Oliver is, when he’ll come home, and (most importantly) whether or not something will happen between them. In turn, Aciman highlights the mental calculations people make as they wait for what they want.

Part of the reason Elio is so tormented by the passage of time has to do with the fact that Oliver is only staying with his family for six weeks, after which he’ll return to America. This lends a sense of urgency to Elio’s desire and makes him even more sensitive to the uncertainties surrounding his and Oliver’s interactions. This distressing uncertainty is especially apparent during a conversation Elio has one morning with his father and Oliver after spending the evening with Marzia. When he tells them that he—Elio—could have had sex with Marzia if only he’d tried, Oliver suggests that he “try again later.” Then, as Elio considers the subtext of this comment, Oliver adds, “If not later, when?” This last remark strikes Elio to his core because it sounds like both a challenge and an expression of doubt. Applying the phrase to his relationship with Oliver, he realizes that “If not later, when?” is open-ended, suggesting a certain inevitability, as if saying that their relationship will certainly come to fruition at some point, even if it doesn’t happen until “later.” At the same time, though, the phrase is a question, and there is only one answer that makes sense: *never*. After all, if something doesn’t happen “later,” then it’ll never happen. More than anything, this idea—that nothing romantic will ever happen with Oliver—intensifies the urgency Elio feels, making him even more aware of the passage of time as Oliver’s departure draws closer.

Anticipation doesn’t only intensify desire and warp the way a person conceives of the passage of time; it also affects how a person experiences whatever it is they have been waiting for. After wanting for weeks to engage romantically or sexually with Oliver, Elio finds himself underwhelmed by their first kiss. “I was not sure our kiss had convinced me of anything about myself,” he notes. “I was not even sure I had enjoyed it as much as I’d expected and needed to test it again, so that even in the act itself, I needed to test the test.” Having built up so many expectations about this moment, Elio is unable to simply exist in the moment, already deciding that he’ll have to kiss Oliver again in order to “test” the effect it has on him. In this way, Aciman shows readers the potentially harmful influence of anticipation on lived experience, which often falls short of expectation.

Although he deftly conveys the sting of anticipation, Aciman also demonstrates how the passage of time changes and heals people. Sixteen years after their summer together, Elio and Oliver speak on the phone. Oliver is visiting Elio’s parents in Italy, and when he gets on the phone, he’s barely able to speak because he starts crying. “He’s all choked up,” Elio’s mother says when Oliver hands her the receiver, and then Elio himself starts to cry. “I wish I could be with you all,” I responded, getting all

worked up myself over someone I had almost entirely stopped thinking about,” he notes. “Time makes us sentimental. Perhaps, in the end, it is because of time that we suffer.” On the one hand, it is significant that Elio has “almost entirely stopped thinking about” Oliver, since this indicates that time has helped him recover from their painful past. On the other hand, though, he immediately becomes “sentimental” again upon hearing Oliver’s voice. In turn, Aciman suggests that the passage of time skews the way people perceive their own romantic relationships, simultaneously easing and recalling difficult emotions. Although the intensity of lovesick yearning can fade, such intense anticipation creates feelings that are intricate and potent enough to linger long after a romantic experience ends.



## SYMBOLS

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



### THE STAR OF DAVID NECKLACE

Oliver’s Star of David Necklace is one of the first things Elio notices about him. As such, he quickly comes to see it as a representation of the ways in which they are bound to one another, since Elio himself is Jewish, too. Unlike Oliver, though, Elio struggles with his Jewish identity, coming from a family who describe themselves as “Jews of discretion.” As a result, Elio is shocked when he sees that Oliver wears a Star of David around his neck without tucking it into his shirt. “He was okay with being Jewish,” Elio writes. “He was okay with being himself, the way he was okay with his body, with his looks.” This self-confidence is remarkable to Elio because he can’t quite bring himself to embrace his own Jewishness or, for that matter, his sexual identity. Oliver, on the other hand, is at ease with who he is and, as such, doesn’t feel the need to hide his Star of David, which therefore comes to symbolize not only the connection he and Elio share, but also the self-possession and confidence he teaches Elio to embody.



### THE PEACH

The day after Elio has sex with Oliver for the first time, he also has sex with Marzia. Nevertheless, his sexual cravings don’t subside, and so he takes one of Anchise’s peaches and uses it to masturbate, thinking that it looks like Oliver’s “ass.” And yet, he also realizes that the peach looks like a vagina. As such, the fruit itself stands for the fluidity of his sexual desires. “I saw that its reddened core reminded me not just of an anus but of a vagina,” he writes, “so that holding each half in either hand firmly against my cock, I began to rub myself, thinking of no one and of everyone.” A representation of both a man and a woman, the peach helps Elio embrace the

unbounded nature of his sexual preferences, allowing him to revel in his flexible desires. What’s more, the peach also makes him think of “no one,” a fact that enables him to not only embrace his bisexuality, but also enjoy pleasure in and of itself, regardless of sexual orientation.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *Call Me By Your Name* published in 2007.

### Part 1: If Not Later, When? Quotes

☛ A few hours later, when I remembered that he had just finished writing a book on Heraclitus and that “reading” was probably not an insignificant part of his life, I realized that I needed to perform some clever backpedaling and let him know that my real interests lay right alongside his. What unsettled me, though, was not the fancy footwork needed to redeem myself. It was the unwelcome misgivings with which it finally dawned on me, both then and during our casual conversation by the train tracks, that I had all along, without seeming to, without even admitting it, already been trying—and failing—to win him over.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 8

#### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs shortly after Elio brings Oliver into town and gives him a tour of the area. In effect, this is the first alone time they spend together and, as such, they make small talk about what they like to do. Thinking that Oliver would be more interested in hearing about the recreational activities he indulges in, Elio lists “reading” last when telling him what he does to pass the time. However, he remembers “a few hours later” that Oliver has “just finished writing a book on Heraclitus.” This suggests that Oliver is most likely an avid reader, and so Elio chastises himself for playing down the fact that he himself is a voracious reader.

What’s most interesting about this passage is the way Elio begins to intuit how much he cares about the way he presents himself to Oliver. Not only does he try to “perform some clever backpedaling” in order to show Oliver that they have similar interests, but he also realizes for the first time that he has been “trying” and “failing” to “win him over.” This is a fairly sophisticated observation for a seventeen-year-old to make, since Elio hasn’t even admitted to himself yet

that he has feelings for Oliver. Nonetheless, he picks up on his own desire to pander to Oliver, and this emphasizes how closely he pays attention to his own emotions.

☝ Today, the pain, the stoking, the thrill of someone new, the promise of so much bliss hovering a fingertip away, the fumbling around people I might misread and don't want to lose and must second-guess at every turn, the desperate cunning I bring to everyone I want and crave to be wanted by, the screens I put up as though between me and the world there were not just one but layers of rice-paper sliding doors, the urge to scramble and unscramble what was never really coded in the first place—all these started the summer Oliver came into our house. They are embossed on every song that was a hit that summer, in every novel I read during and after his stay, on anything from the smell of rosemary on hot days to the frantic rattle of the cicadas in the afternoon—smells and sounds I'd grown up with and known every year of my life until then but that had suddenly turned on me and acquired an inflection forever colored by the events of that summer.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

Since *Call Me by Your Name* is told retrospectively, Elio has the advantage of looking back on his summer with Oliver and examining the significant role it played in his life as a whole. Indeed, he now remembers “the pain” of his relationship with Oliver in a way that mingles with all the experiences he’s had since that summer. Now that he’s an adult, he has encountered “the thrill of someone new” multiple times, but each new lover bears traces of Oliver because the memory of his first serious relationship is “embossed” on his life. Not only does he vividly remember the circumstances of his time with Oliver, he also superimposes these memories onto new experiences. This is because everything began for him during the summer that Oliver came to Italy, meaning that Oliver serves as the basis for all Elio’s future romantic endeavors.

☝ I knew exactly what phrase in the piece must have stirred him the first time, and each time I played it, I was sending it to him as a little gift, because it was really dedicated to him, as a token of something very beautiful in me that would take no genius to figure out and that urged me to throw in an extended cadenza. Just for him.

We were—and he must have recognized the signs long before I did—flirting.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 13

### Explanation and Analysis

When Elio is playing a song on the guitar one day, Oliver comes over and asks him to play it again. However, Elio moves to the piano and plays the piece differently, giving it a new interpretation. This fails to please Oliver, who only wants to hear it the way Elio originally played it, but Elio refuses to acquiesce, instead playing multiple variations even though he knows “exactly what phrase” must have moved Oliver in the first place. When he finally delivers the song the way Oliver wants, he emphasizes this “phrase” as a way of giving Oliver “a little gift.” When he notes that his performance is “dedicated” to Oliver, readers see that everything Elio does during this period of his life is imbued with meaning. Indeed, he’s so preoccupied with Oliver that his feelings for him make their way into even the smallest moments. At the same time, Elio’s decision to withhold the correct version of the song signals the fact that he wants to tease Oliver, dangling the “phrase” before him without actually delivering it. In other words, he creates a sense of anticipation, one that mirrors what it feels like as they both wait for something to happen to advance their relationship. This anticipation, it seems, is what turns Elio and Oliver’s interaction at the piano into “flirting.”

☝ Perhaps, in this, as with everything else, because I didn’t know how to speak in code, I didn’t know how to speak at all. I felt like a deaf and dumb person who can’t even use sign language. I stammered all manner of things so as not to speak my mind. That was the extent of my code. So long as I had breath to put words in my mouth, I could more or less carry it off. Otherwise, the silence between us would probably give me away—which was why anything, even the most spluttered nonsense, was preferable to silence. Silence would expose me. But what was certain to expose me even more was my struggle to overcome it in front of others.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 17

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elio attempts to analyze why it is that he can't respond levelheadedly to Oliver's casual advances. When Oliver gives him a friendly shoulder massage on the tennis court one day, he immediately shrinks away, acting as if he doesn't want to be touched. Of course, the truth is that he *does* want Oliver to touch him, but he's afraid his desire for Oliver will become too apparent if he relaxes into the massage. In response, Oliver urges him to "relax," but Elio is unable to reply in an equally nonchalant manner. This is because he doesn't "know how to speak in code." Indeed, his relationship with Oliver requires a very specific kind of language, one that's capable of simultaneously hinting at and hiding any sense of desire. Unfortunately, Elio hasn't had much experience with this kind of communication, so it's all he can do to simply hide the way he feels. As such, it seems to him as if he doesn't "know how to speak at all." Instead of communicating with Oliver using the same kind of insinuating tone, he only manages to speak "spluttered nonsense." Above all, this is an indication of just how inexperienced he is when it comes to linguistically navigating complex relational dynamics.

☝ I saw his star almost immediately during his first day with us. And from that moment on I knew that what mystified me and made me want to seek out his friendship, without ever hoping to find ways to dislike him, was larger than anything either of us could ever want from the other, larger and therefore better than his soul, my body, or earth itself. Staring at his neck with its star and telltale amulet was like staring at something timeless, ancestral, immortal in me, in him, in both of us, begging to be rekindled and brought back from its millenary sleep.

What baffled me was that he didn't seem to care or notice that I wore one too. Just as he probably didn't care or notice each time my eyes wandered along his bathing suit and tried to make out the contour of what made us brothers in the desert.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

When Elio notices that, like him, Oliver also wears a Star of David around his neck, he finds himself drawn to him all the more. This connection lends their relationship a sense of shared experience and brotherhood, at least in Elio's mind. This is most likely because Elio himself has never fully embraced his own Jewishness, instead hiding his Star of David beneath his shirts and conforming to his mother's notion that the Pearlman's are "Jews of discretion." But learning that Oliver is also Jewish is like forming a bond that is "larger" than the "earth itself," one that transcends all other considerations and reaches back through history. Indeed, Elio and Oliver's shared religion is proof—at least to Elio—that they are similar to one another. Most importantly, this notion is tied to the idea of attraction, as Elio relates Oliver's acceptance of Judaism with his nonchalance about catching Elio staring at his crotch. To Elio, both Judaism and homosexuality are things to be kept secret. What "baffles" him about Oliver, then, is that he sees no reason to shirk either his religion or his sexuality, instead simply accepting himself as the person he is.

☝ What never crossed my mind was that someone else who lived under our roof, who played cards with my mother, ate breakfast and supper at our table, recited the Hebrew blessing on Fridays for the sheer fun of it, slept in one of our beds, used our towels, shared our friends, watched TV with us on rainy days when we sat in the living room with a blanket around us because it got cold and we felt so snug being all together as we listened to the rain patter against the windows—that someone else in my immediate world might like what I liked, want what I wanted, be who I was. It would never have entered my mind because I was still under the illusion that, barring what I'd read in books, inferred from rumors, and overheard in bawdy talk all over, no one my age had ever wanted to be both man and woman—with men and women.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elio marvels at the idea that he has found someone who, like him, doesn't conform to heteronormative stereotypes. Indeed, Oliver is interested in both "men and

women,” and this shocks Elio because he’s never conceived of the fact that someone in his “immediate world might like what” he likes. What’s more, Oliver is well-loved by everyone, charming not only the Pearlmans, but townspeople in B. and beyond. Elio sees that this confident man is living the same everyday life as him, and this astounds him because he has until this point believed that his own desires render him unfit for the world in which he exists. Indeed, he has read books and heard “bawdy talk” and listened to rumors that all condemn bisexuality or homosexuality, but now Oliver has given him living proof that his own sexual preferences aren’t as uncommon or debauched as he thinks.

☝ At my age, [Chiara’s] body was more than ready for him. More than mine? I wondered. She was after him, that much was clear, while all I really wanted was one night with him, just one night—one hour, even—if only to determine whether I wanted him for another night after that. What I didn’t realize was that wanting to test desire is nothing more than a ruse to get what we want without admitting that we want it.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Chiara, Oliver

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 42

### Explanation and Analysis

Threatened by Chiara’s relationship with Oliver, Elio can’t help but compare himself to her. Although Chiara is slightly younger than him (by a matter of months), she has the body of an adult, a fact that is not lost on Elio as he wonders whether or not his own body is as “ready” for Oliver as Chiara’s. However, he draws a distinction between what Chiara wants and what he wants, suggesting that she wants an actual relationship whereas he wants “just one night” with Oliver—“one hour, even,” he notes. While Chiara clearly wants to develop a long-term rapport with Oliver, Elio simply wants (or thinks he does) to see what it would be like to sleep with him, not knowing if he’s even fully attracted to men. However, Elio fails to consider that he actually already *has* the very thing Chiara wants: a developing emotional relationship with Oliver. Since they converse and flirt every day, they have already built the foundation for a genuine relationship. What’s more, Elio now knows that his idea to “test desire” amounts to “nothing more than a ruse to get what” he wants without “admitting” that he wants it. In this way, he deludes himself into thinking that his relationship

with Oliver is less important to him than it actually is.

☝ The fear never went away. I woke up to it, watched it turn to joy when I heard him shower in the morning and knew he’d be downstairs with us for breakfast, only to watch it curdle when, rather than have coffee, he would dash through the house and right away set to work in the garden. By noon, the agony of waiting to hear him say anything to me was more than I could bear. I knew that the sofa awaited me in an hour or so. It made me hate myself for feeling so hapless, so thoroughly invisible, so smitten, so callow.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears during a period in which Elio desperately tracks Oliver’s daily movements and waits for something to advance their relationship. What’s worth noting is that his sense of anticipation encompasses the feeling of “fear.” Indeed, Elio wants something to happen between Oliver and himself, but he also fears the idea of moving forward with their relationship. At the same time, he equally dreads the idea of never getting a chance to act on his feelings, which is why his “joy” “curdles” whenever he hears Oliver “dash through the house and right away set to work in the garden,” thereby cutting off any chance of conversation. These complex fluctuations between joy and fear are only exacerbated by the complete “agony” of waiting, a fact that emphasizes the extent to which lovesick anticipation can warp a person’s sense of time.

## Part 2: Monet’s Berm Quotes

☝ He stared me right in the face, as though he liked my face and wished to study it and to linger on it, then he touched my nether lip with his finger and let it travel left and right and right and left again and again as I lay there, watching him smile in a way that made me fear anything might happen now and there’d be no turning back, that this was his way of asking, and here was my chance to say no or to say something and play for time, so that I might still debate the matter with myself, now that it had reached this point—except that I didn’t have any time left, because he brought his lips to my mouth, a warm, conciliatory, I’ll-meet-you-halfway-but-no-further kiss till he realized how famished mine was.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 80

### Explanation and Analysis

This is the moment that Oliver and Elio kiss for the first time. The passage is worth examining because of what it reveals about the culmination of Elio's many thoughts regarding whether or not he wants to act on his feelings for Oliver. Although he welcomes Oliver's kiss, he also realizes that he's reached a point of no return, thinking that once he kisses Oliver there will be "no turning back." Oliver also seems to understand this, as he pauses before actually bringing his lips to Elio's—a pause Elio interprets as "his way of asking" whether or not Elio really wants this to happen. "I didn't have any time left," Elio notes, suggesting that although this brief pause gives him an opportunity to stop the kiss from happening, in truth there is no way to halt the inevitable. This, in turn, indicates that although Elio is suddenly hesitant to go through with this intimacy, he knows that he won't be able to go on living in anticipation, constantly wondering if something will happen between Oliver and himself. As such, he turns himself over to the moment, suddenly realizing that he is "famished" for Oliver's kiss even if he wasn't even sure he wanted it in the first place.

☝ And yet, he had shown me that what I wanted could be given and taken so naturally that one wonders why it needed such hand-wringing torment and shame, seeing it was no more complicated a gesture than, say, buying a pack of cigarettes, or passing a reefer, or stopping by one of the girls behind the piazzetta late at night and, having settled on a price, going upstairs for a few minutes.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elio considers the profound effect Oliver has on him. When Elio's nose starts bleeding after Oliver presses his foot against his beneath the table, Elio once again sees how intensely he responds to this man. Unfortunately, Oliver leaves the house after this incident

and doesn't come home until quite late, leaving Elio to wonder what has come between them since lunch. Indeed, he says that Oliver has shown him that what he wants can "be given and taken" quite easily. This, it seems, is the only way Elio can possibly make sense of where he stands with Oliver. If he embraces the thought that nothing is permanent—that no intimacy guarantees anything about their relationship—then perhaps will be able to accept the kind of connection he has with Oliver and keep himself from indulging the "hand-wringing torment" that so often accompanies their interactions.

☝ How I admired people who talked about their vices as though they were distant relatives they'd learned to put up with because they couldn't quite disown them. *That and other things. I don't care to remember*—like *I know myself*—hinted at a realm of human experience only others had access to, not I. How I wished I could say such a thing one day—that I didn't care to remember what I'd done at night in full morning glory. I wondered what were the other things that necessitated taking a shower. Did you take a shower to perk yourself up because your system wouldn't hold up otherwise? Or did you shower to forget, to wash away all traces of last night's smut and degradation?

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Elio's Father (Mr. Pearlman), Oliver

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

The morning after Oliver comes home late, he tells Mr. Pearlman about his wild night. When Mr. Pearlman asks if he drank a lot, he replies, "That—and other things." This phrase stands out to Elio because he thinks it "hint[s] at a realm of human experience only others ha[ve] access to." This "realm," of course, is the adult world that Elio wants so badly to join. As such, he pays careful attention to the worldly way Oliver speaks, noting the jaded tone of experience in his voice and wondering what it must be like to need to shower upon coming home in order to feel renewed (when Oliver returned the night before, he immediately got in the shower). "Did you take a shower to perk yourself up because your system wouldn't hold up otherwise?" he thinks to himself. This is an interesting line of thought, considering that after Elio has sex with Oliver for the first time he feels as if he wants to take "a bath in

mouthwash.” As such, Aciman prepares readers to chart Elio’s coming of age, showcasing his progression from wondering about the implications of Oliver’s shower to fully understanding what it means to want to bathe after sex.

“Do I like you, Oliver? I worship you.” There, I’d said it. I wanted the word to startle him and to come like a slap in the face so that it might be instantly followed with the most languorous caresses. What’s *liking* when we’re talking about *worshipping*? But I also wanted my verb to carry the persuasive knockout punch with which, not the person who has a crush on us, but their closest friend, takes us aside and says, *Look, I think you ought to know, so-and-so worships you*. “To worship” seemed to say more than anyone might dare say under the circumstances; but it was the safest, and ultimately murkiest, thing I could come up with. I gave myself credit for getting the truth off my chest, all the while finding a loophole for immediate retreat in case I’d ventured too far.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Elio answers Oliver’s question about whether or not he really likes him “that much.” In doing so, he chooses to employ the word “worship,” which he believes says “more than anyone might dare say under [these] circumstances” while also remaining “murky” and vague. His attention to the implications that this word carries once again underlines his obsession with language—faced with the many complexities of his relationship with Oliver, he heavily scrutinizes the words he uses because they are the only things he can actually control. As such, he feels the relief of “getting the truth off [his] chest” while giving himself a “loophole,” since the word “worship” doesn’t necessarily always carry romantic connotations.

I loved her simplicity, her candor. It was in every word she’d spoken to me that night— untrammeled, frank, human—and in the way her hips responded to mine now, without inhibition, without exaggeration, as though the connection between lips and hips in her body was fluid and instantaneous. A kiss on the mouth was not a prelude to a more comprehensive contact, it was already contact in its totality. There was nothing between our bodies but our clothes, which was why I was not caught by surprise when she slipped a hand between us and down into my trousers, and said, “*Sei duro, duro, you’re so hard.*” And it was her frankness, unfettered and unstrained, that made me harder yet now.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Marzia

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elio revels in Marzia’s straightforward style of communicating. Unlike Oliver, her words are “untrammeled” and “frank,” and Elio finds everything about her easy to read. When he says that “a kiss on the mouth was not a prelude to a more comprehensive contact, it was already contact in its totality,” readers recall Elio’s first kiss with Oliver, during which he was already wondering about the implications of this new intimacy, questioning whether or not he liked it, and wanting to know where it would lead. With Marzia, none of these calculations occur to him. This is perhaps because she’s given to “simplicity,” but it’s also likely that Elio feels clear-minded about their relationship because he doesn’t actually care much about what happens. Indeed, when he leaves for Rome, he doesn’t even tell Marzia he’s going away. In fact, he *never* resolves things with her, a clear indication that he doesn’t feel very strongly about their relationship. With Oliver, on the other hand, he tortures himself with endless mental calculations because he’s desperate to make their relationship last. As such, Aciman suggests that it’s not Marzia who is “frank,” “unfettered,” and “unstrained,” but Elio himself in the context of their relationship.

I couldn’t understand how boldness and sorrow, how *you’re so hard* and *do you really care for me?* could be so thoroughly bound together. Nor could I begin to fathom how someone so seemingly vulnerable, hesitant, and eager to confide so many uncertainties about herself could, with one and the same gesture, reach into my pants with unabashed recklessness and hold on to my cock and squeeze it.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Marzia

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 117

### Explanation and Analysis

As Elio and Marzia kiss while standing in an alley, he considers her ability to embrace conflicting attitudes. In one sense, she's protective of herself and wants to keep her distance from Elio, since she's already told him that she suspects he'll "hurt her" emotionally. This is what prompts her to ask, "Do you really care for me?" At the same time, however, she doesn't stop herself from reaching into Elio's pants and saying, "You're so hard." Of course, this behavior is not, in reality, very hard to understand—Marzia has her hesitations about Elio, but she's human and thus subject to desire. Nonetheless, Elio finds this contradictory attitude baffling because it represents the kind of behavior that he can't bring himself to enact in his relationship with Oliver. At this point, he and Oliver have only kissed, and even during that moment Elio didn't know how to carry out his physical desires while also expressing his concerns. As a result, he's floored by seeing Marzia so flawlessly voice her misgivings without letting them impinge upon her ability to engage in sexual activity.

☝ Did I want this, now that something was being offered? And was it in fact being offered? And if I wanted or didn't want it, how would I live out the day till midnight? It was barely ten in the morning: fourteen hours to go . . . The last time I had waited so long for something was for my report card. Or on the Saturday two years ago when a girl had promised we'd meet at the movies and I wasn't sure she hadn't forgotten. Half a day watching my entire life being put on hold. How I hated waiting and depending on the whim of others.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 120

### Explanation and Analysis

After Elio receives Oliver's note—which instructs him to meet him at midnight—he suddenly isn't sure that he even "want[s]" to act upon his desires anymore. He has spent weeks thinking about this moment, but now that it's almost here, he's nervous about embracing it. This is because all of

his thoughts about sleeping with Oliver have been abstract and distant—now that he actually has to act on them, they become scary and menacing. When he says that the last time he waited this long for something was for a report card, readers remember just how young he actually is—not only has he never had sex with a man, but he's young enough to vividly remember the trials and tribulations of life as a high schooler. Adults, of course, are accustomed to "waiting and depending on the whim of others," since this is simply part of life, but Elio hasn't yet experienced the feeling of intense anticipation.

☝ And yet another part of me knew that if he showed up tonight and I disliked the start of whatever was in store for me, I'd still go through with it, go with it all the way, because better to find out once and for all than to spend the rest of the summer, or my life perhaps, arguing with my body.

I'd make a decision in cold blood. And if he asked, I'd tell him. I'm not sure I want to go ahead with this, but I need to know, and better with you than anyone else. I want to know your body, I want to know how you feel, I want to know you, and through you, me.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 124

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elio resolves to ride out his sudden indecision regarding whether or not he wants to have sex with Oliver. Although he is no longer sure that he wants what he's been trying for weeks to get, he believes that he'll "still go through with it" even if he "dislike[s] the start of whatever [is] in store for" him. Otherwise, he thinks, he will never know what he truly wants. In other words, he frames his blossoming sexual identity as something that can only form through a process of trial and error, and he believes wholeheartedly that Oliver is as good a person as any to help him experiment. On another note, when he says that he wants to "know how" Oliver "feel[s]" as a way of understanding himself, he once again solidifies the notion that romantic and sexual attraction often have a lot to do with a person's desire to recognize themselves in someone else.

☹️ No, I didn't hate it at all. But what I felt was worse than hate. I didn't want to remember, didn't want to think about it. Just put it away. It had never happened. I had tried it and it didn't work for me, now I wanted my money back, roll back the film, take me back to that moment when I'm almost stepping out onto the balcony barefoot, I'll go no farther, I'll sit and stew and never know—better to argue with my body than feel what I was feeling now.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 136

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Oliver asks Elio if he “hated” having sex with him. As they lie in bed in the aftermath of their lovemaking, Elio plunges into despair, suddenly guilty and ashamed of what he's done. He wishes he could “roll back the film” so that he could redirect himself, telling himself to “go no farther.” This feeling of regret, he suggests, is worse than hate, since there's nothing to be done about the fact that he can't turn back time. Whereas he previously thought that he had to go through with having sex with Oliver as a way of figuring out what he truly desires, now he's convinced that it would be better to “never know.” Given the fact that he eventually gets over this depression and ends up wanting Oliver all the more, this scene highlights the notion that having sex for the first time (especially in a new way) can be complicated and volatile, an act that is liable to kick up intense emotions that may or may not last.

☹️ It never occurred to me, as I was going through the heady motions of feeling over and done with him and even a tad disappointed that I had so easily recovered after a spell of so many weeks, that this desire to sit and discuss Haydn in so unusually relaxed a manner as we were doing right now was my most vulnerable spot, that if desire had to resurface, it could just as easily sneak in through this very gate, which I'd always assumed the safest, as through the sight of his near-naked body by the swimming pool.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

The morning after Elio and Oliver have sex for the first time, they go swimming at dawn. As they do so, they talk freely with one another in a way that differs from their normal mode of communication, because they no longer have to tiptoe around the sexual tension that exists between them. As such, they talk about the classical composer Haydn—one of Elio's favorite subjects—and this enables Elio to forget about the complicated feelings he had the night before. Although he very recently felt like he wanted to be as “far away” from Oliver as possible, now he feels safe talking about music with him, as if he's “over and done” with him altogether. However, he notes that this, too, is a form of affection, though he doesn't recognize it in the moment. Still, he suggests that “desire” can “resurface” even in non-sexual contexts like this one, so that by the time he and Oliver are finished swimming, he has already recovered from his wish to push him away.

☹️ I saw him pedal down the cypress lane, still wearing my trunks. No one had ever worn my clothes. Perhaps the physical and the metaphorical meanings are clumsy ways of understanding what happens when two beings need, not just to be close together, but to become so totally ductile that each becomes the other. To be who I am because of you. To be who he was because of me. To be in his mouth while he was in mine and no longer know whose it was, his cock or mine, that was in my mouth. He was my secret conduit to myself—like a catalyst that allows us to become who we are [...].

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 142

### Explanation and Analysis

The day after Elio and Oliver have sex, Oliver wears Elio's bathing suit. Seeing this as an “unbearable turn-on,” Elio considers the fact that nobody has ever worn his clothes before, and he stops to think about the “physical and metaphorical meanings” of such an idea, determining that they're both “clumsy ways of understanding” the closeness that he and Oliver have. After all, they've suddenly become so closely intertwined that it feels as if they've “become” one another. To be “ductile” means to be docile and pliable. This is what Elio thinks he and Oliver are with one another in the context of their relationship, and this kind of flexibility and

exchange of identity manifests itself in their lovemaking, such that Elio feels as though Oliver is a “secret conduit” to himself that—through physicality and a feeling of sameness—gives him the ability to finally become the person he’s supposed to become.

●● I don’t know what happened to me at that moment as I kept staring at him, but suddenly I had a fierce urge to cry. And rather than fight it, as with orgasm, I simply let myself go, if only to show him something equally private about me as well. I reached for him and muffled my sobs against his shoulder. I was crying because no stranger had ever been so kind or gone so far for me, even Anchise, who had cut open my foot once and sucked and spat out and sucked and spat out the scorpion’s venom. I was crying because I’d never known so much gratitude and there was no other way to show it. And I was crying for the evil thoughts I’d nursed against him this morning. And for last night as well, because, for better or worse, I’d never be able to undo it, and now was as good a time as any to show him that he was right, that this wasn’t easy, that fun and games had a way of skidding off course and that if we had rushed into things it was too late to step back from them now— crying because something was happening, and I had no idea what it was.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Anchise, Oliver

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 149

### Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of Elio’s reaction to Oliver’s decision to eat his semen-filled peach. Watching Oliver chew the inseminated fruit, he bursts into tears. Instead of hiding his emotions, though, he decides to let Oliver see what he’s really feeling. He does this because it’s the most intimate thing he can do: share his emotions with Oliver. What’s interesting, though, is the complexity of these emotions, which range from happiness to fear to regret. Indeed, Elio cries because he’s never felt as much “gratitude” as he does to Oliver now. He also cries for “the evil thoughts” he had about Oliver after having sex with him, though another thing fueling his tears is the fact that he knows he’ll “never be able to undo” what happened between them the night before. Most significant of all, though, is the final reason Elio cites for his tears, admitting that he is “crying because something [is] happening, and [he has] no idea what it [is].”

Above all, this reminds readers of Elio’s youth. Although part of his reason for crying comes from a place of happiness, it’s clear that his sexual experiences with Oliver have completely overwhelmed him. Without a robust romantic history to draw upon, he finds himself unable to make sense of their relationship.

●● This was a time when I intentionally failed to drop bread crumbs for my return journey; instead, I ate them. He could turn out to be a total creep; he could change me or ruin me forever, while time and gossip might ultimately disembowel everything we shared and trim the whole thing down till nothing but fish bones remained. I might miss this day, or I might do far better, but I’d always know that on those afternoons in my bedroom I had held my moment.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 162

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elio considers the fact that his relationship with Oliver is setting him up for heartache and pain. He is about to travel to Rome with Oliver, where they will spend three days before going their separate ways, and though Elio knows this time will go by quickly, he can’t bring himself to mentally prepare for the sadness he’s sure to feel. He sees this as “fail[ing] to drop bread crumbs” for a “return journey.” What’s more, he knows that his relationship with Oliver could turn out to be terrible for him, since Oliver could be a “creep” or might tell people about what they’ve done together. Nonetheless, though, he refuses to think about these worst-case scenarios. Instead, he commits to living in the present, and this is something he manages to take pride in, suggesting that at least he’ll always know that he seized the “moment,” fully experiencing this relationship rather than focusing on all of its possibly negative consequences.

## Part 3: The San Clemente Syndrome Quotes

●● Perhaps what I liked far more was the evening. Everything about it thrilled me. Every glance that crossed my own came like a compliment, or like an asking and a promise that simply lingered in midair between me and the world around me. I was electrified—by the chaffing, the irony, the glances, the smiles that seemed pleased I existed, by the buoyant air in the shop that graced everything [...]

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 183

### Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of how Elio reacts to the party he attends with Oliver in a Roman bookstore. Having traveled from the small town of B. to Rome, he's "thrilled" by the thrumming excitement of the people around him, overjoyed that they "glance" at him in ways that make him feel "compliment[ed]." This is a significant moment for Elio, as it's one of the first times he gets to actually participate in the adult world. Although he has been around adults for his entire life, he has always been the kid at the dinner table or the professor's son on the tennis court. Now, though, he has the opportunity to attend this sophisticated party with a handsome lover, an experience that validates his attempt to present himself as a cultured and mature young man.

## Part 4: Ghost Spots Quotes

☝ "You're too smart not to know how rare, how special, what you two had was."

"Oliver was Oliver," I said, as if that summed things up.

"Parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était moi," my father added, quoting Montaigne's all-encompassing explanation for his friendship with Etienne de la Boétie.

I was thinking, instead, of Emily Brontë's words: because "he's more myself than I am."

**Related Characters:** Elio's Father (Mr. Pearlman), Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 223

### Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation between Elio and his father, who hints that he knows about his son's relationship with Oliver. Urging Elio to admit how much pain he's in, Mr. Pearlman seeks to draw him out by making a remark about how "special" their relationship was. When Elio tries to avoid the topic by simply saying, "Oliver was Oliver," his father responds with a quote by the French essayist Montaigne, who believed that a person can only have one true friend in this world. When his own friend, Etienne de La Boétie died, Montaigne tried to describe why they were so close. "Parce

que c'était lui, parce que c'était moi," he wrote—"Because it was he, because it was I." Applied to Elio and Oliver's relationship, this phrase implies that neither Oliver nor Elio can be who they are without the other. In other words, Elio is the person he is *because* of Oliver, and vice versa.

However, Elio takes this idea one step further when he thinks about Emily Brontë's phrase: "he's more myself than I am." In this way, Aciman shows readers just how much Elio believes that his own identity is wrapped up in Oliver, thereby emphasizing how devastating it must be for Elio to part ways with him. After all, if Oliver really possesses so much of Elio's identity, then saying goodbye means letting go of himself.

☝ In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away, or pray that their sons land on their feet soon enough. But I am not such a parent. In your place, if there is pain, nurse it, and if there is a flame, don't snuff it out, don't be brutal with it. Withdrawal can be a terrible thing when it keeps us awake at night, and watching others forget us sooner than we'd want to be forgotten is no better. We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and have less to offer each time we start with someone new. But to feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what a waste!

**Related Characters:** Elio's Father (Mr. Pearlman) (speaker), Oliver, Elio

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 224

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Pearlman says this to Elio during their conversation after Oliver has left Italy. He makes it clear that he isn't a traditional father, the kind who might want his child to never experience "pain." This, Mr. Pearlman suggests, is an unwise way to live, since pain ought to be "nurse[d]." Of course, this is a counterintuitive idea, since most people want to avoid heartache when possible. Nonetheless, the notion aligns with Elio's own instincts, since he has already admitted to himself that "anticipating sorrow" in order to "neutralize" it is "paltry, cowardly stuff." As such, his father's words no doubt strike a chord with him, encouraging him to refrain from "rip[ping]" out his sadness. Instead, Mr. Pearlman urges his son to live with the pain of losing a lover. After all, the only alternative Elio has is to completely numb himself to all feeling whatsoever, which Mr. Pearlman argues is a

terrible “waste.”

●● The very possibility of meeting his family suddenly alarmed me— too real, too sudden, too in-my-face, not rehearsed enough. Over the years I’d lodged him in the permanent past, my pluperfect lover, put him on ice, stuffed him with memories and moth balls like a hunted ornament confabulating with the ghost of all my evenings. I’d dust him off from time to time and then put him back on the mantelpiece. He no longer belonged to earth or to life. All I was likely to discover at this point wasn’t just how distant were the paths we’d taken, it was the measure of loss that was going to strike me— a loss I didn’t mind thinking about in abstract terms but which would hurt when stared at in the face, the way nostalgia hurts long after we’ve stopped thinking of things we’ve lost and may never have cared for.

**Related Characters:** Elio (speaker), Oliver

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 233

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after Oliver invites Elio to his house in New England for dinner. It has been twenty years since the summer they spent together in Italy, and Elio has appeared at Oliver’s university for a short visit. Despite the fact that he no longer thinks constantly about Oliver, Elio finds himself unable to accept this invitation to meet his wife and children, thinking that this experience would be “too real.” Indeed, he has gotten used to viewing Oliver as someone fixed in his past, a lover he preserves in memory alone. “From time to time” he might “dust him off,” but actually coming to his home and meeting his family is simply too intense. Indeed, Elio likes thinking about Oliver only in “abstract terms.” In turn, Aciman suggests that although the passage of time makes it easier to think about painful losses, it doesn’t completely heal whatever emotional wounds a relationship has left behind, since “nostalgia hurts long after we’ve stopped thinking of things we’ve lost.”



## 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: IF NOT LATER, WHEN?

Elio has never heard a person use the word “later” to say goodbye. That is, he’s never heard this until Oliver comes to stay with his family in their summer home in the Italian village of “B.” These days, Elio can still shut his eyes and hear Oliver’s voice saying, “Later!” This memory vividly recalls Oliver and his “billowy blue shirt, wide-open collar, sunglasses, straw hat, skin everywhere.” Whenever Elio thinks about this word, he remembers Oliver hopping out of a cab, giving him his backpack, and shaking his hand while asking if his father is home. At first, he thinks Oliver will be just another “bore,” yet another summer houseguest who has come to work on a book project. “I could grow to like him, though,” he thinks.

Each summer, Elio’s parents invite a young academic to “revise a manuscript before publication” while living with them in their Italian summer home. This means Elio has to switch bedrooms for six weeks, giving up his bed to sleep in an adjoining room that is connected by a small balcony. As long as the scholars help Elio’s father organize his correspondences and paperwork, they aren’t expected to do anything but live however they please and work on their projects. Other than these semi-permanent houseguests, Elio’s parents also frequently host dinner parties, inviting neighbors, colleagues, relatives, and academics of all sorts to sit around their dinner table for seemingly endless meals—a practice Elio refers to as “dinner drudgery.”

One afternoon not long after Oliver arrives, Elio notices how soft and pale this man’s skin is on his palms, neck, and the undersides of his feet. These places on his body, Elio thinks, are “private, chaste, unfledged,” and they tell him “things about [Oliver]” that he otherwise wouldn’t even know “to ask.” One day, he takes him on a tour of B., and this is the first time they spend alone together. Oliver asks questions as Elio shows off his knowledge about the area. However, when Elio asks if he wants to see a train car that has been taken over by “Gypsies,” Oliver says, “Later. Maybe.” This “polite indifference” cuts Elio to his core, as he feels like Oliver has recognized his desire to “play up to him.”

*Elio’s close attention to the way Oliver says “later” signals his sensitivity to language. From the very beginning of the novel, then, Aciman goes out of his way to show readers that Elio is very attuned to the words people use and the way they employ these words. What’s more, this scrutiny of Oliver’s use of “later” suggests that Elio is particularly compelled to analyze this man—an indication that he has taken a special interest in him.*



*It is clear that Elio’s family is cultured and educated. Given the fact that his parents host young scholars every summer, it’s safe to assume that this is a family dedicated to intellectual pursuits. What’s more, Elio is an only child, meaning that he has grown up sitting through long dinners and navigating his way through an adult world. This kind of intellectual sophistication is an important part of his character, one that factors into his romantic relationships and the identity he seeks to build for himself as an adult.*



*Already, Elio hangs on Oliver’s every word, dreading the idea that this man might cast him away with “polite indifference.” Eager to impress Oliver, he gives him a tour of the area and tries to act like a sophisticated adult who’s interested in local history. However, it’s clear he doesn’t fully grasp Oliver’s interests yet, and this distresses him. By stopping Elio from “playing up to him,” Oliver essentially keeps him from presenting himself as a cultured adult, instead making him feel like an over-eager child.*



As they bike to the bank so that Oliver can open an account, Oliver asks Elio what there is to do in B. during the summer. In his responses, Elio tries to seem mature and casual, saying he simply waits for summer to end. When Oliver asks what one does in B. in the winter, Elio smiles, and Oliver cuts him off, saying, “Don’t tell me: wait for summer to come, right?” Oliver’s ability to read Elio’s mind appeals to the boy, who notices that Oliver picks up on things like *dinner drudgery* sooner than other residents ever have.

Elio tells Oliver he plays tennis, swims, goes out at night, jogs, transcribes music, and reads. He purposefully lists reading last because he thinks Oliver isn’t the kind of person who spends much time reading, given his “brazen attitude” and casual “indifference.” However, when he really thinks about it, he remembers that Oliver has recently finished writing a book about Heraclitus, meaning that reading is “probably not an insignificant part of his life.” Because of this miscalculation, Elio knows he must now “perform some clever backpedaling” in order to let Oliver know that his “real interests” align with his. However, this thought bothers him in and of itself, as it forces him to admit that even during “casual conversation” he is trying to appeal to Oliver.

On the way back from the bank, Elio offers to take Oliver to San Giacomo so they can “walk up to the very top of the belfry,” which he and his family have nicknamed “To-die-for” because of how much guests like it. However, he feels stupidly caught off-guard when, in response to this invitation, Oliver tells him that he’ll see the belfry “later.”

In retrospect, Elio wonders how he possibly could not have recognized his attraction to Oliver right from the start. “I know desire when I see it,” he writes, “and yet, this time, it slipped by completely.” Failing to fully acknowledge his attraction, he finds himself pontificating at dinner one night and hoping to impress Oliver. Because he’s only seventeen and always surrounded by older academics, he has a habit of speaking fast in order to fit in as many thoughts as possible. During dinner on Oliver’s third night, then, he speaks quickly about a musical transcription he’s working on, and when he falls silent, he can tell that Oliver is watching him. This pleases him immensely—Oliver must like him, he thinks. When he finally lets himself return the gaze, however, he’s horrified to discover that Oliver is staring at him with “a cold and icy glare” that is almost “cruel.”

*Although Oliver has proven his ability to shut Elio down with just a few words, it’s evident that they both operate on a similar intellectual wavelength. Indeed, they communicate easily, thinking along the same lines and intuiting what the other might say. This is an important aspect of their developing relationship, as it eventually brings itself to bear on the many mental calculations Elio must make when talking to Oliver about more complicated subjects.*



*Once again, readers see how hard Elio works to present an appealing version of himself to Oliver. Trying desperately to come off as someone Oliver might find interesting, he pays careful attention to what he says. What’s most interesting, though, is that he doesn’t initially realize how much he’s working to do this—it’s only when he mistakenly misrepresents himself that he understands what he’s doing. More than anything, this naivety has to do with his youth. Having not had many serious romantic partnerships, Elio doesn’t recognize his own desire to flirt and lay the groundwork for a relationship with Oliver.*



*Aciman has already established a pattern in the novel. First, Elio gets drawn into his thoughts about Oliver, focusing intensely on their conversations. Then, without warning, Oliver reverts to his “indifferent” attitude, suddenly withdrawing from Elio. Not only does this demonstrate how easily Elio is attracted to Oliver despite himself, it also suggests that Oliver is hesitant to let Elio get too close.*



*Oliver’s feelings continue to baffle Elio. As he tries hard to win over his affections, he finds that Oliver is unpredictable. Yet again, then, readers see Elio’s naivety—whereas an adult experienced in the trials and tribulations of romance might recognize this pattern as the initial stages of a forbidden relationship, Elio finds Oliver’s emotional fluctuations completely inscrutable. However, Oliver’s sudden mood changes only hint at complicated feelings that he wants to hide behind his “cold and icy glare.” Elio is unable to recognize this, instead finding himself baffled by these sudden changes.*



In the aftermath of Oliver’s “icy glare,” Elio feels stupid for having “fallen for the skin of his hands, his chest, his feet.” He also feels silly for coveting Oliver’s kinder expressions, which seem like “miracles” now that he has seen this terrible look. In response, Elio returns this “wicked glance,” and they don’t speak to one another for two days, even avoiding each other on the balcony that connects their bedrooms. “He was going to be a difficult neighbor,” Elio notes. “Better stay away from him.”

Without reason or warning, the silence breaks three days later when Oliver asks Elio if he wants to go swimming. Speaking in the present, Elio understands that “the pain, the stoking, the thrill of someone new,” all of these experiences can be traced back to his summer with Oliver, since his experience with him is now “embossed” on his entire life. Still, he comes to learn how quickly his relationship with Oliver can go cold, as if “distance” can abruptly slip between them at any moment. “It was almost as though he were doing it on purpose,” Elio thinks, “feeding me slack, and more slack, and then yanking away any semblance of fellowship.”

While playing guitar one day, Elio senses Oliver staring at him. When he looks up, he’s once more met with the “icy glare.” This time, though, Oliver can’t hide it, so he asks questions about the guitar as a way of diminishing his cruelty. They quickly begin arguing about how Elio was playing the song, so Elio moves to the piano, where he plays another variation. However, Oliver doesn’t like how Elio has changed it—he only wants to hear it the way he originally played it on the guitar, but Elio keeps presenting new and increasingly complex interpretations. Finally, when he has exasperated Oliver, he plays the work in the original way, knowing “exactly what phrase in the piece must have stirred him.” “We were—and he must have recognized the signs long before I did—flirting,” he writes.

Not long after this interaction, Elio begins to admit to himself that he’d do anything for Oliver because he feels strongly for him. Then, one afternoon, he finds himself home alone with Oliver, and he feels as if “fire” is tearing through his “guts.” He sits in his bedroom, waiting in torment for something to happen and thinking about what it would be like to be with Oliver. “I had learned to leave my French windows ajar, and I’d lie on my bed wearing only my bathing suit, my entire body on fire,” he writes. “Fire like a pleading that says, Please, please, tell me I’m wrong, tell me I’ve imagined all this, because it can’t possibly be true for you as well, and if it’s true for you too, then you’re the cruelest man alive.”

*Elio’s decision to “stay away” from Oliver aligns with his belief that this man’s stormy moods arise not from a place of affection but from a place of cruelty. Unable to speak openly with Oliver about their relationship (both because of their age difference and because he has never been with a man before), he’s forced to keep his distance.*



*Throughout Call Me by Your Name, it’s important to remember that Elio is retrospectively narrating this story. As such, he often offers small insights into the nature of his relationship with Oliver that were unavailable to him in the moment because he was too young to recognize the nuances of their connection. Now, though, he knows that his experiences with Oliver were extremely formative, an idea that indicates just how significant romantic relationships can be when a person is still coming of age (especially when that person is involved with an adult).*



*In this scene, it becomes clear that Oliver isn’t the only tormentor in this relationship. Indeed, Elio is perfectly capable of driving Oliver crazy, though he’s perhaps not quite as aware of what he’s doing. As he withholds the “phrase” that Oliver wants so badly to hear in this piece of music, he creates a sense of anticipation and longing, one that reflects the unspoken desires lurking in their relationship.*



*Although he’s capable of alluding obliquely (through his music) to the anticipation that exists between Oliver and himself, Elio is ultimately ravaged by the fact that he’s forced to wait for something to happen in their relationship. As he sits in his bedroom and longs for Oliver to seek him out, he feels the pain of desire and thinks that Oliver is “the cruelest man alive” if he is indeed experiencing the same feelings and not acting on them. And yet, he can’t bring himself to make the first move to break this spell of anticipation, perhaps because he’s younger than Oliver and inexperienced when it comes to initiating sexual or romantic partnerships with men.*



When Oliver finally does walk into Elio's bedroom, he asks why he isn't with the others at the beach, and though he wants to, Elio can't bring himself to say, "To be with you, Oliver. With or without my bathing suit. To be with you on my bed. In your bed. Which is my bed during the other months of the year. Do with me what you want. Take me. Just ask if I want to and see the answer you'll get, just don't let me say no."

*In his fantasies, Elio is much bolder than he is in real life. Indeed, he dreams of straightforwardly telling Oliver about his desires, revealing that he wants to be "taken." It's worth considering that he wants Oliver to "ask" for his consent, but also doesn't want him to accept "no" for an answer. This is a potentially problematic desire, as it complicates the entire idea of sexual consent. This complicated viewpoint suggests that Elio yearns to be "taken" by Oliver but fears he won't let himself actually go through with this desire if presented with the opportunity. In turn, readers see that he is in a situation that both entices and repels him, and this is yet another indication that his youth and sexual inexperience are complicating his ability to move forward with this relationship, even in his fantasies.*



Elio also wishes he and Oliver could talk about the other night, when Oliver came into his room and lay down flat upon his body, pressing him into the mattress. As Elio lay on his stomach, he didn't know what to do, but he knew he didn't want Oliver to leave. "This is like coming home," he thought, "[...] like coming home to a place where everyone is like you." Instead of saying any of this, though, he simply stayed still, pretending to be asleep but also trying to invite Oliver to do more. "I decided to convey without budging, without moving a single muscle in my body, that I'd be willing to yield if you pushed, that I'd already yielded, was yours, all yours, except that you were suddenly gone," he writes.

*Once again, Elio's conception of sexual consent is complicated. On the one hand, he doesn't do anything when Oliver lies on top of him, a fact that suggests he's not ready to move forward with a physical relationship. On the other hand, he internally invites Oliver's advances, hoping that he'll "push" onward so that he himself can "yield." Elio's attraction to Oliver is genuine, but it's not without an element of fear regarding the unknown sexual world that Oliver represents.*



While playing tennis the next day, Oliver throws his arm around Elio during a break and massages his shoulder. Although this is done in a very friendly way, Elio immediately flinches from his touch, scared that he'll give in to his desire to embrace this contact. Startled, Oliver suggests that he must have pinched a nerve, though Elio thinks he only says this to play into the way he himself is reacting. "Knowing, as I later came to learn, how thoroughly trenchant was his ability to sort contradictory signals, I have no doubt that he must have already suspected something." Nonetheless, Oliver simply tells Elio to "relax," inviting a girl named Marzia to feel the knots in his back. "Feel it? He should relax more," he says. "You should relax more," Marzia agrees.

*It's clear in this moment that Oliver is testing the waters with Elio, ultimately trying to sense whether or not he's open to a physical relationship. What he doesn't know, though, is that Elio's strong reaction actually arises from his intense desire to be touched. Wanting desperately to hide his feelings, Elio thinks he has to recoil from Oliver's massage, and this only adds yet another layer of secrecy and complexity to their already tense bond. Marzia is only tangential to Elio's feelings here, but because she's later revealed to be attracted to Elio, this might be a significant moment for her as well.*



After the incident on the tennis court, Elio wonders why he's so afraid to show Oliver how much he affects him. "Because I was afraid of what might happen then?" he asks. "Or was I afraid he would have laughed at me, told everyone, or ignored the whole thing on the pretext I was too young to know what I was doing?" Or, he wonders, perhaps he's afraid to reveal his feelings because they might "tempt" Oliver to "act." "Did I want him to act?" he asks himself. "Or would I prefer a lifetime of longing provided we both kept this little Ping-Pong game going: not knowing, not-not knowing, not-not-not knowing?"

Elio is overcome by Oliver and his billowy blue shirt and the scent of his skin. More than anything, though, he's drawn to the **Star of David** hanging from a gold necklace around Oliver's neck. This, Elio feels, connects them to each other, as they are both Jewish. Because he and his family are what his mother calls "Jews of discretion," he's astounded to see how proudly Oliver displays his Star of David. "Staring at his neck with its star and telltale amulet was like staring at something timeless, ancestral, immortal in me, in him, in both of us [...]." Elio thinks that his family and Oliver are the only Jewish people in B., but this doesn't make Oliver want to hide his religion. Instead, he wears it with his shirt collar open in a way Elio can never manage to imitate without feeling self-conscious.

On the day Oliver walks into Elio's room and asks why he didn't go to the beach with the others, Elio lies and says he has bad allergies. Oliver then suggests they go swimming together, pulling Elio off the bed and noticing his low-slung bathing suit. Elio turns away so Oliver won't notice his erection, and as he does so he asks, "Must we?" This question, he feels, is the closest he can come to suggesting that they simply stay in the bedroom, where Elio will let Oliver put his hand down his swimsuit. However, Oliver only says, "I'll meet you downstairs," and when Elio looks down at his crotch, he's mortified to find that it's damp. "How could I have been so careless, so thoughtless, so totally stupid?" he asks himself. "Of course he'd seen."

In retrospect, Elio understands that he should have embraced Oliver's attitude of self-acceptance and simply "shrugged" away any worries about Oliver noticing his damp crotch—"So what if he saw? Now he knows." At the time, though, he's unable to embrace this idea and unable to conceive of the fact that "someone else in [his] immediate world might like what [he] liked, want what [he] wanted, be who [he] was." This thought has never crossed his mind, he notes, because he hasn't heard of anybody his age wanting "to be both man and woman—with men and women."

*Once again, Elio struggles to decide what he wants. His instinct to hide his feelings from Oliver has to do with the fact that he doesn't conceive of himself as a gay or bisexual man. As such, he worries that Oliver might "laugh" at him or tell people. He isn't even entirely sure he wants anything to happen with Oliver. In turn, he considers embracing a "lifetime of longing," simply remaining in this anticipatory state without having to acknowledge and thus commit to his feelings, which frighten him.*



*When Elio says that "staring" at Oliver's Star of David necklace is like looking at something "timeless" in "both" of them, readers see that part of his attraction to Oliver is a recognition of himself in this confident man. Not only does Elio suspect that Oliver is—like him—attracted to both men and women, he sees that Oliver is also Jewish. To Elio, Judaism has always been something to hide, but Oliver wholeheartedly accepts who he is. As such, he represents a self-assured version of Elio himself, something that draws the boy to him all the more.*



*Slowly but surely, Elio's attraction to Oliver becomes more and more obvious. Now he knows that Oliver must have at least an inkling about his desire. In this way, his body betrays his intention to keep his yearnings secret, forcing him to acknowledge—albeit in a roundabout and involuntary way—how he feels.*



*This is the first time that Elio references that part of his hesitation has to do with how little he has encountered other people who share his desires. Indeed, he's never had friends who are openly gay or bisexual, and so he has no model upon which to base his newfound sexual preferences. As a result, he's forced to make sense of his sexual identity in isolation, realizing that the only person who might understand what he's going through is Oliver himself.*



Every night, Elio lies in bed yearning for Oliver to enter his room. During the day, he sits at a table by the pool and works on his music transcriptions. Unlike the residents before him, Oliver doesn't work in isolation in his room, instead spreading a blanket on the grass and working on his book as Elio toils over his transcription nearby. Without fail, Oliver eventually migrates to the edge of the pool, where he lies down on the warm tiles and reads, saying, "This is heaven." After lunch, he often says, "I'm going to heaven now." When he lies down like this, Elio sometimes asks him if he's sleeping, and they have slow, easy conversations.

Sometimes while lying in *the orle of paradise*—as he calls his poolside perch—Oliver repeats the things Elio says as a response to his questions. When, for example, he asks what he's thinking about and Elio says his thoughts are "private," Oliver says, "So you won't tell me?" In response, Elio says, "So I won't tell you." "So he won't tell me," Oliver repeats in a way that comforts and assures Elio. In other conversations, Oliver asks Elio academic questions and marvels at the boy's intelligence. "I don't get it," he says one day about how smart Elio is. "What's not to get?" Elio replies. "Dad's a university professor. I grew up without TV." On another occasion, a glass falls off Elio's table into the grass, and Oliver walks over to pick it up. "You didn't have to," Elio says. "I wanted to," Oliver answers.

Each day, neighbors and friends visit the house, including Chiara, a girl Elio's age who was smitten with him last summer but now shows no interest in him. In just one year, she has developed into a strikingly attractive adult, and it isn't long before she and Oliver start spending time together. Elio watches them flirt when one day she comes over and tells him to come swimming with her and her sister. Oliver dashes upstairs to change and comes down in his red bathing suit. By this point, Elio has decided that Oliver has four distinct moods that correspond with the color of his swimsuit: "Red: bold, set in his ways, very grown-up, almost gruff and ill-tempered [...]. Yellow: sprightly, buoyant, funny, not without barbs [...]. Green [...]: acquiescent, eager to learn, eager to speak, sunny. [...]" Blue, Elio notes, is the color Oliver wears when he's most affectionate.

*Despite the unspoken tension running between Elio and Oliver, it's clear that their relationship is developing on its own. At least at this point, they don't need to acknowledge their feelings for one another. Instead, they naturally establish a bond by simply spending time together by the pool, talking and getting to know each other in a way that once again illustrates how they operate on similar wavelengths.*



*As the summer progresses, Elio and Oliver's relationship develops in small ways. Elio is characteristically attuned to the way they communicate, taking pleasure in the way Oliver repeats his own words, as language is one of the things that brings them together. What's more, Oliver's attentiveness reveals itself gradually, suggesting that he is as invested as Elio in this relationship.*



*Once more, readers see how closely Elio pays attention to Oliver. This time, this manifests itself in the fact that he has ascribed different moods to each of Oliver's four bathing suits, a perfect representation of the ways in which lovesick people often superimpose meaning onto things that are otherwise banal. Reading into everything Oliver does, Elio can't help but jump to conclusions about him. Unfortunately, though, he doesn't have to do much guesswork in order to understand that Chiara and Oliver are interested in one another.*



Everybody loves Oliver. Even Elio's mother, who claims to dislike his gruff "Americanisms," finds him charming and affectionately calls him "*Il cauboi*" and "*La muvi star*." Elio's father also takes a liking to Oliver, though he suggests that he's shy—an idea Elio finds bewildering. "Could all of his gruff Americanisms be nothing more than an exaggerated way of covering up the simple fact that he didn't know—or feared he didn't know—how to take his leave gracefully?" he wonders. Thinking this way, he remembers that Oliver declined soft-boiled eggs every morning when he first arrived, but that once Mafalda—the cook—offered to open them for him, he accepted them eagerly. This, he admitted with embarrassment, was because he didn't know how to peel boiled eggs.

Oliver now eats two soft-boiled eggs each morning, which Mafalda peels for him. When she offers a third, though, he declines, saying, "I know myself. If I have three, I'll have a fourth, and more." This strikes Elio, for he has never heard anyone say "*I know myself*," and the phrase intimidates him.

In the coming weeks, Elio senses that Chiara is—like him—"smitten" with Oliver. However, this does nothing to change the way he himself feels. When his father asks what he thinks of Oliver, he makes sure to answer in a way that won't make him suspect that he has a stronger affinity for Oliver than anyone else does. One night, Oliver goes out on the small fishing boat with Anchise—the gardener—and doesn't return for quite some time. Everyone in the house is overcome with worry, and Elio allows himself to openly lament the situation, though he makes sure to match everyone else's grief so no one will pick up on what he's really experiencing.

Elio and his family aren't the only people vying for Oliver's time. Indeed, locals invite him almost nightly to dinner, and Chiara and her sister often whisk him away. As a result, Elio waits to see if Oliver will be at the dinner table each night, and when he isn't, his heart sinks. In light of this, he tries to curb his expectations, thinking that "there are certain wishes that must be clipped like wings off a thriving butterfly." He decides that he wants Oliver "gone from [his] home so as to be done with him" and fantasizes about Oliver dying, at which point he switches to imagining his own death, thinking about committing suicide so Oliver will know how much pain he's put him through.

*Because Elio worships Oliver, it's inconceivable to him that this seemingly self-assured man might actually be shy and timid. The fact that this surprises Elio indicates just how much a person's romantic feelings can affect the way they view the object of their desire. In turn, this serves as a reminder to readers that because Elio is so thoroughly entranced by Oliver, he is perhaps unable to see him clearly.*



*The phrase "I know myself" implies that Oliver has an entire past about which Elio knows nothing. Oliver says he is well-acquainted with his own insatiability, and this suggests that he has over-indulged throughout his life and now knows how to keep himself at bay—a disappointing idea, considering that Elio wants nothing more than for Oliver to "indulge" with him. What's more, the phrase "I know myself" strikes Elio because of its sense of self-possession. Since Elio himself is unsure about who he is or wants to be, it's astounding to hear someone so confidently declare this kind of self-knowledge.*



*Yet again, Aciman lets readers observe the tortured emotional calculations that Elio constantly makes in order to hide his feelings for Oliver. When everyone else displays how fond they are of Oliver, Elio takes care to calibrate his own affections so that no one (he thinks) detects his true desires. This, it's safe to say, is an exhausting way to live.*



*The depths of Elio's heartache become quite evident when he starts fantasizing about harming himself. Although there's no reason to believe that these thoughts are about anything other than his desire to make a grand gesture, the mere fact that he thinks about this at all is a testament to just how much Oliver has affected him.*



Chiara spends much of her time with Oliver while Elio himself simply yearns for one night together. “Just one night—one hour, even—if only to determine whether I wanted him for another night after that,” he writes. “What I didn’t realize was that wanting to test desire is nothing more than a ruse to get what we want without admitting that we want it.” Chiara, on the other hand, goes forth and makes her intentions clear, spending most days with Oliver floating on a small rowboat and taking off her bra once they float out far enough. Elio watches them do this, thinking that he doesn’t want to lose Oliver to her and that, when he thinks about it, he also doesn’t want to lose *her* to Oliver.

Watching Chiara and Oliver dance one night in town, Elio tries to convince himself that this is a good thing: now Oliver is taken, and he can’t do anything about it. Maybe this will help him “recover.” The next morning, though, his “heart jolt[s]” when he sees Oliver. Wanting to understand how his and Chiara’s relationship has advanced so quickly, he starts talking to each of them about the other. When talking to Chiara, he compliments Oliver and pretends that he doesn’t know what’s happening between them. When talking to Oliver, he describes Chiara’s naked body, which—he reveals—he saw two years ago. He admits to himself that he simply wants to watch Oliver become aroused, even if it has nothing to do with him. Similarly, he describes Oliver’s body to Chiara to see if she desires the same things he does.

In the coming days, Oliver and Elio stop talking, and Elio experiences pangs of jealousy as Oliver skips their tennis matches and swimming outings in order to spend time with Chiara. Before long, though, Chiara starts coming to the house and waiting for Oliver to appear, and it becomes clear that he’s beginning to lose interest in her, though not completely. While waiting for him one day, she overhears Mafalda talking about the fact that she’s much too young for Oliver. “Nobody asked you anything,” she retorts. “She’s not even seventeen yet and she goes about having bare-breasted crushes,” Mafalda laments. “Thinks I haven’t seen anything?” This aside makes Elio think about the fact that nothing can “escape this network of informed *perpetue*, housekeepers.” Eyeing Chiara, he understands that she’s “in pain.”

*Once again, Elio’s retrospective narration provides insight into the nature of his attraction to Oliver, suggesting that “wanting to test desire is nothing more than a ruse to get what we want without admitting that we want it.” He emphasizes the fact that, although his adolescent yearnings are visceral and real, he hasn’t—at this point in the story—fully come to terms with his sexual cravings. Instead of willingly embracing the fact that he wants to sleep with Oliver, he frames this desire as an experiment, thereby managing to convince himself that it’s not as permanent or consequential as it might otherwise seem.*



*The conversations Elio conducts with Oliver and Chiara highlight his struggle to make sense of his own erotic fixations. Talking to them about their sexual experiences, he seeks to understand what it is that he himself is so attracted to when he looks at Oliver. Once again, then, he looks to language when trying to interpret his feelings.*



*Elio’s realization that nothing will “escape” the housekeepers of B. is important, considering that he doesn’t want anyone to know about his feelings for Oliver. As such, if something does ever happen between them, he risks the entire town discovering that he likes men—a sexual identity he’s not yet ready to fully assume.*



In town one night, Oliver walks by with Chiara and sees Elio sitting with friends outside a *caffè*. Stopping for a moment, Oliver asks what Elio's doing out past his bedtime, and Elio reminds him that his father "doesn't believe in bedtimes." Oliver then explains to Chiara that there are hardly any rules in Elio's family, suggesting there's "nothing to rebel against." In response, Elio says, "We all have our ways of rebelling." When Chiara tells him to name one way he rebels, he's unable to furnish an answer, so Oliver jumps in and says, "He reads Paul Celan." In turn, Elio wonders if he's trying to make up for his "little jab" about Elio's bedtime. Chiara, for her part, asks who Paul Celan is, and Elio gives Oliver a "complicit glance." "A poet," Oliver whispers as he and Chiara walk away. "Later!" he says.

In the aftermath of this conversation, Elio is delighted that Oliver—with whom he hasn't spoken to for several days—has remembered that he reads Paul Celan. Feeling high after this interaction, he dances excitedly with Marzia and walks her home along the beach. When they stop for a moment, he suggests they go swimming, and they both take their clothes off and plunge into the dark water. "You're not with me because you're angry with Chiara?" Marzia asks. "Why am I angry with Chiara?" Elio responds. "Because of him," she says. Elio does his best to look confused, and when they're done swimming he takes her face in his palm and kisses her. After this initial kiss, she presses back passionately, and they decide to meet in the same place the following night. "Just don't tell anyone," she says.

"We almost did it," Elio tells his father and Oliver the next morning at breakfast. His father asks why they didn't, in that case, and he says that he doesn't know. "Better to have tried and failed..." Oliver chimes in. "All I had to do was find the courage to reach out and touch, she would have said yes," Elio claims. "Try again later," says Oliver, and as Elio works out the implications of this statement (is he criticizing him? making fun? seeing through his act?) Oliver adds, "If not later, when?" Mr. Pearlman likes this phrase, but it stings Elio. He thinks about how he will *try again later* with Oliver, but he doesn't like applying *if not later, when?* to their relationship. "What if he had found me out and uncovered each and every one of my secrets with those four cutting words?" he worries.

*When Oliver says that Elio is rebellious because he reads Paul Celan, he makes a reference that only Elio is likely to pick up on, since Elio's the only person in the conversation (other than him) who is well-versed in poetry. This is why Elio sees this statement as making up for Oliver's original insult about his bedtime—after all, Oliver has said something that is clearly for Elio's benefit and Elio's benefit alone, proposing a private line of conversation that even Chiara, his lover, can't join. Once again, then, Elio and Oliver's ways of communicating prove to be intimate and veiled, constantly alluding to a shared worldview.*



*Because he can't be with Oliver, Elio redirects his sexual desires, focusing in this moment on Marzia. It's worth noting that his attraction to her is perfectly genuine, though it is of course unfair for him to lead her along when in reality his primary romantic feelings remain with Oliver. Still, though, Elio is an adolescent in the process of discovering his sexual identity. As such, he embraces sexual attention of any kind, and his blossoming relationship with Marzia is legitimate in and of itself because his attraction to her isn't diminished by his attraction to Oliver. In this way, Aciman showcases the fluidity of Elio's sexuality, suggesting that his desire for Oliver and his desire for Marzia can exist simultaneously.*



*Elio dislikes the phrase "If not later, when?" because it implies two things at once. On the one hand, it suggests that something is bound to happen between him and Oliver, an idea that simultaneously excites and scares him. On the other hand, though, the only actual answer to the question is less optimistic. After all, if something doesn't happen "later," then it will never happen. In this way, Elio senses Oliver's conflicting desire to move forward with their relationship and stop it before it develops into anything serious.*



The summer trudges on, and Elio continues to debate whether or not he wants Oliver to know his true feelings. During a conversation about Chiara, Oliver finally snaps and admits that he's not particularly interested in her, suggesting that maybe Elio should make a move on her. "I know you like her," he says, to which Elio replies: "You have no idea what I like." In this way, their conversations twist in and out of easy communication and tense allusion. When Oliver isn't in "heaven," he spends time with Vimini, a charming ten-year-old who lives in the nearest house and who everyone maintains is a genius. "It would be in rather bad taste for nature to have made me a genius," she says the first time she meets Oliver. When she sees his look of confusion, she explains that she has leukemia and is expected to die young.

Oliver and Vimini start going to the beach together almost every day, where they sit and talk. Elio admits that he's never "seen a friendship so beautiful or more intense," though he isn't jealous and doesn't want to do anything to drive them apart.

As the days pass, Elio's parents worry about how much time he spends alone. Waiting for Oliver to turn up, he spends a large amount of time each day sleeping fitfully on the living room couch, reading, or working on scores. "You can always talk to me," Mr. Pearlman says. "I was your age once. The things you feel and think only you have felt, believe me, I've lived and suffered through all of them, and more than once." He assures his son that he knows "almost every bend, every tollbooth, every chamber in the human heart." Along with Mrs. Pearlman, he urges Elio to go out and "do crazy things" so that he can "get to know people" and discover for himself "why others are so necessary in life and not just foreign bodies to be sidled up to."

Elio tries to hide how closely he tracks Oliver's movement, but it's difficult to conceal his disappointment when he doesn't appear for dinner. He's especially eager to convince his parents that he doesn't care what Oliver does, since they have always said that he gets "too easily attached to people." "They worried for me," he notes. "I knew they were right to worry. I just hoped they'd never know how far things stood beyond their ordinary worries now." And yet, he's certain they don't know what he's feeling, leaving him alone in his torment with no one to talk to. He wonders who he could possibly confide in, and the answer horrifies him: "There is no one else to tell, Oliver, so I'm afraid it's going to have to be you..." he thinks to himself.

*When Oliver suggests that Elio should pursue a relationship with Chiara, he turns the tables, effectively testing Elio in the same way that Elio has been testing him. This is the complicated nature of their communication, which can quickly flip and catch Elio by surprise. By contrast, Vimini is someone who speaks with the straightforward wisdom that only an intelligent child can muster.*



*Aciman uses Oliver and Vimini's relationship as a juxtaposition to the complicated bond between Elio and Oliver. Because of their huge age differences, there is (thankfully) no sexual tension between them, and this enables them to have a "beautiful" and "intense" friendship, one that is quite unlike Elio and Oliver's fraught connection.*



*By this point in Call Me By Your Name, it's obvious that Elio's parents are quite comfortable with the idea that he's a young man who will make mistakes and lead a potentially wild life. In fact, they emphasize the importance of this kind of exploration, suggesting that such activities are essential to a person's identity formation. Nonetheless, it's clear that Elio must discover this for himself, though instead of doing this he simply whiles away the time waiting for Oliver to pay attention to him.*



*If Elio can't talk to his parents and doesn't want anyone to know about his feelings for Oliver, then he's correct in thinking that there's only one person to tell: Oliver himself. However, as he has previously worried, this might prompt Oliver to "act" on these feelings. Interestingly enough, this possibility doesn't seem to scare him as intensely as it did the first time he thought of it, which indicates that he is slowly coming to terms with the fact that he actually does want something to happen between Oliver and himself.*



When no one is home one afternoon, Elio sneaks into Oliver's room and finds his red swimsuit hanging in the closet. Before knowing what he's doing, he shoves his face inside the suit and inhales, cozying up against the fabric and taking in the smell of Oliver's body. He then takes off his own suit and puts Oliver's on. "I knew what I wanted," he notes, "and I wanted it with the kind of intoxicated rapture that makes people take risks they would never take even with plenty of alcohol in their system. I wanted to come in his suit, and leave the evidence for him to find there." But then an even bolder idea overtakes him. Taking off Oliver's suit, he jumps naked into his bed and gets between the sheets and wraps himself around Oliver's pillow, kissing it and folding his legs around it and whispering his desires into it.

One night Elio goes into his father's library and reads an old fairytale about "a handsome young knight who is madly in love with a princess. She too is in love with him, though she seems not to be entirely aware of it, and despite the friendship that blossoms between them, or perhaps because of that very friendship, he finds himself so humbled and speechless owing to her forbidding candor that he is totally unable to bring up the subject of his love. One day he asks her point-blank: 'Is it better to speak or die?'" Having read this, Elio is struck by the thought that he'd never be able to ask this kind of question. When he whispered into Oliver's pillow, he realized that he'd "rather die than face" Oliver's "steely look" after revealing his feelings.

## PART 2: MONET'S BERM

By the end of July, Oliver and Chiara's relationship has fully ended. In fact, Oliver has started having a number of flings with women all over town, prompting Elio to wonder every morning where he was the night before. Staring at Oliver sitting in "heaven," Elio longs to have shoulders like his. "Maybe I wouldn't long for them if I had them?" he wonders. "Did I want to be like him? Did I want to be him? Or did I just want to have him? Or are 'being' and 'having' thoroughly inaccurate verbs in the twisted skein of desire, where having someone's body to touch and being that someone we're longing to touch are one and the same [...]?"

*Elio has finally reached the point where he's desperate to express his desires. However, the way he does this remains somewhat clandestine—what he does is bold, of course, but it's still relatively secret. Oliver might walk into the bedroom or smell Elio on his sheets and pillow, but these are the only ways in which he could possibly find out what has happened. As such, Elio manages to act upon his feelings without fully having to face the consequences.*



*The fairytale about the lovesick knight and the princess he desires perfectly encapsulates Elio's dilemma. Unsure whether or not he should tell Oliver how he feels, he clearly wonders if he'll regret it if he doesn't. At the same time, he thinks he's incapable of actually speaking up about his love, since he often finds Oliver so hard to read. If Oliver looked at him with his "icy" gaze, Elio feels like he would be plunged into irreversible heartache.*



*Once more, Elio shows his sensitivity to the intricacies of language. This time, he wonders if the words "being" and "having" are even capable of capturing the feelings he experiences when he looks at Oliver's shoulders, which he desires in a way that is so complex he feels as if his yearnings themselves make up a "twisted skein." Beyond this attention to language, though, lies something else worth noting: Elio's attraction to Oliver again has to do with a recognition of himself in Oliver, though in this case he isn't seeing in Oliver the person he is, but rather who he'd like to be.*



In the garden one day, Elio tells Oliver about the old fairytale, and he asks if the knight speaks or dies. “Better to speak, she said,” replies Elio. “But she’s on her guard. She senses a trap somewhere.” Asking again, Oliver says, “So does he speak?” “No,” Elio responds. “He fudges.” Getting up, Oliver says, “Figures,” and then he tells Elio he needs to go into town to pick up something from his translator. When Elio offers to do it for him, Oliver pauses and says, “No, let’s go together.” Surprised, Elio puts down his pen, closes his score, puts a glass of lemonade on the pages, and then they make their way to their bikes in the shed, where Manfredi—the house’s driver—is arguing with Anchise.

Once they get their bikes, Elio asks Oliver if he thinks Anchise is creepy, which is the prevailing opinion around the house. However, Oliver maintains that he’s a nice man, explaining that Anchise treated a wound of his the other day after he fell off his bike and scraped his back. As they pedal toward town, Elio notices Oliver’s slow pace and decides to enjoy this easy moment while it lasts. When they reach the piazzetta in town that boasts a view of the ocean and hills below, Oliver asks Elio if he knows that Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned in these waters. Elio admits that he already knows this, and then Oliver asks if he knows what Shelley’s wife and friends did upon finding his body. “*Cor cordium*, heart of hearts,” Elio says, referencing the fact that a friend grabbed Shelley’s heart before he was engulfed by the flames of cremation.

“Is there anything you don’t know?” Oliver asks. Elio stares at him and realizes this is his moment to reveal his feelings. “I know nothing, Oliver. Nothing, just nothing,” he says, feeling like this is the first time he’s “spoke[n] to an adult without planning” what he’s going to say. Oliver counters by saying that he knows “more than anyone around here,” but Elio insists he doesn’t know anything about “things that really matter.” “What things that matter?” Oliver asks. “You know what things. By now you of all people should know,” he answers. After a moment of silence, Oliver says, “Why are you telling me all this?” “Because I thought you should know,” Elio replies. “Because you thought I should know,” Oliver repeats. “Because I want you to know,” Elio adds. “Because there is no one else I can say it to but you.”

*When Elio tells Oliver about the fairytale, Oliver responds in a way that encourages Elio to avoid making the same mistake as the knight. “Figures,” he says, suggesting that the knight’s inability to be honest about his feelings is all too common—something Elio should avoid if possible. He then invites Elio to come into town with him, emphasizing that he wants to spend time “together.” This is significant, considering that until this point their moments together have always been casual and unplanned. Now, though, Oliver goes out of his way to make it clear that he wants to be with Elio.*



*Percy Bysshe Shelley was a famous English Romantic poet who died by drowning in 1822. It’s worth noting that Oliver and Elio have this conversation about the well-known poet, as it once more reminds readers that they’re both interested in art and the life of the mind. Elio already knows the story Oliver wants to tell him, once more giving Oliver the impression that he’s sophisticated beyond his years. In turn, Elio manages to present himself as more mature than he actually is, putting his academic upbringing to use as a way of posturing as an adult capable of taking a lover Oliver’s age.*



*Finally, Elio has revealed his feelings, albeit in a rather oblique way. It’s significant that he thinks this conversation is so straightforward and revealing, when in reality he merely makes insinuations about his feelings. Indeed, he never directly says, “I have feelings for you, Oliver,” instead saying, “By now you of all people should know.” In this way, he effectively puts the impetus on Oliver to admit the truth without ever having to do so himself. Still, Elio manages to speak much more candidly than ever before, and this is because he can’t stand to keep his secret any longer.*



“Do you know what you’re saying?” Oliver asks. “Yes,” Elio says, “I know what I’m saying and you’re not mistaking *any* of it. I’m just not very good at speaking. But you’re welcome never to speak to me again.” At this, Oliver tells him to wait outside while he goes upstairs to see his translator, but when he returns he simply complains about a mix-up with the papers.

*For a moment, Oliver tries to avoid having this conversation by writing Elio off as too young—or too immature—to understand what he’s saying. However, Elio doesn’t allow for this interpretation, clarifying that he knows what he’s saying and that Oliver isn’t “mistaking any of it.” Unfortunately for him, though, he has now spoken too directly, ultimately scaring Oliver away. After all, Oliver is comfortable “sorting contradictory signals,” and has no problem communicating through vague insinuation. Now that Elio has managed to articulate his feelings, Oliver doesn’t know how to respond, so he simply leaves Elio standing in the square and uses this brief pause as an excuse to change the subject when he returns.*



“I wish I hadn’t spoken,” Elio says while biking home. “I’m going to pretend you never did,” Oliver replies, and when Elio asks if this means they’re still on “speaking terms,” he says, “Look, we can’t talk about such things. We really can’t.” Now that he’s revealed his desires, Elio no longer feels ashamed. At the same time, though, he also no longer can cling to “that dash of unspoken hope that [has] kept everything alive these weeks.” Feeling this way, he suggests that he and Oliver stop by one of his favorite places, an area called Monet’s berm, which is a cliff that Monet used to visit to paint. Elio gets off his bike and leads Oliver down a small wooded path to a shady and secluded knoll.

*Although Oliver asserts that he and Elio “can’t talk about” romantic feelings, it’s clear that he himself can’t help but continue to explore this new territory of their relationship. After all, he agrees to follow Elio to Monet’s berm, a beautiful private area that is quite obviously romantic. As such, his actions speak louder than his words, and it becomes clear that the only reason he doesn’t want to talk about “such things” is because he’s trying—and failing—to keep himself from fully falling for Elio.*



“This is my spot,” Elio tells Oliver, saying he comes here to read. “Do you like being alone?” Oliver asks, to which Elio suggests that “no one likes being alone,” though he himself has “learned how to live with it.” “Are you always so very wise?” Oliver asks, but Elio only reiterates that he doesn’t know how to speak. “I like the way you say things,” Oliver says. “Why are you always putting yourself down?” Elio tells him he does this so that he (Oliver) won’t criticize him. “Are you so scared of what others think?” Oliver asks. As Elio contemplates this, he allows himself to stare directly into Oliver’s eyes. Disconcerted, Oliver tells him that he’s “making things difficult” because he himself often has to “hold back.”

*Even as Oliver tries to “hold back” from acting on his feelings for Elio, he can’t keep himself from pursuing conversations that are quite romantic in nature. For example, when he asks why Elio is always putting himself down, he underhandedly compliments the boy, clearly insinuating that he thinks Elio is remarkable. Of course, Elio must pick up on the subtext of Oliver’s questions, but he’s unable to fully see that Oliver likes him in the same way that he likes Oliver. Indeed, it isn’t until Oliver admits that Elio is “making things difficult” for him that his feelings become unavoidably clear.*



Oliver tells Elio that he's "the luckiest kid in the world," but Elio maintains that "so much of it is wrong." Oliver then asks what, exactly, is wrong about his life. His family? The *dinner drudges*? Elio only smirks, and then Oliver says, "Us, you mean." To this, Elio says nothing. "Let's see, then," Oliver says, scooching closer and planting his lips softly on Elio's. After kissing him, he asks, "Better now?" but Elio doesn't reply and instead kisses him again. "I was not so sure our kiss had convinced me of anything about myself," he notes. "I was not even sure I had enjoyed it as much as I'd expected and needed to test it again, so that even in the act itself, I needed to test the test."

"We can't do this—I know myself," Oliver says once they've stopped kissing. "So far we've behaved. We've been good. Neither of us has done anything to feel ashamed of. Let's keep it that way. I want to be good." Despite this sentiment, though, Elio says, "Don't be. I don't care. Who is to know?" He then places his hand on Oliver's crotch. With composure, Oliver brings his own hand down and lets it rest atop Elio's for a moment before lifting it away. "Did I offend you?" Elio asks. "Just don't," Oliver says before standing and wincing with pain as the scrape on his back flexes. Thinking about the cut, Elio suddenly feels the "real world" rush in and eviscerate the moment.

"We'll never speak again," Elio says on the bike ride home. "We'll chitchat. Chitchat, chitchat. That's all. And the funny thing is, I can live with that." At lunch, though, he realizes he *can't* live with that. Beneath the table his foot briefly grazes Oliver's. Then all at once Oliver's foot is pressing assuredly against the top of his arch, rubbing gently against the soft skin. "A sudden giddiness overtook me," Elio writes. "No, I wasn't going to cry, this wasn't a panic attack, it wasn't a 'swoon,' and I wasn't going to come in my shorts either, though I liked this very, very much." Looking down at his plate, he notices a raspberry sauce on his chocolate cake—someone, it seems, is pouring more and more sauce onto the dessert, and then he realizes with a gasp that his nose is bleeding.

*When Elio kisses Oliver a second time because he isn't sure that the first kiss has "convinced" him of anything, readers might recall the idea—which Elio himself retrospectively sets forth in Part 1—that "wanting to test desire is nothing more than a ruse to get what we want without admitting that we want it." In turn, Elio continues to find ways to avoid admitting to himself that he truly does have strong feelings for Oliver. At the same time, he's also gone out of his way to reveal his attraction. Ultimately, what emerges in this moment is that Elio's conception of his own sexual desires remains complex even when he finally begins a romantic relationship with Oliver, and this is yet another indication of the fact that he's still in the process of understanding his developing identity as a sexual being.*



*Oliver tries to tell Elio that they "can't" continue kissing because he "knows" himself, a line of reasoning that reflects his previous assertion that he can't have more than two soft-boiled eggs at breakfast because, indeed, he knows himself: if he has two, he'll have three, and then four, and there will be no stopping him. As such, he frames his attraction to Elio as something he must keep from indulging, something that might entice him to lose himself in a kind of pleasure he thinks he ought to avoid. Of course, this makes sense, considering the fact that Elio is a minor. Since they haven't yet fully embarked upon a romantic relationship, Oliver thinks that stopping now will keep him from transgressing. What he fails to recognize, though, is that they've already embarked upon a romantic relationship. Not only have they kissed, but they've been building an intimate emotional rapport for weeks. In other words, they've already crossed part of the threshold that Oliver thinks he should avoid.*



*Aciman portrays Elio's reaction to Oliver's touch as an onslaught of intense emotion. Relieved that Oliver is still sexually interested in him after their tense conversation and fraught moment at Monet's *berm*, he experiences a "sudden giddiness" that he has to clarify isn't going to make him cry or send him into a panic attack, though it does seem to cause his nose to bleed. This, of course, is a physical occurrence that may have happened on its own, but it's symbolic of his overwhelmed state of mind.*



Elio escapes upstairs with his bloody nose, telling his body not to “give the whole thing away.” Shortly thereafter, Oliver comes into his bedroom and asks if the nosebleed was his fault. Elio doesn’t answer, instead saying, “I’m a mess, aren’t I?” Oliver then asks if he’s going to be okay. “I thought I was,” Elio replies. “I’ll get over it.” On his way out of the room, Oliver tells Elio to get some sleep, promising he’ll “stick around.” When he leaves, Elio thinks about their interactions that day and begins to cry, wishing that he could soak Oliver’s clothing and make him taste his tears. “I didn’t understand why he had brought his foot on mine,” he notes. “Was it a pass, or a well-meaning gesture of solidarity and comradeship [...]?”

Lying in his room, Elio fantasizes about telling Oliver straightforwardly that he wants to be “taken” by him, even if it’s a one-time kind of thing. He plans to enter his bedroom that night and act without hesitation, reaching out to touch him and letting their **Stars of David** touch. However, when he wakes up later that afternoon, Oliver is nowhere to be found. He passes the time by going to the beach and speaking to Vimini—who tells him that Oliver likes him more than he likes Oliver—and then he comes home and has dinner, supremely disappointed that Oliver still hasn’t returned. In fact, he doesn’t come home until quite late, when everyone is in bed. Elio strains to hear him as he comes inside and starts the shower—a sure sign he’s had sex with someone. “Traitor,” he thinks.

After a sleepless night during which he periodically thinks Oliver has entered his room only to discover that no one is there, Elio is silent at breakfast. Mr. Pearlman asks Oliver if he drank a lot the night before while playing poker (which is what he was doing). “That—and other things,” Oliver replies. “How I admired people who talked about their vices as though they were distant relatives they’d learned to put up with because they couldn’t quite disown them,” Elio muses to himself. “How I wished I could say such a thing one day.”

That night, Oliver is kind and calm, eating with the family and going to bed early. The next morning, Elio finds him working hard by the time he himself is awake, and though he doesn’t want to interrupt, he finds himself saying, “I waited for you the other night.” He then asks if Oliver wants to go to town together. “You mean like the other day,” Oliver says. “I don’t think we’ll ever do anything like that again,” Elio says. “But, yes, like that.” As Elio continues to talk about how their time together two days before was an anomaly, Oliver asks, “Do you like me that much, Elio?” Astounded, Elio tells him that he *worships* him—a word he thinks both describes his affection while also remaining the “murkiest” thing he could possibly say.

*It’s important to note that Elio declines to answer when Oliver asks if he caused the nosebleed. Clearly, Elio thinks—or wants to make Oliver think—that the blood that rushed out of his nose has something to do with their amorphous, ill-defined relationship, which is tearing him apart and turning him into “a mess.” In keeping with this, he breaks down as soon as Oliver steps out of his room, a bundle of raw emotion and confusion. Once again, the younger Elio isn’t yet well-equipped enough to handle the emotional complexities that come along with such relationships.*



*Oliver disregards the fact that he has promised to stick around in the aftermath of Elio’s bloody nose, instead opting to go out for a night of debauchery (or so it seems to Elio). As such, he puts Elio back in a position of anticipation. Indeed, the boy whiles away the hours waiting for Oliver to return, constantly wondering what he’s doing and who he’s with and whether or not anything will happen between them when he comes back. Although this is quite cruel, it’s worth noting that at least this gives Elio something to focus on other than his confusion regarding the blossoming sexual relationship between him and Oliver. Instead of feeling fragile and overwhelmed, Elio now feels angry, an emotion that is perhaps easier to grasp.*



*Once again, Elio longs to enter the mature world of adulthood, idolizing Oliver’s worldly way of speaking. What’s more, it makes sense that he covets Oliver’s casual acceptance of his own vices, since this kind of acceptance suggests that perhaps someday he’ll embrace his desire for Elio, writing it off as something that he will simply have to “put up with because” he can’t “disown” it.*



*Yet again, Elio’s close attention to language comes to the forefront of Call Me by Your Name. This time, he tries to find a way of speaking that is simultaneously clear and “murky,” a mode of communicating with Oliver that will enable him to express what he’s feeling while simultaneously withholding some of his emotions. Although the word “worship” might not seem particularly unclear, it’s true that it can be interpreted more than one way. Oliver might understand it to mean that Elio covets him in a romantic manner, or he might interpret “worship” in more innocent terms, thinking Elio means to say that he idolizes him in the way a young boy might look up to an older brother.*



Oliver agrees to go into B. with Elio on the condition that he make “no speeches.” In the town bookstore, Elio picks up two copies of an old Romantic novel and gives one to Oliver, though not before inscribing it. “*Zwischen Immer und Nie, for you in silence, somewhere in Italy in the mid-eighties,*” he writes, delighted by the idea of a stranger looking through Oliver’s books one day in the future and wondering who wrote this note.

The night before this outing to the bookstore, Elio had a dream in which he was having sex with Oliver and looking into his face. The expression Oliver wore was so striking that it ripped “every emotion out of” Elio and confirmed to him “that not to give what [he] was dying to give [Oliver] at whatever price was perhaps the greatest crime [he] might ever commit.” Then, in the dream, Oliver said, “You’ll kill me if you stop,” words that stayed with Elio long after he awoke. Now, as the two ride their bikes down a hill on their way home, Elio turns to him and yells, “Kill me if I stop.” In this way, he thinks, he gives Oliver “back his words with the implicit wish that he repeat them back” like in the dream.

When Oliver and Elio return, Oliver is quiet and unresponsive, shutting himself into his room for the night. Unable to sit still, Elio calls Marzia, who has a “dusky chill in her voice” but agrees to ride bikes with him to B. In town they eat ice cream and visit the bookstore, where a poet has just released his new collection, *Se l’amore (If Love)*. Elio buys two copies—one for him and one for Marzia. “I’m not sure this book is for you, but...” the poet says as he signs them. Outside, Marzia asks Elio why he bought her a book. When he says he doesn’t understand her question, she says, “Any idiot would understand why I’m asking. But you don’t. Figures!” Uncomfortable, Elio senses that he understands what Marzia’s getting at, but he doesn’t want to admit it, worrying that he has perhaps been “purposely disingenuous.”

The German line “*Zwischen Immer und Nie,*” which means “between always and never,” comes from a poem by Paul Celan called “*Nachts, wenn das Pendel der Liebe schwingt,*” or “*At Night, When the Pendulum of Love Swings.*” In the poem, the “pendulum of love” swings “between always and never,” an idea that directly relates to Oliver and Elio’s relationship, ultimately recalling Oliver’s question, “If not later, when?” In this way, Aciman not only brings back Oliver’s previous reference to the fact that Elio rebels by reading Paul Celan, but also reminds readers that the two lovers are still in a period of intense anticipation, wondering whether or not their relationship will ever come to full fruition. At the same time, they also seem to understand that regardless of what happens between them, their feelings will “always” remain with them, affecting them as they move through their lives.



Again, Elio looks to language as a way of comprehending and representing his feelings for Oliver. In this case, he tries to nudge Oliver into playing into a private fantasy, wanting to hear him repeat a line from a dream. This dream, it seems, is a rather important one, since it suggests to Elio that he will deeply regret it if he doesn’t keep pursuing the kind of relationship he yearns to have with Oliver. In this way, readers see that he is coming closer and closer to discarding his reservations.



This is the first time that Elio grasps the fact that he is leading Marzia on, though he’s hesitant to fully embrace this idea. Playing dumb, he pretends to not understand why she’s baffled by his sudden kindness. Of course, he knows that he has failed to keep up their relationship, but he doesn’t think much about the fact that he’s now giving her his undivided attention simply because he doesn’t know where he stands with Oliver. Still, he senses that he’s being “purposely disingenuous” when trying to convince her that he doesn’t understand why she’s confused by this newfound affection.



As he plays dumb, Elio realizes that he's "ignoring" Marzia's signals so as to "draw her out." He then understands with an unpleasant sense of shock that this is exactly what Oliver has been doing to him—"intentionally ignoring" him so as to bring him closer. As he and Marzia walk together, she finally tells him what she feels, saying, "I think you can hurt me and I don't want to be hurt. Not that you mean to hurt anyone, but because you're always changing your mind, always slipping, so no one knows where to find you. You scare me." With this, they stop walking, and Elio kisses her. She then balances her bike against a shop door and leans against the ally wall. "Kiss me again?" she says.

Elio lets go of his own bike and leans into Marzia, his hands moving up her shirt as hers play with his hair and then travel down his pants. "Sei duro, duro, you're so hard," she says. As they kiss and touch each other like this, she briefly lifts her face and says, "*Ma tu mi vuoi veramente bene, do you really care for me?*" In this moment, Elio wonders how Marzia can embody such contrasting emotions. "I couldn't understand how boldness and sorrow, how you're so *hard* and *do you really care for me?* could be so thoroughly bound together. Nor could I begin to fathom how someone so seemingly vulnerable, hesitant, and eager to confide so many uncertainties about herself could, with one and the same gesture, reach into my pants [...]."

Even as Elio kisses Marzia, he finds himself composing a note that he later leaves in Oliver's room. It reads: "*Can't stand the silence. I need to speak to you.*" Before he does this, though, he and Marzia spend the night making love on the beach. Upon leaving at dawn, they plan to meet later in the day. Throughout the daylight hours, Elio obsesses over whether or not Oliver has found his note. Finally, he goes to his room and finds a response: "*Grow up. I'll see you at midnight.*" Suddenly, Elio doesn't know what to think. "Did I want this, now that something was being offered?" he wonders. "And was it in fact being offered? And if I wanted or didn't want it, how would I live out the day till midnight?"

In the afternoon, Elio plays tennis with Marzia. Later, they have sex in his bedroom with the shutters closed but the windows open, and all the while some part of Elio hopes they'll make an obvious noise that Oliver will hear. When she leaves that night, he stays behind and waits for midnight, agreeing to sit through a long dinner with a gay couple visiting from Chicago. Before they arrive, Elio tells his father that he'll wear a purple shirt that was a gift from a distant cousin. "My father laughed it off," he says about the joke, "saying I was too old not to accept people as they were. But there was a glint in his eyes when both showed up wearing purple shirts."

Unlike Elio, Marzia has no trouble speaking straightforwardly, voicing her misgivings about their relationship instead of hiding them and waiting to see what will happen. This, it seems, is what Elio struggles to do in his relationship with Oliver, and so he's attracted to Marzia's forthrightness. Of course, it's unfair to Marzia that he simply kisses her after she admits she's afraid he'll "hurt" her—seeing that she's attracted to him, he kisses her and thus avoids having to address the plain fact that she's right: he will most likely hurt her because he isn't as committed to pursuing a relationship with her as he is to pursuing a relationship with Oliver.



In this moment, Elio takes cues from Marzia, observing the graceful way she handles the overlap between vulnerability and desire. Unlike him, her misgivings don't hold her back from making "bold" sexual advances. As they kiss, it's clear that he wants to embody this kind of attitude himself in his own relationship with Oliver. Moving forward, it seems likely that he'll put this tactic to use, trying to embrace contradictory emotions as a way of navigating the otherwise confusing considerations enshrouding his feelings for Oliver.



Marzia's boldness inspires Elio, enabling him to break the "silence" between Oliver and himself. However, he finds that he's not quite ready to face what breaking this silence means, wondering if he really wants what he thinks Oliver is "offering." This most likely has to do with the fact that he has never been with a man before. With Marzia, he doesn't think twice about engaging in sexual activities because he presumably has already had heterosexual romantic experiences. With Oliver, though, he's about to enter a new realm. What's more, he is younger than Oliver—another reason he's unsure he actually wants to move forward with his desires.



A strong indicator that Elio hasn't yet accepted himself as a bisexual man is the fact that he goes out of his way to make a joke about gay men. This, of course, is most likely an attempt to trick himself into drawing a distinction between himself and someone who enjoys sleeping with men. Because he hasn't yet figured out his sexual identity, he postures as a straight man who makes homophobic jokes. Luckily, his father urges him to "accept people" as they are, a message of acceptance that Elio likely needs to hear in order to embrace his own sexual preferences.



After dinner, Elio goes upstairs and tries to imagine what kind of person he'll be the next time he descends this very same staircase. "By then I might be someone else," he thinks. "Did I even like this someone else whom I didn't yet know and who might not want to say good morning then or have anything to do with me for having brought him to this pass? Or would I remain the exact same person walking up this staircase, with nothing about me changed, and not one of my doubts resolved?"

Sitting on his bed, Elio imagines his grandfather's voice telling him not to go through with his plan. "I was his namesake, and he was speaking to me from the very bed where he'd crossed a far more menacing divide than the one between my room and Oliver's," he notes. "Turn back. Who knows what you'll find once you're in that room," the voice warns. Nonetheless, Elio relishes this fear, imagining Oliver whispering, "You'll kill me if you stop."

When the time comes, Elio enters Oliver's room and watches him move about awkwardly as he assures him how glad he is that Elio has come. Sitting on the bed, the two men share a joint, which Elio is glad to have because it gives him "something to do." Then, as they wait for something to happen—their legs stretched out next to each other on the bed—Elio brushes his toes against Oliver's, moving them through the gaps until Oliver begins to "reciprocate the movement." Then Oliver puts his arm around Elio, who slips his hand under his shirt. "You sure you want this?" Oliver asks, and Elio nods even though this is a lie. "By then I wasn't sure at all," he writes. "I wondered when my hug would run its course, when I, or he, would grow tired of this."

"We haven't talked," Oliver says, but Elio only shrugs. "Can I kiss you?" he asks, lifting Elio's face. Without answering him, Elio brings his mouth forward in the same way that he kissed Marzia the previous night. Before long, Elio gets under the covers and revels in the way they smell of Oliver. Then he's naked and Elio feels as if there's "not a secret left in the world" as Oliver's hands run over his body. When he realizes Oliver is naked, too, Elio feels compelled to ask "the tactful health question," to which Oliver says, "I already told you, I'm okay." As they resume, Elio feels "on the cusp of something," though he also wants this feeling to "last forever" because he knows there's "no coming back from this."

*In this moment, Aciman spotlights the influence of anticipation on Elio's thinking. Wondering if he'll be a different person the next time he descends this staircase, Elio thinks about how sleeping with Oliver might change him. After having waited so long to move forward with his desires, he senses a fundamental change looming before him, thinking that this is a monumental night that will alter him in a profound and irreversible way.*



*When Elio says that his grandfather "crossed a far more menacing divide" in the very bed that he himself is now sitting on, he insinuates that his grandfather died in this bedroom. The fact that he imagines his grandfather warning him against sleeping with Oliver illustrates just how nervous he is to cross this threshold—clearly, he associates what he's about to do with shame and guilt. Indeed, he believes his elders would disapprove of his actions, though this isn't enough to deter him and, in fact, actually makes him all the more eager to act.*



*Even on the final brink of intimacy, Elio isn't "sure" if he really wants to act on his desires. Oliver, for his part, tries to make sure that this is what Elio wants, but Elio doesn't let him in on his thought process, instead nodding as a way of passively agreeing to move forward. At this point, then, it's clear that Elio is simply going through the motions of a plan he's already made up his mind to follow, and he has resigned himself to whatever happens, even if that means moving toward something he doesn't actually want.*



*When Elio asks Oliver "the tactful health question," he's referring to the question of whether or not Oliver has any sexually transmitted diseases—an important question, especially in the 1980s (when Call Me by Your Name takes place), a period during which many people—including many gay men—died of AIDS/HIV. Once he and Oliver establish that they're both "okay," Elio realizes that this is the last thing to be said before moving forward, which is why he suddenly feels on "the cusp of something" that he'll never be able to come "back from."*



“When it happened,” Elio writes, “it happened not as I’d dreamed it would, but with a degree of discomfort that forced me to reveal more of myself than I cared to reveal. I had an impulse to stop [Oliver], and when he noticed, he did ask, but I did not answer, or didn’t know what to answer, and an eternity seemed to pass between my reluctance to make up my mind and his instinct to make it up for me.” Then, as Oliver is inside him, Elio feels a “distinct feeling of arriving somewhere very dear, of wanting this forever, of being me, me, me, me, and no one else.”

Elio realizes his dream was accurate: having sex with Oliver is “like coming home.” And this is why he says, “You’ll kill me if you stop” over and over before switching to curse words, which Oliver repeats before saying, “Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine.” Elio has never done this before. “As soon as I said my own name as though it were his,” he notes, “[it] took me to a realm I never shared with anyone in my life before, or since.”

After making love, Elio wonders if they made too much noise, thinking he might even have “sobbed” a little. As they talk quietly while holding one another, Elio finds a book that he pushed aside while they were still having sex. Now he realizes it was a copy of *Se l’amore* and wonders if Oliver went to the same book party that he and Marzia stumbled into the other night. He then falls asleep and wakes up before knowing he drifted off—suddenly he’s overcome by “a sense of dread and anxiety” that he can’t “begin to fathom.” “I felt queasy,” he writes, “as if I had been sick and needed not just many showers to wash everything off but a bath in mouthwash. I needed to be far away—from him, from this room, from what we’d done together.”

*“When it happened” refers to the moment that Oliver penetrates Elio. Since Elio has never had anal sex, it’s unsurprising that he experiences “discomfort” and that he can’t quite conceal this pain. It’s interesting, in fact, that he doesn’t want to “reveal” this inexperienced part of himself. This is in keeping with his desire to be seen as more mature and experienced than he actually is. Oliver senses Elio’s sudden reaction and asks if he should stop, but proceeds anyway when Elio fails to answer. This is potentially problematic, as he hasn’t received verbal consent. Elio is most likely unable to articulate whether or not he wants what’s happening, since he himself is so conflicted, simultaneously experiencing hesitation, pain, and a “feeling of arriving somewhere very dear.” Under these circumstances, it’s unlikely that a simple “yes” or “no” could possibly convey what he’s feeling, and so he doesn’t respond.*



*When Elio and Oliver call each other by their own names, readers might recall the idea that part of Elio’s attraction to Oliver has to do with the fact that he recognizes himself in his lover. In this moment, Elio and Oliver become one, connecting in the same way Elio feels they’re bound by their shared Judaism. As he previously said, when he looks at Oliver’s Star of David necklace, Elio feels as if he’s looking at something “immortal” in himself, in Oliver, and in both of them together. A similar exchange—or melding—of identity happens when they have sex and call each other by their own names.*



*Because Elio wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to act on his desires, he now feels a mixture of guilt and shame, wanting badly to be “far away” from Oliver and the entire context of their first time making love. As a seventeen-year-old who has never been with a man, the experience of having sex with Oliver—who is seven years his senior—is overwhelming. Not only does Elio endure pain as a result of having anal sex for the first time, he is also tasked with sorting the tense and amorphous emotions that have until this moment been nothing more than unspoken thoughts lurking beneath the surface of his and Oliver’s relationship. Now that they’ve had sex, their attraction to one another is more than a mere matter of words and ideas—it’s real, and Elio hasn’t had enough romantic experience to fully process the complexity of his situation.*



Feeling as if he's just woken up from a nightmare, Elio wonders how he possibly let Oliver do to him what he did. "I would never be the same," he notes. He wonders if the "loathing" he now feels is something that has "always been there, though camouflaged." Oliver, for his part, notices this shift in Elio's mood and says, "You're not happy." Elio shrugs. "It was not him I hated," he writes, "but the thing we'd done. I didn't want him looking into my heart just yet." Nonetheless, Oliver presses on, saying, "I knew we shouldn't have. I knew it." He then asks if Elio hated the entire experience. "No, I didn't hate it at all," Elio writes. "But what I felt was worse than hate. I didn't want to remember, didn't want to think about it."

After a moment, Oliver tells Elio he can go to sleep, so he closes his eyes and wishes he were far, far away. At the same time, he knows he needs to keep Oliver close by "in case this thing [takes] a turn for the worse and there [is] no one to turn to." And yet there's also part of Elio that is happy he had sex with Oliver because now his desires are out of his "system."

Very early in the morning, Elio and Oliver go swimming, and Elio thinks this is the last time they'll be "together like this." Sitting on the rocks, they speak without reservation, prompting Elio to wonder why they were unable to talk like this before sleeping together. Finally, Oliver looks at him and asks if he's okay. "Do we need to speak about it?" Elio says eventually, using "the same words that Marzia [...] uttered when [he] wished to know if she liked what [he'd] done to her."

When they reach the house and go upstairs, Elio goes to his room and is surprised when Oliver follows him. "Take your trunks off," Oliver says, and Elio finds himself unable to "disobey." Then Oliver orders him to sit, whereupon he takes Elio's entire penis in his mouth. "I was hard in no time," Elio writes, but Oliver abruptly stops and says, "We'll save it for later." When he leaves, Elio falls onto his bed and realizes that his "craving to be done" with Oliver has vanished, though his "sickness" lingers like a hangover. Each time he moves, he experiences a "sudden soreness" that incites a "twinge of discomfort and shame."

*Since Oliver is quite observant—especially when it comes to interacting with other people—he immediately picks up on Elio's sudden sense of guilt and shame. Unfortunately, though, there's nothing he can do to help assuage these feelings. As such, he has gone from the only person Elio can confide in about his desires to the last person on earth the boy can look to for help. Because of this, Elio is forced to navigate these complex feelings on his own.*



*As is the case with many of Elio's emotions, even this moment of intense guilt and shame involves a number of contrasting feelings. Indeed, Elio is both devastated and happy that he and Oliver have had sex. What's more, he wants to be far away from Oliver while simultaneously wanting to remain close. Aciman shows how the human emotional spectrum is rarely cut and dry, but rather nuanced and contradictory.*



*Despite the tumultuous immediate aftermath of having sex with Oliver, Elio feels free and unburdened in the morning, finally able to speak without need to "sort contradictory signals" and obscure everything he says. This, it seems, is the first time he can simply exist with Oliver, finally free of the torturous mental calculations that their interactions have required until now. Interestingly enough, though, there remains one thing he doesn't want to talk about: their sexual relationship. In this way, he realizes, he is like Marzia—having wanted so badly to sleep with his lover, now he is hesitant to discuss the actual experience. As such, Aciman shows readers once again that Elio is the equivalent of Oliver in his relationship with Marzia. However, knowing what it's like to be in this position doesn't seem to help him in his own relationship with Oliver.*



*When Oliver gives Elio oral sex, he effectively reminds him of the desire that originally spurred him to pursue a sexual relationship in the first place. Of course, this is a rather bold and aggressive move—one that might even be seen as coercive—but there's no denying that it helps Elio get over his misgivings about what happened the night before. Once again burning with desire, he at least is able to comprehend what drew him to Oliver, therefore making sense of his actions even if the "discomfort and shame" he experiences aren't yet gone.*



At breakfast, Oliver is wearing Elio's bathing suit, which Elio thinks is "an unbearable turn-on." Later in the day, he suddenly feels the need to see Oliver, so he grabs his bike and follows him into town, where he finds him in front of the post office. "I had to see you," he says, and Oliver confesses that he's incredibly happy that they slept together. "I just don't want to regret any of it," he says. "[...] I just dread the thought of having messed you up. I don't want either of us to have to pay one way or another." In response, Elio assures him he won't tell anyone, but Oliver says, "For you, however you think of it, it's still fun and games, which it should be. For me it's something else which I haven't figured out, and the fact that I can't scares me."

Just before Oliver enters the post office, Elio comes up behind him and whispers, "Fuck me, Elio," in his ear. "He remembered and instantly moaned his own name three times," Elio writes, "as we'd done during that night." Then Elio suggests they'll "save it for later," and then he explains to Oliver how much *Later!* always affected him. Laughing, Oliver says "*Later!*" over his shoulder and enters the post office.

On his way home, Elio stops at Marzia's house and joins her as she goes to the beach. Elated, he realizes that he loves the way she smells and the way her mouth looks, and then she takes off her top and asks him to put sunscreen on her back. As he does so, he lets his hands slide around her sides and "cup her breasts," at which point they steal into a small "thatched cabana" that her family owns on the beach, where they have sex, Marzia sitting on a table with her legs on Elio's shoulders as he stands before her. "Barely half an hour ago I was asking Oliver to fuck me and now here I was about to make love to Marzia," Elio thinks, "and yet neither had anything to do with the other except through Elio, who happened to be one and the same person."

Elio goes home for lunch and has two glasses of wine, which make him pleasantly sleepy. He then grabs two ripe peaches and goes upstairs and falls asleep while thinking about Oliver or Marzia walking by the balcony and seeing him lying naked on the bed. He imagines one of them—either one—enter the room, take the **peach** from him, and slide it onto his "hard cock." He vividly envisions the entire scene: "*I know you're not sleeping, they'd say, and gently press the soft, overripe peach on my cock till I'd pierced the fruit along the crease that reminded me so much of Oliver's ass. The idea seized me and would not let go.*"

*When Oliver says that he doesn't want to have "messed" Elio up, readers see that he's cognizant of the complications that arise when an adult has sex with a minor. This is somewhat reassuring, though there's no changing the fact that Oliver has clearly ignored these complications until now, when it's already too late to undo their physical intimacy. What's more, he's wrong when he says that this relationship is only "fun and games" for Elio, since this interpretation fails to acknowledge the emotional complexities Elio has experienced as a result of his feelings. Still, it's worth noting that Oliver says he hasn't "figured out" his feelings for Elio, or perhaps for men in general. This suggests that he's not as romantically experienced as he previously seemed.*



*Finally, Oliver uses the word "later" in the exact way Elio has always wanted him to use it. Unlike the other times he's called this out, now the word constitutes a promise, hinting at a forthcoming intimacy instead of expressing a sense of "indifference."*



*In this moment, Elio is thrilled by the idea of his own sexual fluidity. Marzia and Oliver, he asserts, don't have "anything to do with" one another, and yet they do share one thing in common: they both have slept with him. As such, Elio feels connected not to just one person, but two at once, enjoying a sexual awakening and reveling in the way it informs (and even seems to construct) his own sense of self. Of course, this outlook fails to take Marzia or Oliver's feelings into consideration, but Elio is too preoccupied with his sexual identity to stop and consider such matters.*



*Although Elio seems to think that he's equally attracted to Marzia and Oliver, it's obvious that he's more drawn to Oliver, as evidenced by the fact that the peach—which he has managed to sexualize—reminds him of Oliver's "ass." This also aligns with the simple fact that, while he thinks constantly about his relationship with Oliver, he rarely spends time considering the nuances of his rapport with Marzia. However, he's too overcome by the entire experience of having two lovers to recognize with any clarity that his attraction to Marzia is (unfairly) superficial compared to the feelings he harbors for Oliver.*



Unable to shake the idea from his mind, Elio gets up and takes one of the peaches, presses his thumbs into it, and pushes the pit out the other side. “[I] gently brought the fuzzy, blush-colored **peach** to my groin, and then began to press into it till the parted fruit slid down my cock.” He thinks about how he has “already tried the animal kingdom” and is now moving on to “the kingdom of plants.” Eventually, he finishes masturbating with the peach, ejaculating into the center of the fruit and setting it carefully aside on his nearby desk. Shortly thereafter, he hears someone sneaking into his room. Before he opens his eyes, he knows it’s Oliver, who takes his arm and kisses him, lifts the sheet, and finds him naked.

Oliver lowers his mouth to Elio’s penis and finds the “sticky taste” of the peach. Elio tells him what he did and points to the “bruised evidence” on the desk. Taking the **peach**, Oliver asks if Elio left it for him, and then he brings the fruit back to the bed, balancing it so the semen stays inside. “I’m sick, aren’t I?” Elio says. “No, you’re not sick—I wish everyone were as sick as you. Want to see sick?” Oliver replies, lifting the peach to his mouth. Just as he’s about to “taste it,” Elio shakes his head. “Please don’t,” he says as he watches Oliver dip his finger into the center and bring it to his mouth. “Look,” Elio says, “you don’t have to do this. I’m the one who came after you, I sought you out, everything that happened is because of me—you don’t have to do this.”

Oliver tells Elio that he wanted him “from day one” but that he simply “hid it better.” Hearing this, Elio lunges for the peach, but before he can wrest it away, Oliver grabs his wrist and holds it with a crushing grip. “You’re hurting me,” Elio says. “Then let go,” Oliver replies. And then, unable to do anything, Elio watches Oliver put the peach in his mouth “and slowly begin to eat it, staring at” him as he does so. “If you just want to spit it out, it’s okay, it’s really okay, I promise I won’t be offended,” Elio says, but Oliver shakes his head and swallows. “Something that was mine was in his mouth,” Elio writes, “more his than mine now.”

Elio breaks down crying. “And rather than fight it,” he writes, “as with orgasm, I simply let myself go, if only to show [Oliver] something equally private about me as well.” He cries for all the feelings he’s experiencing and for the many thoughts racing through his mind, like that he’ll “never be able to undo” the fact that he has slept with Oliver. “Whatever happens between us, Elio, I just want you to know,” Oliver says. “Don’t ever say you didn’t know.” These words make no sense to Elio, and yet, he feels he knows “exactly” what they mean. “Kiss me now, before it’s totally gone,” he replies.

*Aciman showcases just how insatiable this Elio’s sexual drive is at this stage in his development. Within twenty-four hours, Elio has had sex with Oliver, received oral sex, and had sex with Marzia, and yet he still can’t resist the allure of this fruit, which reminds him of Oliver’s “ass.” By emphasizing Elio’s desire, Aciman reminds readers that Elio is experiencing a sexual awakening. This sexual drive is important to keep in mind, as it no doubt influences the decisions Elio makes about his romantic relationships.*



*Oliver toys with Elio’s sense of shame, trying to show him that his desires—no matter how twisted they might seem—are not quite as wretched as he might think. This, it seems, is why he wants to eat the inseminated peach: to prove to Elio that he’s not “sick.” However, this entire act mortifies Elio, who’s worried not only that he’s “sick,” but that Oliver’s only doing this as a way of punishing himself for pursuing him. In other words, Elio fears that Oliver regrets what they’ve done and now thinks he must atone for his transgressions.*



*Once again, readers see how Elio’s interest in Oliver has to do with the co-mingling of their identities. “Something that was mine was in his mouth, more his than mine now,” he says, revealing his desire to merge with Oliver. At the same time, he’s nervous that Oliver will reject this part of him, so he tells him that it’s okay if he spits out his semen—a sentiment that suggests that he’s still not confident that Oliver feels as strongly about him as he feels about Oliver.*



*Oliver picks up on the fact that Elio worries he doesn’t want to become one with him in the same way that Elio himself wants to become one with Oliver. This is why he tells Elio to never say that he “didn’t know”—this mysterious phrase implies that, although Elio has misgivings about what Oliver feels for him, he actually knows—on some deeper level—that they both love each other in the same way. This, at least, is what Oliver hints at, urging Elio to make peace with the fact that, despite all his second-guessing, he actually does know that Oliver cares for him.*



That night, Elio and Marzia go to the movies and make plans to go to the bookstore the following night. When Elio returns, Oliver is nowhere to be found. After waiting in agony for him to return, Elio finally gets up in the middle of the night and resolves to go looking for him in B. Luckily, he spots Oliver before reaching the bike shed—he's sitting on the rocks. "I was waiting for you," Elio says, and Oliver says he's been thinking about how soon he'll be returning to America. "I come here every night and just sit here," he says. "All by yourself?" Elio asks, and Oliver nods. "I thought—" Elio begins, but Oliver cuts him off, saying, "I know what you thought." He then reminds Elio that in two weeks he'll be returning to the States.

The next morning, Elio opens Oliver's soft-boiled eggs, taking Mafalda's job and surprising everyone at the table. In particular, his father takes note of this intimacy and stares at him. "Americans never know how to do it," Elio justifies. "I am sure they have their way..." his father replies, and then Elio feels Oliver's foot pressing on his own beneath the table, as if to tell him to "let it go and assume [his] father [is] onto something." Later on, in private, Oliver says, "He's no fool."

"I look back on those days and regret none of it, not the risks, not the shame, not the total lack of foresight," Elio writes. Although he knows summer is drawing to a close, he does nothing to slow down or conclude his relationship with Oliver. He thinks of this as neglecting to "drop bread crumbs" for a "return journey," instead eating the crumbs as he goes. However, he's unable to deny that summer is ending when one morning the sky over B. looks unmistakably like autumn. Then, shortly before leaving, Oliver invites Elio to Rome, where he himself plans to spend three days before leaving for America. He needs to see his Italian publisher, and then he'll fly home from there. Elio immediately accepts this invitation. Wanting to give Oliver—and Elio—a "gift," Mr. Pearlman books and pays for their hotel room.

Giddy with excitement, Elio packs and tries not to think about how short three days really is. He decides that when he returns, he won't move back into his old room, because this way he'll be able to pretend that Oliver is still sleeping next door. Before they depart, Elio makes Oliver promise to give him his red bathing suit, his "billowy" shirt, his sandals, and his sunglasses when he leaves.

*Now that Elio and Oliver have finally acted on their feelings, the concept of time rushes back to the forefront of Elio's concerns. The fact that Oliver will soon be returning to America emphasizes how much time Elio let pass without revealing his desires. However, it's worth noting that the weeks he let go by were important because he needed time to figure out whether or not he wanted to be with Oliver romantically. Nonetheless, it's clear that Oliver's impending departure upsets him, a fact that lays the groundwork for the heartbreak he'll inevitably experience when Oliver goes.*



*Although he hasn't yet factored heavily into the narrative of Call Me by Your Name, the few scenes in which Elio's father appears make it clear that he's an emotionally intuitive person, capable of picking up on the subtleties of human interaction. In particular, he seems particularly attuned to the signs of romantic attraction, a fact that aligns with his previous statement that he's well-acquainted with "almost every bend, every tollbooth, every chamber in the human heart."*



*Elio understands that Oliver's departure is going to devastate him emotionally, but he refuses to spend too much time thinking about this fact. Instead, he decides to focus on the excitement of traveling with his lover. While his refusal to prepare for the impending sadness is perhaps foolhardy and the sign of someone who hasn't yet had his heart broken, it also enables him to actually enjoy his final days with Oliver, thereby helping him fully experience the feeling of this new romance, which he has only recently learned to accept.*



*Now that Oliver's time in Italy is drawing to a close, a different kind of anticipation pervades Elio's life. Whereas in at the beginning of the summer he was saddled with the kind of anticipation that is shot through with excitement, he now has to deal with a more somber brand of anticipation, one that brings a sense of doom. Elio asking for Oliver's clothes again implies a merging of their identities. Even in his absence, Elio still wants to be able to "become" Oliver in at least a superficial way.*



## PART 3: THE SAN CLEMENTE SYNDROME

When Elio and Oliver arrive in their hotel room, there is a note from Oliver's publisher inviting him to a party at a bookstore for one of the press's authors. Elio wonders aloud if he's invited, too, but Oliver waves away this insecurity, saying, "You are now." They then stand naked with their arms leaning against the windowsill and look out at the Roman cityscape. Wanting to "mark the moment," Elio rubs Oliver's buttocks and then begins "to stick [his] middle finger into him." In response, Oliver points out that if Elio keeps doing this, they won't make it to the party.

Later, Elio and Oliver prepare to take a shower together. After Oliver takes a bowel movement, Elio tells him not to flush. "I want to look," he says. "Our bodies won't have secrets now." He then sits on the toilet himself and says, "I want you to see mine." Oliver steps close and kisses Elio while "pressing and massaging [his] tummy with the flat of his palm," all the while watching "the whole thing happen." Elio notes that he wants "no secrets, no screens, nothing between" them. At the same time, he doesn't realize that this desire to feel as if there are "no secrets" between them is also a desire to reignite "the tiny lantern of unsuspected shame." In the shower they begin to have sex, but they stop so that they'll feel like "live wires" for the rest of the night.

Walking to the bookstore, Elio and Oliver pass a "human statue of Dante" who recites lines from *The Inferno* when tourists give him change. At one point, he recites a Roman drinking song instead of Dante's poetry, and everyone present laughs except Oliver, who needs Elio to explain to him what has just happened. As they resume walking, Elio senses that Oliver is uncomfortable about something, but he doesn't know what might be bothering him. He suddenly worries that he's what's distressing Oliver, and suggests that everybody's going to see him as "the professor's son tagging long." However, Oliver waves this away, simply saying, "I don't want anything to change or to come between us tonight."

On the way to the bookstore, Elio and Oliver pass a significant landmark: the place where Elio first intuited his attraction to men. Three years ago, he was walking through Rome when an "errand boy" rode by on a bicycle. As they passed, they made intense eye contact—so intense that the errand boy turned around and introduced himself, asking questions and throwing his arm around Elio while caressing him in a friendly, insinuating way. "Did I want to get together in a nearby movie house, perhaps?" Elio writes. "I shook my head." He notes how easily he could have said yes to this young man's offer, but for some reason he held back.

*Instead of fixating on the fact that their time together is almost over, Elio and Oliver focus on their new erotic intimacy. Indeed, this intimacy threatens to eclipse all other considerations, as evidenced by the fact that Oliver worries they won't make it to the bookstore party if they continue their foreplay.*



*This is a rather vivid scene in which Elio wants to eviscerate any mystery that still exists between Oliver and himself. To do this, he studies Oliver's feces and then decides to add his own excrement to the toilet as Oliver kisses him and helps along his bowel movement. This, he notes, is an attempt to recapture "the tiny lantern" of "shame" that he experienced after first having sex with Oliver. It's interesting that this is something he wants to relive, since he was initially so devastated by the guilt and shame he experienced after their first time making love. The fact that he now actively seeks out this feeling suggests that he's grown immensely more comfortable with himself and their relationship.*



*It is not readily apparent why Oliver thinks that something might suddenly "change" his relationship with Elio. Although Aciman doesn't make clear what's on Oliver's mind, readers can guess that Oliver is reticent to make his and Elio's relationship public. Until now, they've allowed their bond to take hold in private. At the party, though, they'll be subject to outside opinions, many of which could potentially center around their age difference. However, Oliver's misgivings clearly aren't strong enough to keep him from bringing Elio to the party, suggesting that he's willing to publicly display his feelings no matter what.*



*By including this story about Elio's first romantically charged encounter with a man, Aciman solidifies the fact that Elio has been keeping himself from acknowledging his true sexual preferences for quite some time. Although Oliver is the first person he's actually pursued, he's not the only man about whom Elio has fantasized. As such, Aciman insinuates that Elio's sexual desires have been in place long before he was willing to accept them as part of his identity.*



Just before reaching the bookstore, Oliver steps aside to make “a quick local phone call” and tells Elio he’ll meet him inside. Nervously, Elio enters to find the entire two-story shop crowded with people smoking and talking and drinking scotch. He then recognizes the author of *Se l’amore* and realizes that this party is for him. As the poet walks by, Elio shakes his hand and tells him how much he liked his poems. When the poet asks—not without a degree of suspicion—which one Elio liked most, an old woman whose brightly colored clothes make her look like a toucan tells him to stop interrogating the boy. Nonetheless, Elio answers, referencing the only poem he can remember from the book: “The one comparing life to San Clemente,” he says. “The one comparing love to San Clemente,” the poet replies. “The San Clemente Syndrome. And why?”

“My God, just leave the poor boy alone, will you?” says a woman who swoops in and grabs Elio’s hand and whisks him away, casting a derisive yet affectionate remark in Alfredo’s (the poet’s) direction as she goes. This woman, whose name is Lucia, doesn’t let go of Elio’s hand, and he revels in the experience of touching her while moving through a sea of “tanned arms and elbows that [belong] to all these women looking down from the gallery.” As Lucia bickers lovingly with Alfredo, someone makes a joke about love, signaling to Elio that they are married. Finally, the crowd dies down and the poet gets ready to begin. Elio and Lucia have tucked themselves into a corner, sitting on a spiral staircase and holding hands.

The bookstore’s door opens and Oliver steps in, and his publisher shouts, “Oliver! Finally! Welcome, welcome. One of the youngest, most talented American philosophers, accompanied by my lovely daughters.” Elio notes that the two women flanking Oliver are stunningly gorgeous. “Such babes, aren’t they?” Lucia whispers before they and Oliver come to stand near the spiral staircase. “Oliver,” Lucia says to him, “*sei un dissoluto*, you’re debauched.” When the publisher’s daughters see Elio, one of them says, “You’re Oliver’s friend, right? He spoke about you.” Throughout these pleasantries, Elio and Lucia never stop holding hands, even when Lucia jokes about it in a way that makes it clear she wants everyone to know that she’s holding a handsome young man’s hand.

*When Oliver slinks away to make a phone call, the reason he was nervous about bringing Elio to the bookstore becomes a little clearer (though not much). The fact that he has to call someone suggests that he may have other lovers in Rome (or back in America), and this is perhaps why he was worried that something might “come between” Elio and himself. But even if this is the case, Elio thankfully seems to find pleasure in simply entering the bookstore and encountering this vibrant world of artists and intellectuals—a world that no doubt appeals to him because it allows him to publicly embody the mature and sophisticated personality he wants so badly to have.*



*Elio’s descriptions of this book party and the worldly people he meets there confirm that he thoroughly enjoys joining this enclave of poets and readers. In fact, he seems so immersed in and attracted to this environment that he hardly notices Oliver’s absence. No longer wondering why Oliver was worried or why he stepped away to make a phone call, Elio relaxes into the thrill of holding a stranger’s hand and fielding the attention of dotting strangers, all of which give him the opportunity to act like an adult.*



*When Oliver appears with the publisher’s daughters, readers can reasonably assume that he was worried Elio would be upset to see him flirting and interacting with other good-looking people—perhaps even past lovers. However, Elio is too in awe of his surroundings to worry about whether or not Oliver has slept with these women. Indeed, he’s preoccupied with Lucia, clearly enjoying the attention she’s giving him, which makes him feel both alluring and mature.*



Alfredo finally begins, explaining that *Se l'amore* came out of "a season in Thailand teaching Dante." "As many of you know," he says, "I loved Thailand before going and hated it as soon as I arrived. Let me rephrase: I hated it once I was there and loved it as soon as I left." He talks about how lonely he was in Bangkok, admitting how attracted he was to the people around him while simultaneously remaining unable to interact with them in any meaningful way. He then reads poems for twenty minutes, after which the audience delivers thunderous applause.

Oliver looks at Elio as if to ask if he liked Alfredo's poems, and Elio shrugs in a way that he hopes seems indifferent even though in truth he loves this poetry. "Perhaps what I liked far more was the evening," he writes. "Everything about it thrilled me. Every glance that crossed my own came like a compliment, or like an asking and a promise that simply lingered in midair between me and the world around me." He looks around and covets how alive and virile the people around him seem, thinking sadly about "the thoroughly delibidinized lives of [his] parents with their stultifying lunches and dinner drudges." He then accepts a glass of scotch from an older man who tells him he admires his youth. Interrupting their conversation, Lucia calls this man a "dissolute," and Elio admits that he wishes *he* were "dissolute," too.

Resuming the reading, Alfredo reads "The San Clemente Syndrome," though not without first prefacing it by saying that he's only reading it because "somebody" in the audience mentioned it. The poem, he says, is about his seemingly endless time in Thailand, though he ultimately finished the piece in Rome. After the reading, Elio and Oliver go with Alfredo, Lucia, and their many friends to dinner at a trattoria, where they drink heavily and eat well while Alfredo regales them with stories about writing "The San Clemente Syndrome," telling them he wanted to "sleep with all of Thailand" but couldn't avoid the crushing loneliness of living abroad. "This is when I began to think of San Clemente," he says. "It came to me like an undefined, nebulous feeling, part arousal, part homesickness, part metaphor."

*Alfredo's speech about his time in Thailand relates to Elio and Oliver's relationship. When Alfredo was in Thailand, he was unable to truly enjoy the experience, and it wasn't until he left that he could see how good his life was in Bangkok. This ultimately underlines the importance of enjoying good things while they last, which is exactly what Elio is trying to do. Rather than focusing on the sadness he's going to experience when Oliver leaves, he decides to simply relish the last days they have together.*



*In contrast to the life Elio leads in B.—tolerating "dinner drudges" and stuffy academic conversations—this evening in Rome feels magical and imbued with an alluring energy. In the same way that Elio previously wished that he had enough life experience to say something like "I know myself," now he wishes he could be considered a "dissolute," romanticizing the idea of embodying a certain kind of sexual debauchery and worldliness that would make him feel all the more sophisticated and mature.*



*The feeling that led Alfredo to write "The San Clemente Syndrome" is one Elio and Oliver are well-acquainted with. Indeed, they know what it's like to experience "an undefined, nebulous feeling" that has to do with "arousal" and "homesickness." After all, Elio has already stated that having sex with Oliver feels like "coming home." As such, when Oliver leaves, he will experience a certain kind of "homesickness," one that is closely tied to not only his relationship with Oliver, but his sense of self, since this romantic experience has helped him develop his own sexual identity.*



Alfredo speaks about the nature of travel, saying that no place is ever what one expects it to be. He talks about struggling to be oneself in a foreign place, all the while missing home while striving to live a certain (new) kind of life. This, he explains, is what made him think of the Basilica of San Clemente, which “is built on [a] site” that has seen many different buildings, all of which have either burned or been built over multiple times. “Like the subconscious, like love, like memory, like time itself, like every single one of us,” Alfredo says, “the church is built on the ruins of subsequent restorations, there is no rock bottom, there is no first anything, no last anything, just layers and secret passageways and interlocking chambers.”

After dinner, the group goes to a bar, where they drink long past closing. Later, Oliver and Elio walk drunkenly through the streets. Overcome by the alcohol he’s had, Elio feels sick, so Oliver suggests he force himself to throw up, and when Elio insists he can’t, Oliver sticks his fingers down his throat to help. Laughing into the night, they stroll back and encounter buskers in the streets, joining their singing as a German tourist sidles up to them and belts out Neapolitan songs with them. All these years later, Elio writes, he can still remember this moment, thinking of it as the last time he and Oliver ever made love. “Tomorrow let’s go to San Clemente,” Elio says in the streets. “Tomorrow is today,” Oliver responds.

## PART 4: GHOST SPOTS

Anchise picks Elio up at the train station in B. and asks him if “Signor Ulliva” has left. When Elio confirms that he has, Anchise says, “Triste.” Elio agrees, and Anchise adds, “Anche a me duole, I too am saddened.” When they get home, Mrs. Pearlman is excited to hear about Rome and tells Elio that they’ve moved his things back into his old room. “I was instantly saddened and infuriated,” Elio writes. “Who had given them the right? They’d clearly been prying, together or separately.”

Elio goes upstairs and sleeps, thinking there will be “plenty of time for mourning.” And yet, he knows that “anticipating sorrow to neutralize sorrow” is “paltry, cowardly stuff.” Still, he thinks about all the ways he will suffer—perhaps he’ll never be able to sleep alone without Oliver, or live with himself without having his lover’s touch. “Even in my sleep,” he writes, “I knew what I was doing. Trying to immunize yourself, that’s what you’re doing—you’ll end up killing the whole thing this way—sneaky, cunning boy, that’s what you are, sneaky, heartless, cunning boy.”

*When Alfredo describes the Basilica of San Clemente as a building that has been constructed atop multiple “layers” of history, he draws a parallel between the passage of time and the nature of love. Insisting that “there is no first anything” and “no last anything,” he suggests that love, like time, is composed of many different histories. Thinking of love in this way is helpful when considering Elio and Oliver’s relationship, as the idea implies that although their bond may fade into the past, it will never vanish. Instead, it will inform all the other relationships that are “built” upon it, forming “secret passageways and interlocking chambers” that recall Mr. Pearlman’s idea of the human heart as something that consists of many “bends,” “chambers,” and “tollbooths.”*



*The passage of time comes crashing down on Elio when Oliver points out that it is already the next day. More than anything, this reminds him—and, in turn, readers—how soon Oliver will be gone. No matter how much fun they have tonight, there’s no slowing down time, which in this moment works against Elio as it speeds toward the inevitable end of his relationship with Oliver.*



*Throughout Call Me by Your Name, Elio’s parents give him a fair amount of space, respecting his privacy as he develops his relationship with Oliver. Now, though, he’s “infuriated” to find that they’ve moved him back into his old bedroom, since this means he can’t pretend Oliver is still in the house (as he planned to). Of course, this isn’t a rational thing to be angry about, since his parents have only done something nice for him, but his anger shows his emotional fragility in the aftermath of Oliver’s departure.*



*Now that Oliver has finally left, Elio has no choice but to face the heartache he knew was coming all along. However, he tries to “immunize” himself from this emotional pain by “anticipating” it, thinking that if he properly prepares, he’ll be able to minimize his sorrow. Despite this, he ultimately understands that there’s nothing he can do to escape the turmoil he’s bound to feel.*



Elio rises from his nap in the evening and goes downstairs, where he finds Vimini. They decide to go swimming together, walking out and sitting on a rock where she and Oliver used to pass the time. “We missed you,” Vimini says, and when Elio asks who she is, she says, “Me. Marzia. She came looking for you the other day.” Vimini explains that she told Marzia where Elio was, then says, “I think she knows you don’t like her very much.” Vimini then reveals how hurt she was herself when Oliver left without saying goodbye, since she’ll probably never see him again.

After dinner that night, Oliver calls and tells Elio he has arrived safely in New York. Their conversation is sad and somewhat stilted, though Oliver promises to visit during the holidays. He also tells Elio that he took a keepsake from his bedroom. After their conversation, Elio bounds upstairs and sees that Oliver took an “antique postcard of Monet’s *berm*” that used to hang on the wall. Apparently, one of the family’s summer residents gave this to Elio, knowing how much he liked the *berm*. On the back, he inscribed, *Think of me someday*. This resident’s name was Maynard, and he lived with the Pearlmans when Elio was fifteen. One afternoon he asked to borrow some ink from Elio and, while asking, let his eyes sweep over the boy’s body. “I wouldn’t have said no,” Elio notes.

Downstairs, Elio sits with his father, who asks about his trip. Throughout the conversation, Mr. Pearlman’s questions hint at Elio’s relationship with Oliver. “You two had a nice friendship,” he says eventually. “You’re too smart not to know how rare, how special, what you two had was.” Elio tries to sidestep this by saying, “Oliver was Oliver,” but his father presses on, saying, “What lies ahead is going to be very difficult. [...] Nature has cunning ways of finding our weakest spot. Just remember: I am here. Right now you may not want to feel anything. Perhaps you never wished to feel anything. And perhaps it’s not with me that you’ll want to speak about these things. But feel something you did.” Elio looks at him, feeling like he should say something to avoid this conversation, but he can’t bring himself to do so.

*Vimini’s comment about Marzia reminds Elio that he has completely neglected his relationship with her. Whereas he thinks about every detail of his relationship with Oliver, he hasn’t thought about Marzia since he last saw her when they had sex in the shack on the beach. It’s easy to see that this is unfair, but Elio doesn’t realize this until Vimini points it out to him—yet another indication of how preoccupied he’s been with Oliver (and how preoccupied Oliver’s been with Elio, since he neglected to even say goodbye to Vimini).*



*Aciman reveals that Oliver isn’t the first summer resident to have taken an interest in Elio, though Maynard didn’t act on his feelings. As such, it seems Elio’s encounter with the errand boy in Rome wasn’t the only time he considered the idea of having sexual relations with a man. The difference, of course, is that his experience with Maynard only alerted him to the possibility of such relationships, whereas his experience with Oliver brought him into the world of sexual adulthood (albeit before he fully reached adulthood). Nonetheless, his run-in with Maynard paved the way for his relationship with Oliver.*



*This conversation confirms that Mr. Pearlman has known all along about Elio and Oliver’s relationship. A man who claims to know the many “chambers” of the human heart, his advice is wise and empathetic. Instead of telling Elio that everything will be okay, he speaks honestly with his son, admitting that “what lies ahead is going to be very difficult.” However, he emphasizes that this difficulty arises from the mere fact that Elio felt something genuine and real, and this puts a rather positive spin on the idea that pain and heartache “lie ahead.”*



“In your place, if there is pain, nurse it,” Mr. Pearlman continues, “and if there is a flame, don’t snuff it out, don’t be brutal with it. [...] We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and have less to offer each time we start with someone new. But to feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what a waste!” Elio is shocked to hear this, but he doesn’t pretend his father is imagining things. “I may have come close,” Mr. Pearlman says, “but I never had what you had. Something always held me back or stood in the way.” Elio wonders how his father knew about him and Oliver, but all he can ask is if his mother knows. “I don’t think she does,” he replies.

Oliver returns over Christmas but doesn’t treat Elio with the same kind of open passion as before. Just when Elio thinks they may never speak in earnest again, though, Oliver comes into his bedroom. Declining to get under the covers, he sits next to him and tells him he’s engaged to be married. The relationship, he explains, has been “on and off for more than two years.” Elio is surprised, but this doesn’t stop him from trying to convince Oliver to kiss him and take off his clothes. Admitting that he’d like nothing more than to hold him, Oliver says that he can’t do this anymore.

Oliver gets married the next summer. Elio writes him a letter when Vimini dies, but by the time Oliver—who’s traveling when he receives the letter—responds, his sorrowful note renews the Pearlman’s sadness. “Then came the blank years,” Elio notes. Hardly ever hearing from Oliver, he has a number of lovers—some of whom are important, some of whom aren’t. Like Oliver, several of these lovers Elio can’t imagine living without. Then, nine years later, Elio’s mother calls him over Christmas and says she has a surprise and puts Oliver on the phone. Elio can hear Oliver’s children running around the living room with his wife. The conversation is short, because Oliver starts crying. “He’s all choked up,” Mrs. Pearlman says, and then Elio himself begins to cry, surprised to feel this way about someone he has “almost entirely stopped thinking about.”

*When Mr. Pearlman advises Elio not to “rip out” the pain he will feel in the aftermath of his relationship with Oliver, he suggests that heartache and emotional suffering are important parts of being alive. Under this interpretation, hardship is unavoidable and educational, something that makes a person stronger and keeps them from becoming desensitized to the world.*



*Although news of Oliver’s engagement surely upsets Elio, it’s worth noting that it doesn’t seem to bother him as much as the fact that Oliver refuses to kiss or touch him. This is because Elio is focused on what happens in the moment, not the future. He has already come to terms with the idea that he and Oliver won’t be together for the rest of their lives, so the fact that Oliver is engaged isn’t particularly distressing. What he really wants is to have one more moment of intimacy, but Oliver can no longer give this to him.*



*It’s significant that Elio has “almost entirely stopped thinking about” Oliver, considering how important their relationship was to him. Indeed, this is a testament to how time influences emotional pain, soothing even the most devastating wounds. At the same time, though, Elio finds himself crying on the phone when he hears Oliver’s voice. As such, Aciman showcases that, although time heals emotional hardships, it doesn’t completely erase them from a person’s history.*



After another four years, Elio finds himself passing through the New England town in which Oliver teaches. As such, he pays him a visit at the university. At first, Oliver doesn't recognize him because of his beard, but then he's overjoyed to see him standing before him. It has been fifteen years, but Oliver still looks handsome and lively. He insists that Elio must come over for dinner, but Elio says he can't. When Oliver presses, Elio says, "You don't understand. I'd love to. But I can't." By this he means that he can't "bring [himself] to do it," though he doesn't know how to express this to Oliver. How, he wonders, can he explain that he can't possibly stand to see his wife and children? After a moment, Oliver says, "So," and the word seems to capture all of Elio's "uncertainties." "So," Elio repeats.

Oliver and Elio walk to Oliver's office together. On the way, Oliver stops to introduce him to his colleagues, surprising Elio by telling people specific details about his career—details he can only have learned by reading about Elio online. In the office, Oliver shows him the postcard of Monet's berm hanging on his wall. "I had hoped one day to let one of my sons bring it in person when he comes for his residency," Oliver says. "I've already added my inscription—but you can't see it." Elio then invites him for a drink at his hotel, and though Oliver hesitates, he eventually accepts. "In another eight years, I'll be forty-seven and you forty," Oliver says at the bar. "Five years from then, I'll be fifty-two and you forty-five. Will you come for dinner then?" "Yes," Elio replies. "I promise."

Elio tells Oliver, "You are the only person I'd like to say goodbye to when I die, because only then will this thing I call my life make any sense." He then asks what Oliver wrote on the back of the postcard, and though Oliver wanted it to be a surprise, he tells him: "*Cor cordium*, heart of hearts." He then says that he's "never said anything truer in [his] life to anyone."

"Last summer he finally did come back," Elio writes, explaining that Oliver returns to B. for one night on his way through Italy. He arrives with a wrapped gift for Mrs. Pearlman, who Elio says is suspicious of everyone. Elio then takes Oliver on a tour of the house, showing him how the place has remained the same—the *orle of paradise* is "still there," as is the same gate to the beach, though things are also different because Vimini, Anchise, and Mr. Pearlman have all died. And although Elio wants to show Oliver that nothing has changed, he also wants to make clear how much time has passed. "Part of me wanted him to sense there was no point trying to catch up now," he writes, "we'd traveled and been through too much without each other for there to be any common ground between us."

Once again, Aciman demonstrates the strange influence of time on old emotional wounds. Although Elio has no problem coming to see Oliver and dredging up the memory of their relationship, he can't "bring" himself to face Oliver's wife, a fact that suggests he hasn't fully healed from the pain of losing Oliver as a lover. Thankfully, Oliver seems to understand this and therefore lets him off the hook, content just to see Elio after all these years.



That Oliver still displays the postcard of Monet's berm and has clearly kept up with Elio's career suggests that he still clings to the memory of their relationship. This is an important moment, for it calls attention to the fact that Oliver himself was not very old during that summer, meaning his experience with Elio was most likely quite influential too. Indeed, he was only twenty-four, an age at which people are often still forming their identities. In turn, readers realize that Elio wasn't the only one engaging in this relationship during a fraught and formative time in his life. This idea aligns with what Oliver said to Elio outside the post office one day, when he suggested that he hadn't yet "figured out" the implications of their relationship and that this "scared" him. What becomes clear is that Oliver's love for Elio wasn't simply a casual summer fling, but a monumental connection that deeply affected him.



Oliver's inscription on the back of the postcard confirms the idea that his relationship with Elio was a memorable and significant part of his life. Elio, he suggests, is his "heart of hearts," a phrase that implies a pure kind of love that can't be matched.



Once again, Aciman portrays time as something that is both capable of distancing a person from a certain emotion and bringing that person back into contact with that same emotion. In this case, Elio wants to show Oliver that the life they had together during their one summer is still alive, but he also wants Oliver to feel as if "too much" has happened between now and then to perfectly recall their relationship and what could have existed between them if they had continued their romance.



The old lovers sit on the rock Oliver used to visit with Viminia. “She’d be thirty today,” he says. “She wrote to me every day. Every single day. Then one day she stopped writing.” Soon conversation turns to Mr. Pearlman, and Elio shows Oliver the garden where they buried some of his ashes. “I call it his ghost spot,” he says. He explains that he spread his father’s ashes in many different places, but that this is where he comes when he wants to be with him. “I know he would have wanted something like this to happen, especially on such a gorgeous summer day,” he says, referring to Oliver’s visit.

Elio says he’s going to take Oliver to the belfry in San Giacomo before lunch. When he asks if he remembers the way, Oliver says he does. “I’m like you,” he says. “I remember everything.” This makes Elio pause. “If you remember everything, I wanted to say,” he writes, “and if you are really like me, then before you leave tomorrow, or when you’re just ready to shut the door of the taxi and have already said goodbye to everyone else and there’s not a thing left to say in this life, then, just this once, turn to me, even in jest, or as an afterthought, which would have meant everything to me when we were together, and, as you did back then, look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name.”

*When Mr. Pearlman and Elio spoke after Oliver first left Italy, Mr. Pearlman suggested that he had “come close” to having the kind of relationship Elio had with Oliver, but he he’d never quite experienced the same kind of connection. In doing so, he implied that, like Elio, he had relationships with both women and men, though he made it clear that he was never able to fully embrace this fluid sexual identity, instead committing to the monogamous life of a heterosexual man. This, it seems, is why Elio thinks his father would be pleased to see Oliver and Elio reconnecting on a “gorgeous summer day.” Mr. Pearlman was always sensitive to Elio and Oliver’s relationship when he was alive, and now that he’s gone, Elio remembers his kind encouragement and fatherly acceptance—something that ultimately enabled Elio to embrace himself.*



*Elio’s last words reiterate the fact that part of his romantic relationship with Oliver involves a recognition of himself in his lover. If Oliver were to call Elio by his own name, Elio thinks, this would confirm that he does indeed “remember everything,” since this was seemingly the most important moment of their romantic partnership. When they traded names while making love, they forged an intense connection, one in which they not only shared parts of themselves with each other, but actually became each other. In turn, this is why it is so difficult to see Oliver leave, even after all these years—in saying goodbye to his lover, Elio must also say goodbye to part of himself.*





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