

# Hatchet



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GARY PAULSEN

Gary Paulsen endured a tumultuous childhood during which he lived with his mother in a variety of locations, including the Philippines and Hawaii. At the age of fourteen, Paulsen ran away from home and began a decades-long stretch working a variety of jobs in order to support himself while writing. An avid outdoorsman, his pursuits have included sailing in the Pacific and racing sled dogs, even competing in the 1983 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. He's published more than one hundred books, many of which are based on his own experiences living and working in the wilderness, and his works include fiction and nonfiction for both children and adults. In addition, many of his works include a "coming of age," much like the one Brian experiences in *Hatchet*. Paulsen currently lives with his wife, Ruth, who illustrates children's books, and divides his time between homes in New Mexico and Alaska.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Published in 1987, *Hatchet's* themes of the value of nature and interconnection relate to the technological innovations of the 1980s, which had already begun to alter humans' relationships with the natural world. Paulsen hints at his anti-technology views throughout the novel, as when he contrasts Brian's view of the stunning sunset with his former life watching TV back in the city. With his emphasis on Brian's personal growth in connection with nature, Paulsen seems to push back against a cultural context focused on technological advancement and isolation from natural experience.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Hatchet* is the first of five novels about Brian Robeson's experiences in the wilderness. Perhaps the most notable of its sequels is *Brian's Winter*, which was the third published chronologically but offers an alternate ending to Brian's rescue at the conclusion of *Hatchet*. Paulsen wrote *Brian's Winter* to satisfy readers who felt that *Hatchet* ended too tidily and wanted to know how Brian could survive the coming winter. These sequels continue to expand the theme of nature's role in Brian's identity. Paulsen's nonfiction work *Guts* also relates to *Hatchet* in that it describes Paulsen's own adolescent experiences with outdoor survival and sometimes trauma, including hunting, extreme weather, and attacks by wild animals. *Hatchet* is also part of a long tradition of American novels about young adults surviving in the wilderness. Among these is Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain*,

which tells the story of a fourteen-year-old boy who runs away from his home in New York City to live alone in the Catskill mountains. Published nearly thirty years before *Hatchet*, George's book won several awards and set the stage for the success of later novels like Paulsen's.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Hatchet*
- **When Written:** mid-1980s
- **Where Written:** Unknown
- **When Published:** 1987
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult novel, bildungsroman, nature writing
- **Setting:** The wilderness in Northern Canada
- **Climax:** When Brian explores the plane, successfully obtaining the survival pack but also seeing the pilot's deteriorating body.
- **Antagonist:** The dangers of the wilderness, as well as the blindness of a human society that does not value nature.
- **Point of View:** Third person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Turtle Eggs.** Although Paulsen had already personally experienced much of what Brian experiences in the book, he tried to eat a raw turtle egg as research for *Hatchet*, so that he could describe what Brian tastes as accurately as possible. Unlike Brian, however, Paulsen couldn't make himself swallow the egg.

**Survival Guide.** In 2007, the father of a boy who was lost in the wilderness of North Carolina for four days credited *Hatchet* with helping his son survive. A fan of the book, 12-year-old Michael Auberry reportedly managed to find water and survive below-freezing nighttime temperatures during his ordeal.



## PLOT SUMMARY

A thirteen-year-old boy named Brian Robeson is flying in a small plane over the Canadian wilderness, with only a quiet middle-aged pilot for company. Brian is consumed with thoughts of his parents' divorce and the way it has torn his life apart, and he is unable to stop thinking about it even when flying over the beautiful landscape. Brian also hints at knowing what he calls "The Secret" about his mother, which his father does not know. Brian is briefly distracted when the pilot gives him a turn at the plane's controls, but he soon falls into

miserable contemplation of the divorce again. The reader learns that Brian lives in the New York City area but is on his way to visit his father in Northern Canada, since his father now has summer visitation rights. Brian feels angry at his mother, but somewhat guilty for refusing to talk to her in the car on the way to the airport. He remembers that she gave him a new **hatchet** as a gift for the journey, which he is wearing on a loop attached to his belt.

The pilot starts complaining of aches in his shoulder and stomach, which distracts Brian from his thoughts. The pilot suddenly spasms violently, and Brian realizes that he is having a heart attack. The pilot falls unconscious, leaving Brian alone in the airborne plane. Terrified, Brian realizes that the pilot's spasms knocked the plane off course, and he tries to steer it back in the right direction. He desperately calls for help on the radio but cannot get a clear connection. An hour passes, during which Brian realizes that the pilot is definitely dead, and he will have to land the plane himself. The plane abruptly runs out of fuel and starts to drop. Brian manages to steer the plane toward a lake at the last minute, landing in the water although the wings are torn off in the trees on the way.

In a panic, Brian escapes from the sinking plane and manages to swim to the shore of the lake, where he falls asleep. When he wakes up, the first thing he remembers is discovering his mother in the car with a strange man while out biking with his friend Terry. This is *The Secret* that haunts him. Remembering the crash, Brian starts screaming and crying. He does not know where he is and is in terrible pain. Brian loses consciousness again and wakes up in the early morning, still in pain and confused. Brian cannot stop thinking about the pilot's death and is unable to move, especially after he is attacked by mosquitos that appear as the sun rises. Before falling asleep again, Brian struggles to take in his surroundings and sees a blur of lake and trees, as well as a tall rocky ridge.

When he wakes up, Brian is horribly thirsty and sunburned, and he decides to drink the lake water even though it might not be safe. He tries to calm himself down, but keeps thinking that he is nowhere and has nothing. He focuses on repeating his own name and telling himself that rescuers are likely to come for him soon. He remembers an English teacher named Perpich who always used to tell students to get motivated and stay positive. The memory inspires Brian to carefully look through everything he has, which makes him remember the hatchet. He also remembers that he himself might be his most important asset. As Brian considers his situation, he realizes that because the plane was off-course, rescuers might not come right away. However, he decides to build a shelter and find food, determined to survive until they find him.

Brian discovers that the stone ridge hides an overhang by the lake, which he decides to turn into a shelter, happy at his good luck. Extremely hungry, Brian sets off around the lake to look for berries to eat, which he finds by following a flock of birds.

Although the berries are tart, he eats many of them and harvests more to bring back to his new shelter. In the night, Brian wakes up horribly ill from eating the berries and is again lost in thoughts of his mother's affair. The next morning, he is overcome with self-pity for how lost, alone, and ugly he is, feeling unable to escape his misery. Eventually, his hunger distracts him, and he eats a few of the riper berries before going to search for better food. As he leaves, he catches himself thinking of his shelter as home.

Along the shore of the lake, Brian finds a clearing full of raspberry bushes but is startled when a black bear appears. However, the bear leaves him alone, interested only in the berries. Brian realizes that it does not pose a threat to him and continues gathering berries. Later, he wonders how the bear felt seeing him and realizes that he has stopped thinking about his own pain for the first time since the crash.

While Brian is sleeping that night, he hears an animal enter his shelter and throws the hatchet at it. He misses, and the animal, which turns out to be a porcupine, attacks his leg. Brian begins to cry and feel sorry for himself again, a point that he later recalls as the moment in which he realized that self-pity doesn't work. Brian has odd dreams of his father and his friend Terry, and when he wakes up the next morning, he suddenly remembers seeing the hatchet make sparks when he threw it against the rock wall in the night.

Brian succeeds in recreating the sparks, becoming totally absorbed in the task of making fire. After some trial and error, he succeeds in getting the sparks to catch in a nest of birch bark, creating fire at last. Brian is overjoyed and gathers wood for the fire, swearing to himself that he will never let it go out. Soon thereafter, he discovers that a turtle has laid eggs in the sand near his shelter, giving him a new source of food. Encouraged by the fire and food, Brian begins to feel more confident about his ability to survive, but reminds himself that he must keep hoping to be rescued as well.

In order to keep from getting depressed, Brian resolves to stay busy around his camp by cleaning, gathering wood, and collecting food. He also makes an unlit signal fire on top of the ridge, in the hope that he can send a smoke signal if he hears a passing plane. Brian feels himself changing mentally, becoming more attuned to his surroundings and noticing everything more than he did living in the city. He also realizes that lots of fish live in the lake and plans to make a spear in order to catch them.

When his fish spear doesn't work, Brian decides to build a bow using springy wood and one of his shoelaces. While cutting wood for the bow far from his shelter, he suddenly hears the engine of a plane. Ecstatic, he sprints back to light the signal fire, but the plane turns back just as he gets the smoke going. Realizing the plane has disappeared, Brian falls into total despair, feeling certain that he cannot survive on his own any longer.

Many days later, Brian stands in the shallows of the lake, fishing even though he is sick of eating fish. Moved by instinct, he turns to see a **wolf** behind him on the hill. Though he is initially frightened, Brian quickly realizes that the wolf is only a part of nature and does not want to harm him. The reader learns that 42 days have passed since Brian's despair at the plane's passing. The narrative flashes back to that experience, during which Brian attempts to commit suicide with the hatchet before deciding that he has to continue living. Afterward, Brian realizes that he is not the person he was before the crash and must now rely on himself to survive.

Brian experiences many setbacks and mistakes as he learns to live in the wilderness, and he views his mistakes as learning experiences. He successfully builds a bow and learns to shoot and cook fish, which gives him the strength to believe he can keep surviving on the "tough hope" of self-reliance. Several times, Brian's mistakes seriously threaten his survival, as when an encounter with a seemingly harmless skunk almost blinds him. Still, each mistake helps Brian improve his survival skills, and over time he even learns how to hunt and kill some of the birds that live in the woods. He comes to realize that his survival depends on his ability to be patient and attuned to his surroundings.

Back in the present, Brian has succeeded in building a sustainable life in the wilderness, even though he remains hungry and vulnerable. As he is hunting that morning, a moose attacks him for no reason, severely injuring his ribs and leaving him terrified. He returns to his shelter to recover, but that very same night, a tornado strikes, destroying his camp and scattering his possessions. Brian marvels at how quickly his luck can change, but he also finds himself feeling more resilient than he once was, vowing to rebuild the camp even as the tornado tears it apart. When he wakes up in the morning, he sees that the tail of the sunken plane is now visible above the water and prays for the pilot to have rest.

Brian begins rebuilding his shelter and camp. As he does so, he suddenly remembers that survival pack in the plane and wonders if he can get to it now that part of the plane is above the water. He decides to explore the plane, making a crude raft to stand on in the water. He uses his hatchet to open a hole in the plane, at one point dropping his hatchet into the lake. Although he fears that it is lost forever, Brian successfully retrieves the hatchet from the bottom of the lake, and soon opens a hole in the plane wide enough to crawl inside.

Floating amid the supports of the body of the plane, Brian dives down and quickly finds the survival pack. In the process, he sees the decaying head of the pilot, mostly eaten by fish. Brian is horrified, but he manages to get himself and the survival pack out of the plane and, eventually, back to camp. Exhausted, Brian falls asleep immediately.

The next morning, Brian opens the survival pack and can barely comprehend the incredible riches it holds, such as sleeping

bags and packets of food. There is even a **rifle**, which makes him feel strangely separated from the natural world around him. He sets the rifle aside and finds an emergency transmitter as well. He flicks it on, but it appears to be broken. Overwhelmed by the excitement of the food, Brian decides to have a feast before rationing the rest, and begins to cook several packets over his fire. Suddenly, a rescue plane lands on the lake. The pilot of the plane asks if he is the missing kid and Brian, astonished, invites the man to eat with him.

In the epilogue, the reader learns that the pilot heard the signal from the transmitter that Brian unknowingly left on. Brian returns home to find that he is profoundly changed and experiences life in a much calmer, more observant way than he did before. He often dreams of the lake and its beauty. Although his parents are happy to have him home, they do not get back together, and Brian's life soon returns to normal. Although he considers it, he does not tell his father about The Secret.



## CHARACTERS

**Brian Robeson** – Brian Robeson, the protagonist of the novel, is a thirteen-year-old boy from the New York City area. At the start of the novel, Brian is reeling at the news that his mother and father are getting a divorce. The split is devastating for Brian, and his knowledge that his mother has been having an affair is particularly haunting. Brian takes a plane to Northern Canada to visit his father, but midway through the flight, the pilot has a heart attack and dies suddenly, forcing Brian to land the plane on his own in the dense Canadian forest. Brian has always lived in urban comfort and has little knowledge of the natural world. His development from sheltered child to wise, self-sufficient young man forms the story's central arc. Even though he is weak and frightened at first, Brian reveals himself to be resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity, demonstrating how the challenges and wonders of the natural world can transform even an average person into someone strong and insightful. Brian's newfound understanding and appreciation of the natural world leave him calmer and more perceptive even after he returns home at the end of the book.

**Pilot** – The pilot is an unnamed man in his mid-forties who flies Brian in a small plane to see his father in Northern Canada. The pilot is brusque but kind, making little conversation with Brian but encouraging him to enjoy the flight and even to try his hand at controlling the plane. Brian notices that the pilot is so engaged in flying that he seems to be an actual part of the plane rather than a separate being. The pilot suffers a fatal heart attack midflight, leaving Brian alone to land the plane and survive in the wilderness. The memory of the pilot's death and the knowledge that his body remains in the lake haunts Brian throughout the book, sometimes frightening him and sometimes inspiring him to remain strong on his own.

**Brian's Mother** – Brian's mother lives in the New York City area and works in real estate. She is described mostly in terms of her divorce from Brian's father. She has an affair with another man and initiates the end of her marriage, although she is not aware that Brian knows about the affair. Although Brian is furious with his mother about the affair, he also longs for the comfort of her presence during his time in the wilderness and especially misses her cooking. Brian's mother also gives him his **hatchet** as a gift before he leaves on the plane, which enables him to survive for several months in the wilderness after the crash.

**Brian's Father** – After divorcing from Brian's mother, Brian's father moves to Northern Canada to pursue his career as a mechanical engineer. Brian's father is not described in detail, but Brian feels sympathetic toward him because of his mother's affair, which Brian's father presumably never finds out about. Paulsen hints that Brian feels a strong bond with his father, as when Brian imagines telling his father all about the mistakes that he makes in the wilderness. Brian also dreams of his father wanting to tell him something important, an experience which leads Brian to figure out how to make fire with the **hatchet**.

**Perpich** – Perpich is one of Brian's former English teachers. He teaches Brian the importance of thinking positively and valuing oneself, lessons that turn out to be crucial for Brian's survival in the wilderness. Brian often thinks of Perpich as a source of strength as he struggles to remain positive and calm in the face of adversity.

**Terry** – Terry is one of Brian's friends from school. Terry is not described in detail, but he is present in Brian's memory of discovering his mother's affair ("The Secret"), and Brian thinks of him several times while lost in the wilderness. At one point, remembering playing make-believe with Terry inspires Brian to build his shelter, and Terry also appears in the dream that encourages Brian to attempt making fire.

Canadian wilderness, Brian finds himself facing much greater adversity than before. Through this extreme challenge, he eventually comes to understand that when combined with perspective and courage, adversity can be a source of positive change rather than pure destruction. Through his depiction of Brian's personal evolution, Paulsen argues that while adversity can be a powerful catalyst for growth, it is not on its own enough to cause profound change in a person. In order to grow through adversity, an individual must meet challenges with patience, thoughtfulness, and hope.

Brian's despair at the book's start demonstrates his initial inability to gain perspective on his difficulties. To Brian, his parents' divorce is all-consuming, and at this early stage, he is unable to imagine it as anything other than a force of destruction and ruin. Even as he is immersed in the new experience of flying in a plane above beautiful scenery, Brian can't stop contemplating his parents' divorce. Paulsen describes Brian's interpretation of the word "divorce" as "a tearing, ugly word [...] the breaking and shattering of all the solid things." After the crash, Brian's first reaction is to focus on what he lacks, echoing his despair and pessimism over his parents' divorce. Considering what he'll need to survive, Brian perceives himself to have no assets at all, thinking: "It kept coming back to that. He had nothing." This simplistic view of events underscores Brian's initial immaturity and inability to find anything positive in his challenging situation. Even after gaining some early mastery of his surroundings and attempting to find ways to survive, Brian continues to feel sorry for himself and focus on the destructive results of his situation. He sees his reflection in the water and, reacting to all the ways that he has been harmed, cries "long tears, wasted tears, self-pity tears." Although Brian's feelings are understandable given the circumstances, Paulsen's word choice and description of these tears as "wasted" highlights his argument that for Brian to grow from his painful experiences, he will have to move past self-pity and find a more productive way to interpret the adversity he faces.

As Brian's ordeal continues, his perspective slowly shifts from one of victimhood to one of empowerment and agency. After admitting to himself that his self-pity is holding him back, Brian gradually teaches himself glean lessons from the challenges he faces. In this way, he transforms his experience into one that brings him both a greater chance of survival and greater personal satisfaction. As his adversity increases, so too do the rewards he finds by looking for the benefits within his new challenges. After being attacked by a porcupine, Brian thinks repeatedly that he "can't do this" and succumbs to a final bout of self-pity. However, this time he comes out of his despair with the new understanding that "feeling sorry for [himself] didn't work." Though he remains tempted by self-pity after this point, Brian's acceptance of its futility is a crucial turning point in his ability to survive. Immediately after the episode with the



## THEMES

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### ADVERSITY AND GROWTH

At the start of the book, *Hatchet's* protagonist, thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson, is a privileged city boy who is accustomed to the comforts of home and shocked at the unexpected changes brought about by his parents' divorce. Brian initially views such adversity as a negative force that ruins the things he values. However, after a tragic plane crash that leaves him stranded alone in the

porcupine, Brian's newfound commitment to searching for wisdom in his challenges allows him to discover how to make fire with the **hatchet**. By rewarding Brian with the crucial tool of fire so soon after his rejection of self-pity, Paulsen promotes the idea that a positive mindset is a necessary component of growing through adversity.

Brian's ability to maintain this new mindset is tested by greater and greater setbacks during the rest of the novel. When the rescue plane flies away without seeing his smoke signal, Brian is so overcome with despair that he contemplates suicide, but rather than giving in to misery as he has in the past, Brian emerges knowing that "the disappointment cut him down and made him new." Abandoning hope of a speedy rescue, Brian instead finds a fresh resolve that he calls "tough hope," which rests not on an external savior but on his ability to take care of himself. Brian's survival skills increase dramatically as a result of this "tough hope," indicating that it is a superior, more useful mode of thought than playing the victim. The most dramatic example of Brian's ability to find strength within disaster comes when the tornado destroys Brian's camp. Instead of despairing over what he has lost, Brian notices that he can now access the sunken plane and, through grueling work, he finds within it the resources he needs to finally get home. Brian's rescue comes only when he has genuinely learned to survive without it, again underscoring Paulsen's argument that determination in the face of adversity is essential for true growth.

By the novel's conclusion, Brian's priorities and perspective have undergone a profound shift. His newfound familiarity with life's most essential needs—food, shelter, survival—helps him reinterpret adversity as a force for building strength rather than breaking it. Brian's changed priorities are a crucial piece of his success in escaping the wilderness. Excited by the prospect of searching the plane after the tornado, Brian remembers to slow down and eat before beginning, thinking: "First food, then thought, then action." Paulsen indicates that approaching his difficulties with thoughtfulness and careful observation has made Brian more able to confront change with wisdom. When Brian at last reaches his family after his ordeal, the thought of his mother's affair no longer seems to hold any power over him. Although "The Secret" haunted him at the beginning of the book, Brian has grown enough to recognize its relative unimportance, and he does not bring it up with his father. What once seemed an insurmountable force of destruction is now just another part of Brian's life, a change that again underscores the importance of the individual's interpretation of adverse circumstances.



### INDEPENDENCE VS. CONNECTION

The opposing forces of personal independence and connection with the natural world play a key role in Brian's journey. At the beginning of *Hatchet*, thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson is upset about his parents'

divorce but takes his immediate safety for granted, trusting the kind pilot to navigate to their destination in Northern Canada, where Brian is to spend the summer with his father. However, the pilot's fatal heart attack creates a situation in which Brian is completely vulnerable and helpless, and from that point on, he longs to gain a sense of control over his difficult new circumstances. As his skills and experience develop, Brian also develops this stronger sense of independence, learning to rely on himself to survive in the wilderness. However, it turns out that simple self-reliance is not enough to allow Brian to truly thrive. Rather, Paulsen illustrates that in order to feel genuinely safe and at home, Brian must learn to connect deeply with his surroundings and give up the idea that he is separate from the rest of nature. Through Brian's changing relationship with the wilderness around him, Paulsen argues that rather than being an end in itself, personal independence is instead a crucial step on the journey toward a meaningful connection with the rest of the world.

At the start of the novel, Paulsen foreshadows the conclusions that Brian will eventually reach about the limitations of personal independence. Before the crash, Brian imagines a sense of control over the situation that quickly turns out to be illusory. When the pilot offers Brian the chance to steer the plane, the experience of controlling the complicated machine distracts Brian from his troubles and prompts him to call flying "easy." However, after the pilot's heart attack Brian quickly realizes that his momentary perception of knowing how to fly is not enough to get the plane back on track. Similarly, Brian develops a careful plan to land the plane safely, drawing on all the facts he has about the situation. However, the plan becomes obsolete when the plane runs out of fuel much more quickly than Brian expected. This turn of events underscores the futility of trying to impose one's own plans on the complex, unpredictable nature of the outside world.

After his initial despair after the crash, Brian revisits the idea of his own independence within nature. At first, his feeling of independence proves to be an essential means by which he gains the confidence to survive his early days in the wilderness. Taking stock of his assets, Brian at first thinks that he has nothing of value. Then, he remembers his teacher Perpich telling him: "You are your most valuable asset." Remembering his own value and independence gives Brian the strength to begin finding food and shelter. Brian also uses the phrase "I am Brian Robeson" to stay calm, and he repeats basic facts about himself in order to focus on the tasks at hand. Throughout this early phase, individual identity is an important way for Brian to ground himself in reality and hang onto his courage. Later, when the rescue plane turns back without noticing Brian's flare, Paulsen writes: "They would not come. He was alone and there was nothing for him." This moment of extreme independence is painful for Brian, but it also pushes him into the next phase of his evolution, in which he develops "tough hope" and the ability

to sustain himself in the wilderness. In this shift, Paulsen suggests that this sense of isolation is a necessary phase that Brian must move through in order to achieve true connection later on.

As Brian's familiarity with the wilderness grows, his initial reliance on a sense of independence fades away. He develops a more nuanced view of himself as a component of nature rather than an entity apart from it. This shift highlights Paulsen's argument that genuine safety and resilience, as opposed to simple survival, requires an understanding and acceptance of the interrelated nature of all things. An early hint of the coming change in Brian's sense of self appears when he meets a bear while picking raspberries. Though terrified at first, Brian continues to contemplate the bear and realizes that it was only curious about him and did not want to harm him. Though still largely self-absorbed at the time, Brian later wonders whether the bear was surprised to see him, a thought that Paulsen notes as "the first time since the crash he was not thinking of himself, or his own life." Gradually, Brian finds that his senses grow more acute and his mind and body are connected to the world around him in a way he has not previously experienced. Paulsen writes: "When he saw something [...] he would truly see that thing, not just notice it as he used to notice things in the city." Though he does not know exactly how or why, Brian perceives the boundaries between himself and the outside world breaking down.

Though independence gives Brian his basic survival skills, his newly sharpened senses and perception of connection give him a more sustainable way of existing in the wilderness. In particular, Brian applies this patient, open mode of being to his study of how to catch the elusive camouflaged foolbirds. When he finally learns how to recognize their unique shape in the underbrush, he is rewarded with his first taste of meat. This milestone solidifies Brian's ability to thrive in the wilderness as a part of nature rather than simply survive there as an isolated individual. In contrast, when Brian finds a **rifle** in the survival kit just before being rescued, he reacts with discomfort, realizing: "It somehow removed him from everything around him. Without the rifle he had to fit in, to be part of it all, to understand it and use it—the woods, all of it." Brian sets the rifle aside, choosing his newfound sense of connection over a shortcut to individual power. With this choice, Paulsen points to the necessity of surrendering independence in favor of interconnection, even when independence may seem to be the easier route.



## THE NATURAL WORLD

After a terrifying plane crash that leaves thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson alone in the wilderness to fend for himself, he becomes acquainted with a rich, complex natural world that was previously foreign to him. Even after he is rescued at the end of the book, Brian's interactions

with that new world continue to shape him in profound ways. At first, the wilderness around Brian appears chaotic to him, just as his life in New York feels after his parents announce their divorce. However, as his experience in the wilderness unfolds, Brian slowly begins to see the rational order and deep value of the natural world—a new worldview that brings him peace and guides his actions even when he returns home. Through Brian's experiences, Paulsen illustrates that nature provides a model of profound balance that can and should inform human behavior, even for people who live far from the wilderness.

At first, Brian is so used to interpreting the world around him as a chaotic blur that he can barely perceive the beautiful nuances that now surround him. Accustomed to the sensory overload of city life, Brian cannot at first see the natural balance that becomes so clear to him later on. Looking at the lake for the first time, Brian is dazzled by the reflection of the trees in the water, with reality and illusion blending together and everything looking like "a green and blue blur." Initially, Brian is unable to appreciate the full beauty that he perceives later on. When Brian impulsively yells how hungry he is, he is surprised to find that complete silence follows his voice. He realizes that "in all his life he had never heard silence before," underscoring how different his city life has been from his time in the wilderness. After that clarifying silence, Brian hears the birds and insects start making noise one by one, hearing them now as individuals rather than a blur of sound. With this moment, Paulsen demonstrates that quiet and peace underlie even the wildest of natural environments, and suggests that cities lack the conditions necessary to truly appreciate the nuances of nature.

Brian's burgeoning understanding of the careful balance and logic underpinning the seemingly chaotic natural world around him comes from the dangers that he discovers. Initially they seem purely threatening, but many of these dangerous situations turn out to conceal clues that help him survive. The **wolf** that initially frightens Brian quickly becomes a symbol of his newfound sense of connection with nature. Brian reflects that "he knew the wolf for what it was, another part of the woods, another part of it all." With this realization, Brian's fear fades, and he gains further confidence that he has a right to live in harmony with the wilderness. Even the skunk that nearly blinds Brian with its spray demonstrates the crucial fact that food can be quickly and easily be lost. After this experience, Brian resolves to protect his food supply above all else, learning an important key to survival from a painful experience. In this way, the skunk helps Brian even as it harms him, again showing the presence of an essential balance in nature. Later, when a moose attacks Brian, he is stunned that he cannot find any reason for the moose's "insane" behavior. Although it seems to be at odds with the logic that Brian discovers elsewhere in the woods, its randomness also serves a purpose for Brian: the

moose's attack illustrates the continued possibility of genuinely unexpected events even within a sensible environment. Brian's ability to make peace with such random misfortune is a crucial part of his successful coping upon returning home to his divorced parents. Over and over, Paulsen demonstrates that each misfortune contains a lesson that Brian will need in order to continue surviving.

As Brian continues to grow more confident living in the wilderness, he learns to fully appreciate the finely balanced order of the natural world around him. Where he once saw chaos, he now sees logic and opportunity everywhere, an understanding that brings him peace even in the face of difficulty. Over time, Brian settles into a routine of maintaining his camp and food stores while repeating variations of the phrase: "There were these things to do." By sorting the complex landscape into rational concrete tasks, Brian gains a sense of stability and staves off his fear that he will never be rescued. This relatively early example of finding order in chaos foreshadows the even greater logic that Brian will come to perceive throughout the wilderness. Shortly before he is rescued, Brian rests after a day of work and reflects on the beauty of a sunset. He notes each part of the sight—the sky, the water, the trees—and thinks that the balance between all of these elements creates "almost unbelievable beauty." Imagining what might be happening at that moment back in the city, Brian also wonders if the situation will someday be reversed: will he someday find himself sitting at home and imagining the details of the sunset that's unfolding before him? This moment hints at the growing affinity that Brian feels for the wilderness. Even as he misses his urban home, some part of him understands that the balance of the forest sunset is lacking in the city. Upon returning home, Brian continues to dream of his camp at the lake and the peace that he found there. Paulsen writes that the dreams were "not bad and would never be bad for him," and also notes that Brian's increased thoughtfulness and ability to be observant will persist throughout his life. At the end of the book, even Brian's parents' divorce appears as a simple fact rather than the painful chaos that it was before Brian's experience in the wilderness. Furthermore, it seems that the lake remains a truer home for Brian than the homes of either of his parents. The epilogue makes it clear that Brian is permanently changed for the better by his deep understanding of the natural world, even though he cannot continue living there.



## THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Although he is isolated from all human interaction during his time in the wilderness after a tragic plane crash, thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson frequently turns to language as a coping mechanism and survival tool. Brian's ability to verbalize what he is going through is pivotal at many points throughout the story, and the words he chooses

often define the way he proceeds in the face of challenge. By repeatedly emphasizing the importance of language in shaping Brian's reality, Paulsen argues that words can actively shape the world around us rather than just describing it.

Even at the start of the novel, Brian is preoccupied with words and definitions. The words that he uses to interpret events, whether good or bad, impact the roles that those events play in his life. Thinking about his parents' divorce while on the plane, Brian reflects that his thoughts are "always the words." He mulls over the harsh language of divorce, lawyers, and visitation rights, and feels that the words themselves are breaking his life apart with "legal phrases that mean nothing." After the pilot suddenly dies of a heart attack, Brian turns again to language, this time as a mode of support rather than a force of destruction. Planning how he might land the plane, he repeats the phrase, "easy say, hard do," until it becomes "a chant that beat with the engine." This repetition allows Brian to stay calm enough to manage the plane's descent to a degree that might otherwise have been impossible. After the crash, Brian is largely helpless until he says aloud: "Here I am." Paulsen writes that after Brian speaks those words, "for the first time since the crash [...] his brain triggered and he began thinking." Voicing his reality leads to Brian's first attempts at survival, demonstrating that using clear language is a crucial tool for creating real action.

Once Brian begins consciously using language to shape his circumstances, he remembers the lessons of Perpich, the English teacher who taught him about positive thinking. Committing to using positive words to interpret his surroundings helps Brian find opportunities where at first he only saw setbacks. Though Brian is initially certain that he has nothing that will help him survive, thinking of Perpich's directive to "look at *all* of it" leads him to go through his assets more carefully and, crucially, to remember the **hatchet** strapped to his belt. Although his actual circumstances have not changed, Brian goes from having nothing to having something very valuable, just by using different language to describe his situation. Beginning to venture out in search of sustainable food, Brian catches himself thinking of how he will return "home" at the end of the day. Though initially uncomfortable with considering his shelter home, Brian decides that even though the shelter "wasn't much," he would rather call it home than not have a home. With that, Brian gains another asset just through changing his definition of what constitutes a home, and his ability to think of the shelter as home leads him to make improvements that ultimately increase his safety.

The changing meanings of the words "luck" and "mistake" are perhaps the most essential instances of Brian's use of language to shape his reality. Brian uses these words to find the positive aspects of his situation and to learn from occurrences that at first seem negative, again demonstrating how simple word choice can dramatically alter one's mindset and surroundings.

When Brian feels lucky to have survived the crash, he quickly reminds himself that genuine good luck would have been to have his parents still together, or to have been flying with a pilot who didn't have a heart attack. At this early stage, Brian has not yet harnessed the power of language to positively shape his reality. Accordingly he becomes despairing and struggles to endure the first day in the wilderness. However, when Brian discovers the spot that will become his shelter, he feels lucky again and decides that he is lucky to have survived the crash at all, casting his life in the wilderness as a positive outcome rather than a negative one. This new mindset provides Brian with a way to remain upbeat and inspires him to continue searching for ways to improve his situation. Similarly, Brian comes to rely on the word "mistake" as an indication that he can learn from a negative outcome. Paulsen writes that Brian "list[s] all his mistakes" mentally and analyzes each one thoughtfully to turn the mistake into an asset. By returning over and over to this word and the many lessons that it teaches Brian, Paulsen demonstrates how even a seemingly negative word can have great power for good, underscoring the way that careful, thoughtful engagement with language can be a tool for shaping reality for the better.



## SYMBOLS

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



### HATCHET

Brian Robeson's use of the hatchet throughout the novel symbolizes his developing ability to cope with adversity and find his place within the natural world. At first, the hatchet is just a useless and somewhat embarrassing gift from Brian's mother. However, after the tragic plane crash that leaves him stranded in the woods, Brian takes careful stock of his assets and realizes how useful the hatchet can be, discovering a means of self-reliance that is crucial to his ability to survive and eventually thrive. As Brian finds more and more uses for the hatchet, he feels increasingly at home in the wilderness, again demonstrating the symbolic link between the hatchet and his own personal development. The hatchet even enables Brian to create fire, which gives him a new sense of mastery and connection within the natural world. When Brian drops the hatchet in the lake toward the end of the book, he is left to rely only on himself, a prospect that terrified him at the start of the book. However, Brian is able to overcome his fear and skillfully retrieve the hatchet from the bottom of the lake, at which point it symbolizes the profound growth that Brian has undergone during his time in the wilderness.



### WOLF

After living in the wilderness for over a month, Brian sees a wolf, which symbolizes the harmony that can exist when humans view nature with respect and compassion. Before this encounter, Brian's interactions with wild animals have mostly caused him fear or pain, as when he is attacked by a porcupine and later by a skunk. However, these earlier episodes help Brian learn how to better coexist with nature, and by the time he encounters the wolf, he is able to master his fear and instead marvel at the wolf's complete rightness within the natural world. Brian nods and smiles to the wolf and feels that it recognizes him as part of nature as well. This calm encounter with a dangerous animal represents the peace and belonging that Brian comes to feel in the wilderness.



### RIFLE

The rifle that Brian finds in the plane's survival pack represents humankind's overwhelming power and ability to harshly dominate the natural world. At first, the rifle appears to be a valuable asset, but Brian quickly becomes uncomfortable holding it and decides not to use it, even though it would make his hunting much easier. Brian's discomfort stems from the fact that the rifle removes the need for all the knowledge and sense of harmony he has gained in the wilderness; it would allow him to survive without truly understanding or caring about his environment. In this way, the rifle functions as an opposing symbol to the **wolf**. Where the wolf represents peaceful connection to nature, the rifle represents disruption, illuminating the harmful separation that occurs when humans try to take from or overpower the natural world without bothering to understand it.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Hatchet* published in 1987.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☹☹ The burning eyes did not come back, but memories did, came flooding in. The words. Always the words. Divorce. The Secret. Fights. Split.

**Related Characters:** Brian's Mother, Brian's Father, Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 5

**Explanation and Analysis**

After being momentarily distracted by learning to fly the plane, Brian falls back into the thought pattern of dwelling on his parents' divorce. Neither the thrill of controlling the plane nor the pilot's growing discomfort can distract Brian from this fixation, showing how deeply mired in self-pity he is at the start of the book. He does not see any potential for growth within his challenges; rather, he views them as being only destructive and harmful.

Additionally, this quote emphasizes Brian's focus on repeating words and phrases to define his understanding of reality. Here, the words are almost in control of Brian, bringing him deeper and deeper into despair. This moment stands in contrast with Brian's use of language later in the book, when he takes control of the words he uses to find positive perspectives on difficult situations.

**Chapter 2 Quotes**

☝☝ "Help! Somebody help me! I'm in this plane and don't know... don't know... don't know..." And he started crying with the screams, crying and slamming his hands against the wheel of the plane, causing it to jerk down, then back up. But again, he heard nothing but the sound of his own sobs in the microphone, his own screams mocking him, coming back into his ears.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson (speaker), Pilot

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 18

**Explanation and Analysis**

After the pilot's death, Brian desperately tries to call for help on the plane's radio, not realizing that he needs to release the microphone switch in order to hear any response. He loses control of his emotions again, giving in easily to panic, in contrast to the way that he will learn to respond to challenges calmly later in the book. His terror in this moment even causes him to change the course of the plane, highlighting how little control he has.

However, Brian is ultimately brought back to his senses by the sound of his own voice, which reminds him to let go of the microphone switch. This hints at the way that Brian will become his own most important asset later on, even though he is, at this point, incapable of relying on himself for survival.

**Chapter 4 Quotes**

☝☝ Luck, he thought. I have luck, I had good luck there. But he knew that was wrong. If he had had good luck his parents wouldn't have divorced because of the Secret and he wouldn't have been flying with a pilot who had a heart attack and he wouldn't be here where he had to have good luck to keep from being destroyed.

**Related Characters:** Pilot, Brian's Father, Brian's Mother, Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 37

**Explanation and Analysis**

Looking at the rocky ridge and thinking about how narrowly he missed hitting it during the crash, Brian at first thinks that he is lucky to have survived. Then, however, he changes his definition of the word "luck," rethinking the situation to decide that he is not lucky after all. With this train of thought, Brian essentially uses language to remove an asset—in this case, luck—that he might otherwise have had. Brian will revisit this method of shaping reality with language multiple times throughout the book, and this particular instance stands in contrast with the more positive interpretations that he learns to use later on.

Brian's pessimism here also exemplifies the self-pitying perspective that he relies on throughout the first few days of his ordeal, before he has learned to find the opportunities within the setbacks he encounters.

☝☝ The scenery was very pretty, he thought, and there were new things to look at, but it was all a green and blue blur and he was used to the gray and black of the city. Traffic, people talking, sounds all the time—the hum and whine of the city. Here, at first, it was silent, or he thought it was silent, but when he started to listen, really listen, he heard thousands of things.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 38

**Explanation and Analysis**

Although Brian is still exhausted and overwhelmed from the crash, he takes a moment to observe the lake before him and listen to the sounds of the wilderness before he falls asleep. This scene demonstrates the limits of Brian's ability

to perceive the natural world at this early stage, as he is used to the activity of urban life and as such cannot yet perceive the unique details of the nature around him. Paulsen seems to indicate that the senses of people who live apart from nature are to some extent limited, since they never have the chance to experience the rich nuance that Brian finds here.

At the same time, Brian's experience looking at and listening to his surroundings also hints at the depth of perception that he will gain as time goes on. For now, he is only aware of a wealth of sound and color, but as his connection to nature grows, he will learn to distinguish each unique facet of the world around him.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ “So.” He almost jumped with the word, spoken aloud. It seemed so out of place, the sound. He tried it again. “So. So. So here I am.” And there it is, he thought. For the first time since the crash his mind started to work, his brain triggered and he began thinking.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 42

### Explanation and Analysis

Waking up the afternoon after the crash, Brian finds water for the first time and then begins to try and understand where he is and what he should do. He speaks aloud in order to orient himself and finds that doing so clears his head and allows him to begin taking action. This is perhaps the book's most crucial instance of the power of language, in that simply using specific words gives Brian the strength to start trying to survive.

It is also meaningful that Brian's words focus on himself, using “I” to describe his situation. Even though he is still largely helpless, at this point Brian begins to confront the idea that he might be able to rely on himself, deepening what will become a key theme as his time in the wilderness goes on.

☛ Nothing. It kept coming back to that. He had nothing. Well, almost nothing. As a matter of fact, he thought, I don't know what I've got or haven't got. Maybe I should try and figure out just how I stand.

**Related Characters:** Perpich, Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 45

### Explanation and Analysis

Trying to figure out what to do while he waits for the rescuers, Brian feels that he has no way to get food or shelter. Then, he decides to inventory his assets, hoping that he will find that he has more than “nothing.” This moment is one of the first times that Brian begins to reject the negative mindset that has plagued him since the start of the book. With the decision to think actively about what he might have, he suddenly remembers his teacher Perpich, who taught him to think positively and value himself. In turn, that memory gives him the strength to rely on himself a bit more and begin learning how to survive on his own.

Additionally, Brian's initial reliance on the word “nothing” demonstrates again how specific language can limit a situation. As long as he thinks “nothing,” he has nothing, but as soon as he decides to move away from that word, he finds several important resources at his disposal.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ It was his first good luck. No, he thought. He had good luck in landing. But this was good luck as well, luck he needed.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

While searching for a place to build a lean-to, Brian discovers a stone overhang at the base of the ridge by the lake and realizes that it will be the perfect place to build a secure shelter. In this moment Brian redefines the idea of luck, acknowledging that his landing was indeed lucky, whereas he thought earlier that he was essentially unlucky. With this linguistic shift, Brian shows an early sign of beginning to approach his circumstances with maturity and optimism rather than self-pity.

The natural shelter of the rock is also one of the first times that Brian perceives the natural world around him as comforting rather than menacing, hinting at the supportive role that nature will eventually come to play in his life.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ Ugly, he thought. Very, very ugly. And he was, at that moment, almost overcome with self-pity. He was dirty and starving and bitten and hurt and lonely and afraid and so completely miserable that it was like a being in a pit, a dark, deep pit with no way out. He sat on the bank and fought crying. Then let it come and cried for perhaps three, four minutes. Long tears, self-pity tears, wasted tears.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 65-66

**Explanation and Analysis**

After eating too many gut cherries and getting sick in the night, Brian wakes up in the morning and is dismayed upon seeing his battered reflection in the lake. Being forced to look at an image of his own pain and vulnerability brings Brian to one of his lowest points, during which self-pity completely overwhelms him and he focuses only on the negative aspects of his situation. At this point, Brian does not yet have the ability to look outside of himself or gain perspective from his challenges, so the adversity he faces weakens him instead of acting as a source of strength as it does later in the book. Paulsen's description of Brian's tears as "wasted" hints at the essential futility of self-pity and indicates that Brian will not experience meaningful growth until he overcomes his fixation on his own problems.

☞ Yes, this was the third day and he had thought of the shelter as home. He turned and looked at it, studied the crude work. The brush made a fair wall, not weathertight but it cut most of the wind off. He hadn't done so badly at that. Maybe it wasn't much, but also maybe it was all he had for a home. All right, he thought, so I'll call it home. He turned back and set off up the side of the lake, heading for the gut cherry bushes, his windbreaker-bag in his hand. Things were bad, he thought, but maybe not that bad. Maybe he could find some better berries.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 67-68

**Explanation and Analysis**

Soon after falling into despair upon seeing his reflection in

the lake, Brian is distracted by his intense hunger and decides to look for better berries. Heading out along the lake, Brian inadvertently thinks of the shelter he has built as "home" and wonders at his own use of that word. This moment provides another powerful example of the way that language can change one's reality. Using only language as a tool, Brian goes from being lost to being at home, and this shift immediately improves Brian's mood. His situation becomes "not that bad," without any concrete change in the world around him.

Brian's growing sense of self-reliance is also a key aspect of this scene, since his own work improving the shelter is part of what makes him think of it as home. That autonomous act leads to more positive language, which in turn leads to more confident action. This kind of positive feedback loop recurs throughout the text, each time allowing Brian to get closer to thriving in the wilderness.

☞ Outside the rain poured down, but Brian lay back, drinking syrup from the berries, dry and with the pain almost all gone, the stiffness also gone, his belly full and a good taste in his mouth. For the first time since the crash he was not thinking of himself, or his own life. Brian was wondering if the bear was as surprised as he to find another being in the berries.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 72-73

**Explanation and Analysis**

After encountering a bear in the raspberry bushes, Brian overcomes his fear and realizes that the bear showed no signs of wanting to hurt him. He picks and eats many more raspberries, bringing some back to his camp, where he discovers how delicious their juice is. Here, Brian's first moment of thinking of something other than himself—in this case, the perspective of the bear—is also his first moment of relaxation. This connection shows that, while learning self-reliance is undoubtedly important for Brian's survival, he can only be truly comfortable when he learns to consider the rest of the world around him as well. Brian has not yet integrated himself into the natural world, but this moment provides an early example of the kind of rewards he will find when he does.

This is also an early instance of the theme of finding peace within nature's seeming menace. Though powerful and initially frightening, the bear ultimately provides Brian with

a greater understanding of the world around him and the ability to relax enough to enjoy himself.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

●● He did not know how long it took, but later he looked back on this time of crying in the corner of the dark cave and thought of it as when he learned the most important rule of survival, which was that feeling sorry for yourself didn't work. It wasn't just that it was wrong to do, or that it was considered incorrect. It was more than that—it didn't work. When he sat alone in the darkness and cried and was done, all done with it, nothing had changed. His leg still hurt, it was still dark, he was still alone and the self-pity had accomplished nothing.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 77

### Explanation and Analysis

After being attacked by a porcupine in the night, Brian falls again into overwhelming despair, thinking that he will never be able to handle the fear and difficulty of his situation. Brian's realization here that self-pity is essentially useless is a key turning point in his ability to grow from adversity. Whereas before Brian was unable to use his challenges as opportunities for growth, from this point forward he becomes determined to find the lessons in his pain and mistakes. Rejecting self-pity and embracing hope, Paulsen argues, is what allows an individual to mature as a result of adversity.

Like the encounter with the bear, the porcupine's attack provides an example of the hidden lessons within the natural world. While porcupine causes Brian pain, it also leads him to a new understanding of survival, again hinting at the underlying logic and wisdom of the wilderness.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

●● So much from a little spark.

A friend and a guard from a tiny spark.

He looked around and wished he had somebody to tell this thing, to show this thing he had done. But there was nobody. Nothing but the trees and the sun and the breeze and the lake.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 87

### Explanation and Analysis

After much effort, Brian succeeds in making fire from the sparks he creates with the hatchet. Having fire makes him feel immediately safer and more comfortable, and he thinks of the fire as his "friend and guard." By calling the fire by such meaningful names, Brian again uses language to give himself assets that were previously missing, increasing his sense of belonging using words alone. Additionally, the symbolic role of the hatchet as a signifier of Brian's independent identity makes his creation of fire all the more meaningful. Even in a few short days, Brian's ability to survive through his own efforts is markedly increased.

Finally, even though there is "nobody" there to share Brian's happiness, he does not feel isolated at this moment, which underscores his growing sense of connection to the "trees and the sun and the breeze and the lake." The natural world begins to become clearer and more comprehensible to Brian, and so he feels less alone simply through this increased familiarity, even though he is still the only human present.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

●● He smiled. City boy, he thought. Oh, you city boy with your city ways—he made a mirror in his mind, a mirror of himself, and saw how he must look. City boy with your city ways sitting in the sand trying to read the tracks and not knowing, not understanding.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

After hearing an odd noise in the night, Brian finds a set of tracks in the sand that he eventually discovers were left by a turtle laying her eggs. Before figuring out where the tracks came from, however, Brian catches himself wondering if an animal came onto the beach to play in the sand, which makes him smile at his own foolishness. Brian's realization that he has so much more to learn about the world around him is an important moment in his evolution past

independence toward true interconnection. He is able to create a mental “mirror of himself,” but that self-awareness only goes so far; he understands at this point that he will need to turn his attention outward to feel genuinely comfortable in his new environment.

This is also one of the novel’s starkest moments of contrast between urban and natural environments, with Paulsen implying that people who live in cities miss out on opportunities to understand the complex realities of nature.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ But it was a mental thing. He had gotten depressed thinking about how they hadn’t found him yet, and when he was busy and had something to do the depression seemed to leave. So there were things to do.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 98-99

### Explanation and Analysis

Encouraged by having built a fire and found the turtle eggs, Brian becomes more dedicated to creating a sustainable life in the wilderness. He cleans and organizes his camp, even though part of him feels like it’s silly to think of his simple actions as valuable. Throughout this chapter, Brian relies on the phrase “things to do” as a kind of guiding mantra, which allows him to stay busy and fight off the idea that the rescuers might not come for him. The idea of “things to do” comes from Brian himself rather than any external force, but by phrasing the idea carefully and repeating it often, Brian again uses language to build himself a sustaining sense of purpose.

The connection between staying busy and feeling better also shows the power of taking charge of one’s own situation. Finding opportunities for self-reliance keeps Brian from becoming depressed, which demonstrates how his independent identity acts as a key survival mechanism at this early phase of the story.

☞ I am not the same, he thought. I see, I hear differently. He did not know when the change started, but it was there; when a sound came to him now he didn’t just hear it but would know the sound. He would swing and look at it—a breaking twig, a movement of air—and know the sound as if he somehow could move his mind back down the wave of sound to the source. He could know what the sound was before he quite realized he had heard it. And when he saw something—a bird moving a wing inside a bush or a ripple on the water—he would truly see that thing, not just notice it as he used to notice things in the city. He would see all parts of it; see the whole wing, the feathers, see the color of the feathers, see the bush, and the size and shape and color of its leaves.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

As he continues to find ways to improve his camp and feel more at home in the wilderness, Brian sees his reflection in the lake and realizes how much his body has already changed. This sight prompts him to reflect on how his mind has changed as well. Brian’s increased sensitivity to the details of the world shows how profoundly time in nature can affect an individual’s way of perceiving everything around him. Where the world was once a chaotic blur from a plane window, it is now full of detail and delicate balance. This changed perception—and Brian’s acknowledgement that he has never experienced such perception in the city—underscores the theme of nature’s inherent logic and transformative power.

Additionally, Brian’s new sensitivity to the world outside of himself also adds complexity to his increasing independence. While his survival here depends on his ability to take care of himself, Paulsen also hints that attunement to the rest of the world will be an even more crucial asset in Brian’s ongoing struggles.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ He could not play the game without hope; could not play the game without a dream. They had taken it all away from him now, they had turned away from him and there was nothing for him now. The plane gone, his family gone, all of it gone. They would not come. He was alone and there was nothing for him.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

Brian hears a plane nearby and lights his signal fire to get its attention, but the plane turns away without noticing him. Assuming that it was a rescue plane and that it will not return again, Brian is overcome by complete despair, realizing that his attempts to survive so far will not sustain him forever. This moment tests the limits of Brian's ability to learn from adversity and seems to be more than he can handle. The depth of his despair here makes his transformation in the following chapters all the more meaningful.

This moment also hints at how Brian's independent efforts to survive, while effective in the short term, will not be enough to allow him to thrive in a sustainable way. The "game" of his attempts will have to give way to a deeper, more serious kind of living, in which Brian becomes a connected part of the world around him rather than an isolated actor.

Finally, Brian's use of the word "hope" here is notable in that it implies that hope relies on the chance of rescue, rather than on Brian himself. Using this definition, Brian is indeed hopeless, but in the chapters to come, he creates a new definition of "tough hope," which rests instead on his own efforts. Here, again, language shapes Brian's reality, in this case in a negative way by removing his ability to maintain hope.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ Brian looked back and for a moment felt afraid because the wolf was so... so right. He knew Brian, knew him and owned him and chose not to do anything to him. But the fear moved then, moved away, and Brian knew the wolf for what it was—another part of the woods, another part of all of it. Brian relaxed the tension on the spear in his hand, settled the bow in his other hand from where it had started to come up. He knew the wolf now, as the wolf knew him, and he nodded to it, nodded and smiled.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 115

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrative picks up again several weeks after the departure of the rescue plane, with Brian newly calm and confident within the wilderness. He senses the presence of the wolf and recognizes it as a peaceful aspect of the finely balanced natural world, despite its outwardly frightening appearance. The wolf is a key symbol of the natural world, here representing how each of its parts works in cooperation with all the others. Brian's calm interaction with the wolf further shows that humans can also be part of this cooperative whole, when they approach nature with thoughtfulness and curiosity as Brian has done.

Coming so soon after the revelation that Brian is now successfully thriving in the wilderness, this moment also shows that interconnection with nature is a crucial part of that success. Whereas Brian's independence once allowed him basic survival, he has now moved past that individualistic mode of being to connect with the rest of nature and develop a more sustainable life in the wilderness.

☛☛ With his bow, with an arrow fashioned by his own hands he had done food, had found a way to live. The bow had given him this way and he exulted in it, in the bow, in the arrow, in the fish, in the hatchet, in the sky. He stood and walked from the water, still holding the fish and arrow and bow against the sky, seeing them as they fit his arms, as if they were part of him.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 119

### Explanation and Analysis

Brian thinks back on the day that he first shot a fish, remembering all the mistakes that led to his eventual success and reflecting that the long process made the reward that much more satisfying. Recalling his sense of triumph, Brian reveals how much he has progressed toward integrating his sense of individual identity with the collective identity of the wilderness. Brian values himself—here represented by the hatchet—at the same time and in the same way that he values the fish and even

the entire sky, showing that connection to the whole is a necessary component of personal success.

Brian's deep appreciation of the fish in this moment also underscores the value of the mistakes that he made leading up to this triumph. It takes him several tries to build the bow and arrows and understand how to use them, but the outcome of these errors is nonetheless joy and success. Again, Brian's setbacks in the natural world always come with lessons and rewards, furthering the theme of the natural world's abundant wisdom.

☝ By the end of that day, when it became dark and he lay next to the fire with his stomach full of fish and grease from the meat smeared around his mouth, he could feel new hope building in him. Not hope that he would be rescued—that was gone. But hope in his knowledge. Hope in the fact that he could learn and survive and take care of himself. Tough hope, he thought that night. I am full of tough hope.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 120

### Explanation and Analysis

Brian remembers the feast he had when he first caught fish and reflects on the sense of celebration that he felt that day. Brian's use of the word "hope" here stands in marked contrast to the way that he defined the same word earlier, when the rescue plane departed. By altering the meaning of the word to refer to his own abilities rather than the chance of rescue, Brian essentially gives hope back to himself, again just by changing how he thinks about language.

Brian's new idea of what constitutes hope also highlights the necessity of his integration into nature. While he still relies on his own abilities, he also accepts the reality that the wilderness is now his home and commits himself to learning how to live within in, rather than focusing on how to escape it. By focusing on connection rather than separation, Brian begins thriving rather than simply surviving.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ He had been looking for feathers, for the color of the bird, for a bird sitting there. He had to look for the outline instead, had to see the shape instead of the feathers or color, had to train his eyes to see the shape...

It was like turning on a television. Suddenly he could see things he never saw before. In just moments, it seemed, he saw three birds before they flew, saw them sitting and got close enough to one of them, moving slowly, got close enough to try a shot with his bow.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 133

### Explanation and Analysis

After several frustrating attempts to hunt the camouflaged foolbirds, Brian finally figures out how to see their uniquely-shaped bodies, which means that he will be able to shoot them before they fly away. Brian's thoughtful, patient approach to this difficult situation yields satisfying results, which demonstrates again how much can be learned from meeting adversity with an open mind. Instead of becoming angry and self-pitying as he once did in response to setbacks, Brian now accepts that challenges are simply occasions for curiosity and further exploration.

The sharpness of Brian's perception of new information about nature—in this case, the shape of the foolbirds—also provides a vivid example of the orderliness of nature, which may be invisible to the casual observer but is nonetheless a rich source of information to those patient enough to look for it.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ She had done more damage than he had originally thought, the insane cow—no sense to it at all. Just madness. When he got to the shelter he crawled inside and was grateful that the coals were still glowing and that he had thought to get wood first thing in the mornings to be ready for the day, grateful that he had thought to get enough wood for two or three days at a time, grateful that he had fish nearby if he needed to eat, grateful, finally, as he dozed off, that he was alive.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 143

### Explanation and Analysis

While hunting, Brian is suddenly attacked by a female moose, who pushes him under the water and injures his ribs. Having dragged himself back to his shelter, Brian thinks repeatedly of the nonsensical nature of the attack, struggling to find any reason for this random misfortune. The moose's madness complicates the theme of logic in natural world, showing that even the most finely balanced system still includes unfair and irrational occurrences. Learning to accept the randomness of the moose's attack is one of Brian's final steps in coming to terms with the equally random and senseless event of the plane crash.

Brian's gratitude upon arriving back at his shelter also shows how much he has matured over the course of his time in the wilderness. Where once he was unable to see good luck anywhere in his life, he now finds countless things to appreciate even in the midst of random suffering. Because of Brian's newly thoughtful approach to life, adversity is now an occasion for celebration rather than despair.

☝☝ A flip of some giant coin and he was the loser. But there is a difference now, he thought—there really is a difference. I might be hit but I'm not done. When the light comes I'll start to rebuild. I still have the hatchet and that's all I had in the first place.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 147

### Explanation and Analysis

Almost immediately after the moose attacks Brian, the lake is hit by a terrifying tornado that destroys his camp and injures him further. Brian initially thinks with sorrow of all that he has lost in the storm, but he quickly realizes that he has not been knocked back to where he started because he is much stronger now. This refusal to pity himself, even under extremely trying circumstances, shows again the way that courage and positive thinking can transform negative events into positive ones. Buoyed by his determination to rebuild, Brian realizes soon after this moment that the tail of the plane is now above water, offering him a new

resource that was not available before this most recent challenge.

Brian's mention of the hatchet reinforces the power of that central symbol, again highlighting how it stands in for Brian's sense of self-reliance. At this point, Brian appreciates not only the power of the hatchet but also the power of his own ability to use it well, returning again to the theme of independence as a key ingredient for basic survival.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ He went to sleep thinking a kind of reverse question. He did not know if he would ever get out of this, could not see how it might be, but if he did somehow get home and go back to living the way he had lived, would it be just the opposite? Would he be sitting watching television and suddenly think about the sunset up in back of the ridge and wonder how the color looked in the lake?

**Related Characters:** Brian's Mother, Brian's Father, Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 158

### Explanation and Analysis

While watching a sunset, Brian wonders what his parents are doing at that moment—likely watching television and cooking—before pushing himself to instead focus on the beauty of his immediate surroundings. Though he has not thought of life back in the city for some time, and is unaware that he will soon be rescued, Brian considers here what that life might be like upon his return. This moment makes clear that the changes Brian has experienced in the wilderness will not simply evaporate upon his return to urban life; on the contrary, the personal strength he has discovered and his deep connection to the natural world will be a part of him forever.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ For all this time, all the living and fighting, the hatchet had been everything—he had always worn it. Without the hatchet he had nothing—no fire, no tools, no weapons—he was nothing. The hatchet was, had been him. And he had dropped it.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

While cutting open the aluminum shell of the sunken plane, Brian accidentally drops the hatchet down into the lake. This is the only moment after his transformation in the middle of the book when Brian gives in briefly to self-pity, feeling lost without the one constant that has been with him throughout his ordeal. However, Brian quickly recovers and dives into the lake to retrieve the hatchet, demonstrating that even though he feels as if the hatchet is his source of strength, he actually possesses his own strength as well. Even at this late stage of Brian's time in the wilderness, adversity continues to provide Brian with opportunities to expand his perspective and resources, in this case showing him how strong he truly is even when he feels he is "nothing." Paulsen mentions the hatchet only a few times after this point, hinting that once Brian has fully comprehended his own worth, the symbolic representation of his independence is no longer necessary.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ It was a strange feeling, holding the rifle. It somehow removed him from everything around him. Without the rifle he had to fit in, to be part of it all, to understand it and use it—the woods, all of it. With the rifle, suddenly, he didn't have to know; did not have to be afraid or understand.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 173

### Explanation and Analysis

While going through the supplies in the survival pack from the plane, Brian discovers what turns out to be a small rifle. Brian's feelings of detachment here contrast sharply with the calm belonging he has come to feel in the wilderness. The rifle functions as the symbolic opposite of the wolf

Brian encountered earlier; where the wolf represented the connection and balance of nature, the rifle represents the isolation and conflict of human society.

Though the rifle gives Brian a kind of strength, it also makes him feel insecure, suggesting that the individual power prized by humans is actually less meaningful than the communal power of the natural world. This moment underscores both the value of nature and the limits of a self-centered mindset. Brian's intuitive discomfort with the rifle shows how deeply he has internalized the lessons of his time in the wilderness, even though he began the story as an average city boy.

## Epilogue Quotes

☝☝ They were not nightmares, none of them was frightening, but he would awaken at times with them; just awaken and sit up and think of the lake, the forest, the fire at night, the night birds singing, the fish jumping—sit in the dark alone and think of them and it was not bad and would never be bad for him.

**Related Characters:** Brian Robeson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 180

### Explanation and Analysis

Back at home after being rescued, Brian continues to dream about the wilderness, especially after seeing the photographs that journalists took of his camp. It is significant that, despite all the terrifying experiences he faced during his ordeal, Brian's dreams do not frighten him, and he even seems to enjoy reflecting on the peaceful details of the lake and the woods. The persistence of these positive memories shows how profoundly time spent in nature can change a person, even after that person has returned to an urban environment.

Brian's complete lack of anxiety in confronting these dreams also shows the extent of his personal growth over the course of the novel. Being in the wilderness was challenging for Brian and returning home may have been challenging in its own way as well, but he is now able to face this adversity with calm contemplation rather than despair. By remembering the wilderness as an essentially good place, Brian provides a final, especially vivid example of the power of a positive perspective.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

## CHAPTER 1

Thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson sits in a small bush plane, looking out the window into a blurry green wilderness. The only other person in the plane is the pilot, a quiet middle-aged man. The two do not talk over the roar of the plane's engine.

Brian is initially excited about the new experience of flying in the plane, but he soon becomes distracted thinking about the circumstances that led to the flight. His thoughts begin with the single word "divorce," which he reflects on unhappily, remembering the fights and legal battles that his mother and father have been going through. Brian also thinks about something that he has not told anyone, something he knows about his mother that he refers to internally as the "Secret." Brian begins to cry, hoping that the pilot won't notice.

Brian looks over at the pilot and notices how attuned he is to the plane, almost as if he is an extension of the machine. The pilot notices Brian's attention and tells him about the plane, asking if he's ever flown in one before. When Brian says that it's his first time in any kind of plane, the pilot encourages him to take the controls and steer for a few moments. Brian enjoys learning the controls and is surprised to find that steering is easy. The pilot tells Brian that "all of flying is easy. Just takes learning. Like everything else."

The pilot turns his attention back to flying, and Brian is again alone with his painful memories of the divorce. Brian reflects that his father doesn't know what he knows about his mother and reveals that he will now have to live with his father during the summer and his mother during the school year. Brian feels the plane lurch as he is thinking and notices the pilot rubbing his arm, appearing to be in pain. He smells flatulence and assumes that the pilot "must have stomach troubles."

*Brian's quiet reliance on the pilot demonstrates his unquestioning trust in his own safety; it does not at first occur to him to gain independent control over what happens to him. The blurry green view of the wilderness below also introduces the idea that the natural world is initially abstract to Brian, lacking the meaning that it will gain later on.*



*The despair of his parents' divorce overwhelms Brian in this moment, showing his initially simplistic way of dealing with adversity. The divorce, in Brian's mind, is all bad, a force of destruction without any potential for growth. This passage also introduces Brian's preoccupation with words, in this case "divorce," and suggests the power that language will have to shape his reality.*



*Brian's conclusion that taking control of the plane is "easy" underscores his immature relationship to the idea of independence. To him, the control seems complete and simple, but this idea is shattered shortly thereafter when the plane crashes. Additionally, the pilot's words that everything "just takes learning" foreshadows the conclusions that Brian eventually draws about the lessons hidden within adversity.*



*Brian's insistent preoccupation with the pain of the divorce again highlights how self-absorbed he is at the novel's start. Because he cannot see past the despair that this challenge causes him, he fails to notice even the severity of the pilot's distress and so is unprepared when the situation worsens.*



Brian thinks about what it will be like to spend the summer with his father in the Canadian oil fields, where the plane is headed. He reflects that the flight isn't so bad after all, but notices that the smell in the plane is getting worse, and the pilot looks increasingly unwell. Still distracted, Brian remembers driving to the airport outside New York City with his mother. He recalls that she wanted to talk to him about his feelings about the divorce, but he remained silent. When Brian didn't answer, his mother presented him with a present for his trip, a new **hatchet** with a belt loop. He felt guilty for hurting his mother, so he attached the hatchet to his belt, even though he thought it looked silly.

Brian realizes that the pilot's pain is getting worse. The pilot tries to talk, but is in too much pain to communicate clearly. Brian watches as the pilot attempts to radio for help but is then hit by a new wave of pain. Brian realizes that the pilot is having a heart attack and watches helplessly as the pilot thrashes in agony, knocking the plane's controls as he does so. Brian struggles to comprehend what he is seeing, watching as the pilot falls still. Frozen with horror, Brian slowly realizes that the pilot is either dead or in a coma, leaving him alone in a small plane thousands of feet above the remote northern wilderness.

## CHAPTER 2

Brian remains frozen for a minute, reliving what he saw and wishing desperately for the pilot to wake up. He decides that he has to help the pilot, but finds that he cannot detect any heartbeat or breathing. Panicked, Brian, feels the nose of the plane begin to drop and realizes that he will have to figure out how to fly the plane himself.

Despite his terror, Brian experiments with the plane's controls and manages to get it flying level again. He looks out the windows, hoping for a place to try to land, but sees nothing but trees and lakes. He is not sure which direction the plane is heading and is unable to read the navigational devices. Looking over the dashboard, Brian remembers the radio and decides to call for help.

Brian takes the headset from the pilot, even though he is horrified to touch his body, and uses the microphone to call for help into the radio. At first, no one answers, and Brian gives in to panic, screaming and crying into the microphone. He hears his own voice returning and suddenly remembers that the microphone needs to be off in order to pick up an answering signal. Brian turns off the microphone and hears someone faintly answering him, asking for a location and flight number.

*Brian continues to withdraw into his own unhappiness, still oblivious to the danger of the pilot's illness. His memory of his mother introduces the crucial symbol of the hatchet, which plants the seed of his eventual independence even as he remains without personal agency in the moment. Notably, it is his relationship with his mother—a sense of connection—that provides him with the means he will need to take care of himself, hinting at Paulsen's larger argument about the ties between independence and connection.*



*At the moment of the pilot's heart attack, Brian's situation suddenly intensifies from the pain of the divorce to much greater life-or-death stakes. This new danger paralyzes Brian, showing how unprepared he is to handle real adversity. The speed of this change also dispels the illusion of Brian's sense of "easy" control over the plane on his own, providing an early example of the futility of the idea of independence.*



*Brian's ability to move past his panic and at least try to help the pilot shows his hidden capacity for growing through adversity, even though his ability to take action is still limited.*



*Again, Brian overcomes his fear long enough to take some control of his situation. His ability to right the plane exemplifies the role of independence in this story: Brian does not ultimately avoid the crash, but the act of taking control himself nonetheless gives him the strength to survive this phase of his ordeal and take next steps.*



*Brian's quick return to blind panic again demonstrates how easily he succumbs to desperation in the face of challenge. However, it is the sound of his own voice that returns him to his senses and lets him ask for help, which foreshadows the way that he will learn to rely on himself in the wilderness.*



Brian attempts to answer and explain his situation, but the responses are increasingly broken up and are soon gone altogether. Brian can only hear static through the radio. Brian calls for help again and explains who he is, but no one answers. He begins to despair, wondering how someone on the radio could help him even if they did answer. An hour passes, and Brian continues to call for help. Eventually, Brian realizes that the plane will run out of fuel if he does not land soon. He also remembers the pilot knocking into the controls and understands that the plane is no longer on its original course.

Frightened and confused, Brian decides to keep the plane flying until it runs out of fuel. Every ten minutes, he calls for help, and in between calls he attempts to plan the best way to bring the plane down when it runs out of fuel. Because landing in the water seems less dangerous than landing in the trees, Brian decides to aim for a lake when the time comes and try to slow the plane down as it hits the water. Even as he makes this plan, he feels that it will be impossible to carry out. Suddenly, the plane's engine stops, and Brian has no choice but to aim the plane downward. Panicked, he throws up.

### CHAPTER 3

Brian is overcome with fear that he is going to die. The plane glides quickly downward, and Brian is suddenly unable to see any lakes on the ground below. Finally, he catches a glimpse of one and steers the plane toward an L-shaped lake nearby. It seems for several moments that the plane will not reach the lake before hitting the ground, and Brian looks out the window, seeing the landscape frozen around him.

All at once, the plane reaches the tree line, and Brian is again sure that he will die. Just in time, he sees the lake again and steers the plane upward. It hits the trees, which tear its wings off, and the crash throws Brian forward. Then, just before it hits the ground, the plane rolls through the air and hits the surface of the lake. Brian screams as the windows break and water floods the plane.

Underwater and terrified, Brian unbuckles his seatbelt and tears his jacket away from the plane. Free in the water, he swims toward the surface, certain that he will not make it in time. At the last moment, he reaches the surface and swims toward the shore, screaming and barely aware of his surroundings. He makes it to the grassy shore and faints in pain and exhaustion.

*It seems for a moment that communicating through the radio will save Brian, but then the loss of this verbal connection leaves him helpless, providing an example of how crucial language can be to survival. Brian's realization that the plane is off course also highlights the limits of his ability to control the situation. His independent response gave him strength and calm, but it did not actually fix the problem at hand.*



*Even though he is terrified, Brian makes and carries out a plan for managing his situation, showing that he is already growing into the ability to respond to adversity with maturity. However, the plane's sudden descent also underscores the essential unpredictability of life and hints at the limits of trying to control the complexities of the world.*



*In this moment, Brian surrenders completely to the knowledge that he is at the mercy of circumstance, giving up on independent action to save himself. However, the natural world intervenes in the form of a lake to give him fresh hope, foreshadowing the connection that Brian will come to experience with the wilderness as a whole.*



*Steering the plane upward so that it reaches the lake turns out to be a crucial act of control that allows Brian to survive the crash. However, the natural world of trees and lake water quickly overwhelms him, depicting the balance between Brian's actions and the forces of nature that will develop over the course of the book.*



*Again, Brian uses his will to survive to overcome the dangers of the natural world, but only to a point. He is alive, but he will not truly thrive until he learns to work with nature rather than against it.*



## CHAPTER 4

Brian is lost in the memory of the Secret: he is riding bikes with his friend Terry back home, when he sees his mother sitting in a station wagon. Brian does not recognize the car and is about to wave to his mother when he realizes that there is a strange man sitting there with her. Brian recalls all the tiny details of this traumatic moment.

Back in the present, Brian wakes up and screams, not knowing where he is. He sobs as he remembers the crash and slowly becomes aware of birds singing. He fully comprehends for the first time that he has survived and then closes his eyes again, not waking until evening.

When he wakes up again, Brian relives the details of the crash and manages to crawl inland from the shore. Lying in the brush, he falls asleep again and awakens in the very early morning. His entire body hurts, in particular his head where he hit the plane's dashboard. However, he does not think that he has any broken bones or has other serious injuries. Brian is grateful to be alive and then remembers the pilot's death again, thinking of his body submerged in the lake.

Brian tries to sit up and feels that he is unable to think clearly, bouncing between reality and the feeling that perhaps he imagined the crash. As the sun begins to rise, hundreds of mosquitos swarm Brian, biting and tormenting him until the sun rises fully. Brian feels that the mosquitos are as impossible as the crash, thinking that no one ever mentions insects in books and movies about the outdoors.

Overcome with pain from his injuries and the insect bites, Brian looks over his surroundings, trying not to think about the pilot sunken in the lake. He is overwhelmed by the green of everything around him, seeing the trees and water blend into a blur. Brian sees a rocky ridge overlooking part of the lake and realizes how lucky he was that the plane hit the water instead of the rock. Then, he second guesses himself, thinking that if he were really lucky, his parents wouldn't have gotten divorced, and he wouldn't have been in the plane in the first place.

*The fact that Brian thinks of the Secret in this moment indicates that he is still largely bogged down in interpreting adversity as nothing but destruction. Though he has already begun to show potential for growth, Brian is at this moment very much still a privileged city boy despairing over his parents' divorce.*



*The trigger of the singing birds allows Brian to rediscover the basic reality of his situation, even though it is a terrifying one. In this moment, Paulsen links awareness of the natural world to an understanding of survival.*



*As he begins to regain full consciousness, Brian briefly experiences gratitude for his survival, but this is quickly clouded by his knowledge of the pilot's death. Brian begins here to find some positive in his very challenging situation, but he quickly returns to focusing on the tragic elements of what happened.*



*Brian's initial inability to fully believe that the crash happened exemplifies the tension he experiences between acceptance and denial. Some part of him is ready to confront the situation and grow from it, while another part remains passive and uncomprehending. But as Brian remains in this limbo, the natural world, in the form of the mosquitos, invades his reality, forcing him to accept that he is now a part of the wilderness around him whether he likes it or not.*



*Brian's perception of nature in this moment exemplifies his initial inability to understand its complexity and value. It is just a blur at this point, rather than the nuanced system it will become. This scene also marks a return to Brian's preoccupation with language, as he struggles to determine what the word "luck" means to him, ultimately choosing a negative interpretation of his situation by refusing to call himself "lucky."*



Brian continues to watch the lake, discovering a beaver lodge and countless jumping fish in the water. He reflects that the scenery is pretty but that he still can't think clearly, since he is used to "the hum and whine of the city." He thinks at first that the wilderness is silent, but then listens closer and hears a blur of thousands of sounds from the insects, birds, and other natural phenomena around him. Exhausted, Brian moves to lean against a tree and again falls asleep in the sun.

*This moment offers an especially stark contrast between the urban world that Brian comes from and the natural world that he now finds himself in. Paulsen makes it clear that living in the city has left Brian unable to really appreciate or understand what he is seeing and hearing, even as he begins to acknowledge the beauty around him.*



## CHAPTER 5

Brian wakes up and is extremely thirsty. He also realizes that he has been badly sunburned while he slept. Although he is unsure whether it's safe to drink the lake water, he is unable to resist and drinks deeply from the lake. Back on the bank, he feels sick but somewhat restored, able to think more clearly than before. Brian says aloud, "So here I am." At that point, he feels his mind begin to work "for the first time since the crash."

*Though he is unsure about doing so, Brian begins to learn to rely on the natural world when he drinks the lake water. This moment is also a crucial turning point in Brian's use of the power of language; speaking aloud enables him to take further action to survive, showing how language can actually create reality rather than just describe it.*



All of Brian's thoughts come rushing in at once, so he forces himself to think through the facts of his situation slowly, one by one. He does not know where he is, only that he was flying over the northern Canadian woods when the plane crashed. Brian comforts himself with the thought that his mother and father will do everything possible to find him, and that a search crew could even arrive within a day or two. Brian wonders whether he'll go to his mother's home or his father's, and realizes that he no longer cares what the answer is.

*Here, the use of clear language again allows Brian to find a measure of calm as he faces a difficult situation. His realization that he does not care whether he goes home to his mother or his father also shows that Brian is beginning to escape from his despair over the divorce now that he has to deal with more pressing adversity.*



Thinking of home, Brian realizes how hungry he is and wonders how he will find food. At first, he thinks that he has nothing, and then stops and thinks that he actually doesn't know what he has. Brian remembers an English teacher named Perpich who used to talk about staying positive and getting motivated, and he thinks that Perpich would tell him to look at everything to determine his assets.

*Brian at first assumes that he has nothing, showing how pessimistic he still tends to be. However, he quickly challenges that assumption by remembering Perpich's instructions to stay positive, demonstrating that he is beginning to gain some ability to see the potential for growth within difficulty. Again, the power of language comes into play here as Brian remembers words like "think positive" and "get motivated."*



Brian empties his pockets and finds only some change, a twenty-dollar bill, and a nail clipper. Then, he remembers the **hatchet** on his belt and adds that to his assets. He also inventories his clothes, shoes, and torn windbreaker. Finally, Brian realizes that Perpich would say that Brian himself is his most valuable asset. Brian wishes that Perpich were with him and yells aloud how hungry he is. In response to his voice, everything in the woods around him falls silent, making Brian realize that he has never before experienced true silence.

*Finding the hatchet provides Brian with a link to an idea of his own value and ability to act independently even within a strange new environment. His decision to value himself hints at the growing independence that he will find in the wilderness. When Brian yells out into the wild, he uses words to discover his power to shape the natural world, in this case by making it go silent.*



Preoccupied with thoughts of hamburgers, Brian tries to ignore a nagging realization about his time in the plane. Slowly, he remembers that the pilot had knocked the plane off course and is forced to admit to himself that the searchers might not be able to find him right away. Still, he tells himself that they will arrive in a matter of days. He decides that he can live in the woods for three or four days. Resolute, Brian touches the hatchet and, thinking of Perpich, motivates himself to find food and shelter.

*This moment marks an early example of Brian's choosing action over despair. He accepts the troubling knowledge that the plane was off course, but he does not let this knowledge crush him as it might have in the past. Armed with his decision to value himself and his independence, Brian again remembers the power of Perpich's inspirational words and adopts an attitude that will support his immediate survival.*



## CHAPTER 6

Brian thinks back on a time when he and his friend Terry pretended to be lost in the woods, making fire and hunting with a gun. Brian wishes that Terry were with him and, inspired by the memory, decides to try to build a lean-to for shelter. He walks around the stone ridge he saw earlier and discovers an overhang in the rock that forms almost a cave. Brian thinks that finding this shelter is his first good luck, but then decides that surviving the landing was actually lucky as well.

*Although Brian misses Terry and the security of home, he allows the memory to inspire him rather than drag him into despair, again showing a new skill at drawing strength from something that might seem negative. Brian's new interpretation of the concept of luck is also a key change for him, as he uses the definition of "good luck" to frame his situation in a more positive light.*



Brian sits in the shade of his new shelter and wonders how to find food, feeling too weak to improve the shelter until he has eaten. He reflects on how easy it has always been for him to have food, remembering the delicious meals that his mother and father used to cook before their divorce. Brian thinks back on survival shows he has seen on television and decides that there must be berry bushes nearby. He almost starts thinking about his mother's affair again but decides that he must "stop that kind of thinking," resolving instead to find berries before dark.

*Thinking back on the ease of his old life, Brian's experience again underscores the sheltered, unnatural reality of urban living. Here, he also takes another step toward the independence that he needs to survive, consciously separating himself from the idea of his mother so that he will not be distracted from finding food.*



Trying to keep his thoughts focused on the task at hand, Brian walks slowly along the edge of the lake. He sees a flock of birds land in the undergrowth and follows them, discovering that they are eating berries that look almost like grapes. Overjoyed, Brian eats the berries but discovers that they are oddly tart, with large pits like cherries. Still, he continues eating them until he is completely full and then carries more back to his shelter in a pouch made from his windbreaker.

*Even in his newly independent mindset, Brian ends up relying on birds, one of the most prevalent parts of his new environment, to lead him to the berries. Paulsen shows that even at this early stage, independence must balance with connection to the rest of the world. The crucial role of natural resources is also underscored here, as Brian gains new strength from the berries.*



Back at his camp by the ridge, Brian tries and fails to make fire by rubbing sticks together. Giving up, he decides to try to close in part of the overhang to make a better shelter. Using interlaced dead branches, he spends the afternoon covering the front of the overhang to make a wall and doorway. As the sun goes down, Brian begins to feel sick to his stomach and is again attacked by mosquitos. Although he is very tired, he struggles to fall asleep until night falls completely.

*This scene illustrates the limits of Brian's sense of independence and the way that the order of the natural world continues to impose itself on him. Despite his commitment to providing for himself, Brian cannot make fire easily, and the insects still torment him even though he has begun to understand the assets of the world around him.*



## CHAPTER 7

Brian wakes up in terrible pain in the middle of the night, screaming for his mother. He feels that the berries he ate are tearing his stomach apart, and he throws up in the sand outside his shelter before finally crawling back inside. He relives the memory of seeing his mother in the station wagon, this time thinking of her kissing the man in the car. Tormented by the Secret, he eventually falls asleep again.

Brian awakens early, again swarmed by mosquitos. He does his best to tidy up his camp and, while drinking from the lake, sees his reflection in the water. Brian thinks how ugly he looks and is overcome by misery at how alone and battered he is. He cries “self-pity tears, wasted tears” for several minutes before being distracted by his hunger and deciding that he must eat again.

Brian chooses some of the riper berries, which he now calls gut cherries, and carefully washes and eats them, deciding to get rid of the less ripe ones. He decides that he can still eat them if need be but that he wants to find better berries as well. Planning his route, Brian thinks about returning home later and realizes that he has thought of the shelter as home. Looking at it, he decides that it’s not such a bad place and resolves to call it home from now on.

Brian explores farther along the lake and discovers a clearing full of raspberry bushes. Brian is delighted to find that they are sweet and ripe, and he eats until he is full, careful not to push his stomach too much. He starts to pick more and is feeling happy about his situation when he turns around and sees a black bear.

Brian is frozen with fear and watches as the large, beautiful bear studies him with curiosity. The bear calmly continues eating raspberries and then leaves the clearing. As soon as it is gone, Brian runs back toward the shelter in terror. However, he stops halfway, reflecting that the bear was only curious about him and in fact did not try to hurt him. Brian convinces himself to believe that the bear does not mean him harm and resolves to go back and pick more berries.

*The physical pain of Brian’s illness quickly transports him back to the passive, despairing mindset that he showed at the start of the book. This demonstrates that though Brian now senses the potential for growth through adversity, he has not yet matured enough to let go of his simplistic view of his parents’ divorce. The hidden danger of the berries also underscores the complexity of the natural world and Brian’s need to understand it much better.*



*Although Brian’s self-pity is understandable in such an extreme situation, Paulsen nonetheless characterizes his tears as “wasted,” highlighting the idea that Brian cannot truly accomplish anything useful until he stops feeling sorry for himself.*



*Despite his despair moments earlier, Brian’s survival instinct quickly wins out, showing how essential his drive to sustain himself in the wilderness is. By calling his shelter “home,” Brian again uses language to shape his reality, giving himself a sense of belonging without actually changing anything but the words he uses.*



*Discovering a sustainable, safe source of food is a significant milestone in Brian’s mastery of his circumstances. Here, his ability to take action brings meaningful rewards.*



*Right when Brian is rewarded for his proactive search for food, the natural world again reasserts its power. However, this time that power is not frightening or painful; rather, the bear is beautiful and leaves Brian in peace. Again, connection to nature forces itself upon Brian, balancing out his independent approach to survival.*



Brian picks raspberries for the rest of the morning without seeing the bear again and then returns to his shelter when it starts to rain in the afternoon. He discovers that the raspberry juice is seeping through his windbreaker and drinks it happily, realizing that the pain in his body has greatly decreased since the crash. Brian thinks back on the bear, wondering whether it was as surprised as he was, and finds himself thinking about something other than himself for the first time since the crash. Just in case other dangerous animals appear, he places his **hatchet** by his head when he goes to sleep.

*Contemplating the bear, Brian finds himself drawn out of his own selfish concerns for the first time since the crash. This shift coincides with his first moment of real pleasure as he enjoys the juice of the raspberries. This moment hints at the necessity of connecting with forces outside oneself; while an independent mindset allows Brian to survive, it is only connecting with the other creatures around him that brings him a sense of actually thriving.*



## CHAPTER 8

Brian wakes up in the night to a growling sound and a terrible, rotting smell. Unable to see in the dark, he hears a slithering sound inside his shelter and throws his **hatchet** toward the sound. The hatchet misses, sparking where it hits the rock wall, and Brian suddenly feels an excruciating pain in his leg. He screams and sees a dark shape slithering out of the shelter door.

*With the hatchet by his side, symbolizing his ability to take control of his situation, Brian is seemingly prepared to handle the intruder. However, this preparation does no good. Because Brian does not understand the natural world well enough, his attempt to take control backfires and ends up causing him pain.*



Brian touches his leg and discovers that he has been attacked by a porcupine, leaving his leg full of sharp quills. Forcing himself to pull the quills out and overcome by the pain, Brian gives in to self-pity again. He starts to cry and feels unable to carry on. After a while, Brian stops crying and realizes what he will come to regard as “the most important rule of survival”: self-pity is not helpful.

*Brian realizes the essential futility of self-pity, moving into a new phase of maturity and showing that he has begun to learn from his repeated struggles with despair. Additionally, this incident is an early example of a natural danger—in this case, the porcupine’s attack—leading to a useful revelation rather than just pain.*



After falling asleep again, Brian dreams of his father and then of his friend Terry. In the dream, Brian watches his father trying to talk to him, but he is unable to hear the words coming out of his mouth. Then, his father vanishes, and Brian sees Terry in the park, smiling and building a fire in a barbecue pit. He repeatedly points to the fire, frustrating Brian, who does not understand what he means.

*Even though he is alone in the wilderness and attempting to be independent, it is still the memory of those he loves that inspires Brian to new revelations, again showing how important it is to balance personal independence with outside connection. The muted words from Brian’s father and silent smiles from Terry also underscore how difficult it is to create meaning language is absent.*



Brian wakes up in the morning light, again hungry and thirsty. While eating raspberries, he sees the **hatchet** lying where he threw it and picks it up. Then, as the light hits the blade of the hatchet, his dream returns to him, and he remembers the sparks that flew from the hatchet when it hit the rock. He realizes that his dream was trying to tell him that he can make fire with the hatchet.

*With the realization that he may be able to make fire, Brian succeeds in drawing a lesson from a very painful experience, immediately demonstrating the value of his decision to move beyond self-pity. This new revelation also adds further meaning to the porcupine’s attack, deepening the value that Brian gains from the natural world.*



Brian examines the wall where the **hatchet** hit and finds the harder, darker stone that caused the hatchet to spark. He quickly learns that he can make sparks by swinging the hatchet against the stone. Delighted, Brian believes that he will be able to make fire.

*The creation of sparks is the most significant use of the hatchet so far, representing a new phase in Brian's independent identity. Taking on this exciting new task brings Brian joy and a sense of purpose.*



## CHAPTER 9

After discovering the sparks, Brian is determined to make fire but finds it more difficult than he expected. First, he tries to find tinder for the sparks to ignite, but even small twigs do not work. He even tears his twenty-dollar-bill into pieces, but those do not burn either. Finally, he notices the thin, papery bark of a birch tree and attempts to catch the sparks in bits of the bark. Brian learns that the bark has to be even thinner, so he painstakingly shreds it into tinier pieces using the **hatchet**. Eventually, he succeeds in getting a few of the sparks to smolder briefly in a nest of birch bark shavings.

*In this sequence, the relationship between Brian's new sense of independence and the resources of the natural world around him becomes increasingly explicit. The creation of fire depends on Brian's efforts, but it is only when he draws support from nature (this time in the form of the birch bark) that he is able to make progress. Notably, paper money is of no use to Brian here, symbolizing his growing distance from the urban, civilized world.*



After several more failed attempts to get the sparks to catch, Brian thinks back to his school lessons on fire and realizes that the sparks lack oxygen. By blowing on the sparks in the nest of bark, Brian successfully creates a ball of flames. Brian is ecstatic to see the fire but quickly realizes that it is burning too fast, so he feeds the flames with small pieces of wood. He runs out of the shelter to find bigger pieces of wood and continues feeding the fire until it is burning steadily.

*Brian's ability to face multiple setbacks with calm rationality shows how far he has come since his previous tendency to jump toward despair. Though Brian does not yet think of it in these terms, this moment echoes the pilot's wise statement that "everything takes learning."*



Brian smiles at the fire, thinking of it as his friend and guard. He marvels at the achievement and wishes he could tell someone about it. Alone with the fire, he looks out over the landscape and wonders what his mother and father are doing at that moment.

*Again, Brian reacts with calm to an occurrence that would once have caused him misery, in this case remembering his family. Though he misses them, he manages to think of the fire as a friend, using the power of defining it to create a sense of connection in place of human company.*



## CHAPTER 10

Relieved and joyful to have the fire, Brian spends the rest of the day gathering wood and feeding the flames. Once the sun begins setting, he discovers that the mosquitos no longer swarm him near the fire. Soon thereafter, he realizes that he is also able to make a smoke signal using fire. Continuing to build his stock of wood, Brian feels that he "might be getting a handle on things" at last.

*The many benefits of the fire bring Brian a sense of control that he has previously lacked. For the time being, he begins to perceive himself as independent. However, he continues to rely on the natural world even as he celebrates this feeling of "getting a handle on things," using wood from the forest to keep his fire going.*



Brian wakes up in the night to see that his fire has burned down. He revives it and resolves to be more careful to keep it going. Then, he hears a dragging sound outside his shelter, but nothing approaches him. In the morning, Brian finds a set of odd marks in the sand that seem to have been left by an animal coming out of the water, with a pile of sand at the end of the trail. He tells himself to think like an animal and understand why an animal would have come out of the water, knowing that it must have had a good reason. Digging under the pile of sand, Brian discovers a stash of eggs and realizes that the animal must have been a turtle laying her eggs.

Seeing the eggs, Brian becomes hungrier than ever before and digs them all up, thinking that he had “never felt so rich somehow.” However, he realizes that he has no way to cook the eggs and will need to eat them raw. Although he is disgusted at the idea, Brian tells himself that he has no other choice.

Brian cracks open one of the turtle eggs and eats it raw. Although the taste disgusts him, he is still hungry and eats several more, growing to like them. He forces himself to save the rest of the eggs for later, resolving to eat one a day and remembering that the rescuers might come before he finishes them all. Brian decides to continue thinking of the rescuers because they allow him to keep hoping.

## CHAPTER 11

Encouraged by both the fire and the turtle eggs, Brian discovers that keeping busy prevents him from becoming depressed about the slow arrival of the searchers. Accordingly, he finds as many tasks for himself as possible, starting with burying the eggs in the sand, tidying up his camp, and maintaining the fire.

Brian spends much of the day gathering firewood. While stopping to drink at the lake, he sees his reflection and realizes how much his body has changed: he is now thin and tan, and his head is no longer swollen. Noticing these changes leads Brian to take note of how his mind has changed as well. He finds that he is more attuned to the sights and sounds around him and thinks that he is now able to “truly see” things, rather than just notice “as he used to notice things in the city.” The details of the natural world around Brian are suddenly much clearer to him.

*By carefully thinking through the meaning of the tracks he finds, Brian begins to gain an understanding of the essential logic of the natural world. This moment is the start of the sensitivity to his surroundings that he will continue to develop throughout the book.*



*Here, Brian uses the word “rich” to define his circumstances as increasingly positive, seeing the eggs as a form of genuine wealth. He also moves quickly past his aversion to eating the eggs, showing an increased maturity and commitment to avoiding self-pity.*



*Brian's determination to continue thinking of the rescuers shows that, although he is no longer giving into despair, he has not yet accepted the reality that he may need to learn to thrive in the wilderness. At the same time, he quickly learns to enjoy the eggs, showing an appreciation for the value of nature that will be essential once he does accept that the rescuers will not come.*



*Brian's decision to keep busy by taking care of all the details of his camp exemplifies the way that a sense of independence becomes essential to his survival. He avoids depression by fending for himself, a strategy that keeps his basic needs for food and shelter met.*



*This moment stands in contrast to Brian's earlier perception of his reflection as ugly and weak. He sees clearly for the first time that his challenges have changed him for the better, demonstrating that his new attitude allows the adversity he faces to facilitate real growth. Additionally, this shift comes with a greater sensitivity to nature, showing how Brian's seeming independence is actually linked to a deepening understanding of how he connects to everything around him.*



Continuing to repeat the phrase “things to do,” Brian gathers more wood and builds a signal fire on top of the stone ridge, planning to light it if he ever hears a plane engine nearby. Sitting on top of the ridge, Brian looks down at the lake and realizes how “incredibly beautiful” and “full of life” the landscape is. He watches a kingfisher catch a fish and suddenly realizes that he might be able to catch fish as well.

Brian runs down to the edge of the lake and sees that there are countless small fish swimming in it, as well as shellfish. The fish come so close to Brian that he thinks he might be able to hit one if he had a spear, so he decides to try and make spear out of sharpened wood. Brian thinks through his evening’s plan to bank the fire, collect more raspberries, and sharpen wood for a spear, again feeling happy to have “things to do.”

## CHAPTER 12

Brian stands at the edge of the lake the next day, trying to use his newly made fish spear. To his frustration, the spear doesn’t work, even though he spent hours perfecting it. The fish always swim away too fast. Brian realizes that he needs a way to make the spear faster than the fish and decides that he will try and build a bow and arrow to shoot the fish within the water.

Brian eats a turtle egg for breakfast and then goes out in search of wood for a bow. He stops on the way to eat raspberries and is surprised to find that his stomach feels full, even though he is still hungry for more substantial food. Walking along the lake looking for springy wood, Brian is startled by a feathery bird that bursts up from the ground right in front of him. Realizing that the bird looked like a chicken, Brian wonders if he might be able to catch one and eat it.

Eventually, Brian finds a tree with branches that he thinks will work well for a bow. He stops to cut the wood, and as he is working, he hears a distant whining sound that he slowly realizes must be the motor of a plane. Brian runs back to the camp as fast as he can, hearing the sound get louder and imagining how happy he will be to see the rescuers and be reunited with his mother and father soon.

Brian takes a burning stick from his fire and runs up to the signal fire that he prepared, lighting it and blowing on the flame. As the fire grows, Brian realizes that the sound of the plane is moving farther away. He searches the sky for the plane but cannot find it.

*Brian again uses language as a support throughout this chapter, relying on the idea of “things to do” to stay focused and productive even in an outwardly chaotic situation. Brian’s perception of nature begins to sharpen as well, and his ability to notice more details about it is immediately rewarded with the possibility of fish to eat.*



*Aided by his use of his “things to do” mantra, Brian embraces his circumstances fully, no longer dwelling on all the things he could be upset about. This happy moment underscores the way that a self-reliant mindset can turn adversity into opportunity.*



*Brian’s calm, methodical response to his frustration exemplifies his developing ability to be thoughtful and patient in response to challenges. His careful attention to the details of the fish’s behavior also shows the detailed understanding of the natural world that he is in the process of gaining.*



*Even as Brian gains mastery over his circumstances, he is clearly still reliant on countless natural resources—eggs, raspberries, wood—for his basic survival. This balance highlights Paulsen’s argument that independence is most valuable as a means to greater interconnection, rather than as an end in and of itself.*



*The arrival of the plane and its connections to human civilization immediately disrupt the balance that Brian has begun to achieve with the natural world. When he begins imagining his rescue, he completely abandons his idea of self-reliance.*



*Brian continues to hope desperately for rescue, even as he fails to find evidence of the plane. In this moment, Brian’s sense of independence vanishes, even beside the fire that once gave him such hope.*



Desperate, Brian pleads aloud for the plane to come back. It does not, and soon the sound slowly fades away entirely. Brian falls to his knees and cries, feeling certain that the plane was his only chance for escape. He thinks that his attempts to survive were only games, and that he cannot “play the game without hope.” Completely alone, Brian is overcome by the idea that there is nothing left for him in the world.

*Without the hope of rescue, Brian’s ability to gain strength from adversity evaporates, leaving him even more desperate than we had been right after the crash. It seems here that this challenge will be too much for Brian to bear, which makes his transformation in the coming chapters all the more significant. Brian’s definition of the word “hope” is also significant here, as it ties the idea of hope to the idea of rescue rather than sustainable survival.*



## CHAPTER 13

Brian stands in the shallows of the lake, watching a fish swim by. The fish is too far away for Brian to catch, but he does not care because he is sick of eating fish. Instead, Brian is looking for one of the birds he calls “foolbirds,” which he believes live near the lake. Then he freezes instinctively and thinks back on other times that a similar instinctive feeling has saved him from danger.

*Brian’s complete transformation from the end of the previous chapter shows the full potential of an individual’s ability to mature in response to a challenge. Brian is much more capable than before—as evidenced by how successful he’s become at fishing—but he is also much more sensitive to the world around him, again showing how closely independence and connection can be tied together.*



Slowly turning around, Brian sees a **wolf** standing up the hill from the lake. It is huge, and he is initially frightened, seeing the wolf look at him and claim him “as his own.” However, Brian looks back at the wolf and slowly realizes that the wolf is “another part of the woods, another part of it all.” He feels calm and nods and smiles to the wolf. Three more wolves appear, and then all four walk away, Brian nodding to each in turn.

*This moment is perhaps most representative of Brian’s changed relationship with the natural world. Rather than appearing as a menacing blur as it did at the start of the book, nature now seems rational and harmonious to Brian. Even seemingly dangerous creatures like the wolves are actually peaceful friends in this new reality.*



Brian reflects on how much he has changed in the 47 days that have passed since the crash. It has been 42 days since the rescue plane turned away and left Brian alone, an experience which he now thinks left him “born as the new Brian.” He relives the despair he felt that day and the experience of trying to commit suicide using the **hatchet**. In his memory, he lies awake all night wishing for his suffering to end, but in the morning he feels disgusted by the version of himself that contemplated suicide and realizes that he would never be the same. That morning, Brian decides that he will not allow himself to die.

*Brian’s transformation after the departure of the rescue plane is the book’s starkest example of growing through adversity. The pain of seeing the plane leave was Brian’s greatest challenge, but it also led to his greatest leap in maturity. Because Brian was already learning to approach setbacks thoughtfully when the plane appeared, he is able to turn even his worst experience into something positive. Paulsen underscores Brian’s agency in this situation with the image of the hatchet, which Brian considers and then rejects as a tool of his own destruction. While the difficult experience is a key component of Brian’s growth, it is clear that his own choices are also essential in creating this new, more powerful version of himself.*



Brian also reflects on the many mistakes that he has made since that morning, noting them all in his “mental journal” so he can tell his father about them later. He thinks back on the first bow he made, which shattered in his hands and almost blinded him. He later improved the bow and figures out how to shoot fish, finally understanding that the water refracts light and makes the position of the fish appear different than it actually is.

After catching his first fish, Brian roasts it over his fire and becomes obsessed with catching and eating more fish. He also discovers that he can use the scraps from one fish as bait for more fish. After eating so many fish that first day, Brian feels a new “tough hope” within himself, based on the idea that even if he won’t be rescued, he is able to take care of himself in the wilderness.

## CHAPTER 14

Brian continues to think back on the mistakes that he made in the earlier days of his time in the woods, noting in particular how quickly any small error can seriously threaten his survival. One of his most significant mistakes is throwing sand at a skunk that he finds digging up his turtle eggs on the beach. Brian finds the skunk unthreatening and even cute, but it immediately sprays him in the face, temporarily blinding him, and eats all of the turtle eggs. From that experience, Brian learns that food needs to be protected above all else, and that tiny actions can have lasting repercussions.

Brian also thinks back on time spent rebuilding his shelter and planning out ways to keep food on hand in case he is ever unable to find more. Brian figures out a system for storing food on a rock shelf above his shelter, complete with a ladder made of a fallen tree. Additionally, he creates a small enclosure out of rocks in the lake and lures fish inside with food scraps, closing them in with a woven gate.

Reflecting on all the progress and mistakes he has made along the way, Brian thinks that his goals now are not just about surviving, but about planning ahead to build a sustainable life in the wilderness.

*Brian's thoughtful decision to view “mistakes” as learning experiences again shows the power of choosing the right words to define a situation.*



*Brian's new understanding of “hope” contrasts sharply with the way he defined it when the plane departed. Before, hope referred to hope of rescue, but now Brian understands that he is able to create his own, more powerful “tough hope.” This new definition relates closely to his realization that true survival means integrating himself into the wilderness, rather than trying to control it as an independent actor.*



*Brian's reflections on his errors again underscore the importance of careful definitions, as when he thinks of the skunk as “cute” and is nearly incapacitated as a result of that error in judgment. This incident, however, is one of many in which a seemingly negative encounter with nature leads to important wisdom, in this case the total primacy of food, that Brian will rely on to continue surviving.*



*Armed with his increasing understanding of the lessons of the natural world, Brian's immediate action to preserve his food supply demonstrates how well he has learned to find the lessons in negative experiences. Rather than dwelling on despair as he once did, Brian now moves quickly to take concrete positive steps.*



*Brian's understanding that he is no longer trying to simply survive is a key turning point in his understanding of his role within the natural world. His focus on independence begins to fade here as he sees himself as a component of a larger system in which he may someday thrive.*



## CHAPTER 15

Although he marks each passing day on a stone near his shelter, Brian thinks of time in terms of significant events rather than days. In particular, Brian remembers “the day of First Meat” as a significant milestone. He recalls wishing for meat obsessively after getting sick of fish and berries, wondering how to catch the squirrels, rabbits, and foolbirds that he sees out in the woods.

Brian thinks back on the long, frustrating process of learning to catch foolbirds. Because the birds are so well camouflaged, they are nearly impossible to see even when they are very close by. It is not until Brian realizes that he is “looking wrong” that he notices the unique pear-shaped bodies of the birds and learns to recognize them by their shape rather than their color or pattern.

Using his newfound ability to see the birds, Brian attempts to shoot them first with his bow and arrows and then his old fish spear. After missing many times, Brian finally spears a foolbird. He reflects on how different the experience is from buying a chicken at the grocery store and teaches himself to clean and pluck the bird before roasting it.

Through trial and error, Brian figures out how to roast the bird over his fire, turning it on a pointed stick in order to cook it evenly. Taking his time to cook it, Brian thinks how important it is to be patient, reflecting that “so much of all living was patience and thinking.” Finally, the bird is cooked and Brian takes a bite. He thinks back on all the other food he has ever eaten and realizes that none of it has ever tasted as good as this First Meat.

## CHAPTER 16

Standing in the lake back in the present, Brian is confident that he will never be the same as he was before his day of First Meat. He also relives other First Days from his weeks in the woods, including the first time he made a working arrow and the first time he killed a rabbit. He reflects that although he is still always hungry, he finally understands how to obtain food and take care of himself.

*Having given up some conventions of human civilization—such as thinking in terms of days—Brian is free to pursue increasingly ambitious goals like catching foolbirds, which again shows the power of surrendering to the order of the natural world. Brian’s boredom with fish and berries also demonstrates how familiar he has become with the wilderness around him, a depth of understanding that seemed impossible to him at first.*



*Brian’s patient persistence in hunting the foolbirds is a key example of Brian’s new capacity to be thoughtful and perceptive rather than rash and easily discouraged. The concept of “looking wrong” also provides insight into Brian’s heightened sense and awareness of the natural world. By showing Brian getting meat right after he corrects this flawed perception, Paulsen highlights just how rewarding it is to be attuned to the tiniest details in nature.*



*Brian’s thoughts about how he used to get food at home illuminate the stark contrast between urban life and the natural world. Though getting food is easier in an urban setting, Brian’s sense of joy and accomplishment upon catching the foolbird illustrates the unique value hidden within nature’s hardships.*



*Here, Brian consciously reflects on how crucial it is to be patient in all situations, hinting that his experiences will lead him to approach life differently even after he leaves the wilderness. This moment of reflection shows the depth of Brian’s growth from the panicky, impatient boy he was before the plane crash. The particular deliciousness of the meat also reiterates the value of working hard for something as opposed to getting it easily as Brian would have back home.*



*These reflections highlight the permanency of the changes that Brian has undergone. With each hard-won “first,” he marks a step away from his previous, less mature self. Brian also understands that relying on himself also means relying on the world around him.*



Brian spots a foolbird in the brush and carefully hunts it, finally hitting it with an arrow after several patient attempts. After killing the bird, he kneels at the edge of the lake to wash the blood off of his hands. Suddenly, some small instinct tells Brian to look over his shoulder, and he turns just in time to see an enormous moose running toward him. The moose throws him into the water with her forehead and then follows him into the lake.

The moose continues to attack Brian, attempting to push him under the water with her head. He thinks the word “insane” over and over again, helpless to get free, until suddenly the moose stops, and Brian is able to come to the surface and breathe. Seeing that the moose is not paying attention to him, Brian begins to swim to shore, but as soon as he moves, the moose attacks him again, pushing him under the water and smashing into his ribs.

When he is able to surface again, Brian realizes that his ribs are injured and wonders how badly he’s hurt. Slowly, he moves out of the water little by little, trying not to attract the moose’s attention. He makes his way into the edge of the woods and realizes that he has left his bow and spear in the water, but thinks that he will have to leave them behind. Just then, the moose walks away along the shoreline and Brian goes back for his possessions once she is out of sight.

Brian slowly makes his way back to his camp, unable to breathe deeply because of the pain in his lungs. He dwells on the lack of reason in the moose’s attack, unable to come up with any reason for her behavior. When he arrives at the shelter and begins to fall asleep, he feels grateful to be alive with fire and fish to eat nearby.

Brian awakens in the night, still in pain, to a sound that he cannot identify. The sound is like a strange, distant roar, and he feels afraid of it. Brian gathers his weapons and slowly realizes that the sound reminds him of something he saw on television: the roar of the wind of a tornado. Understanding that a tornado is heading toward his camp, he realizes it’s too late to defend himself.

*This sudden change from success to peril illustrates how much Brian is still at the mercy of chance, even though he has carefully learned how to work with the natural world. Just as the plane crash was a freak accident, so too does this unexpected attack come from nowhere and demonstrate the inherent risk of being alive.*



*The word that Brian fixates on in this moment, “insane,” highlights the contrast between this episode and the rational balance that Brian has come to perceive throughout the wilderness. Brian thought that he had discovered the logical order of everything in nature, but the moose shows him that even in such an elegant system, random misfortune still occurs. Coming to terms with this kind of irrational pain is a crucial final step in Brian’s journey to grow through adversity.*



*The moose’s sudden departure shows again how quickly reality can shift, this time from dangerous to peaceful. The balanced natural world still exists, even after the intrusion of the sudden attack.*



*Brian’s immediate reaction to the attack demonstrates both how much he has matured since the start of the book and how much more growth remains ahead of him. He copes with the significant setback and feels grateful for what he has, but at the same time, he fixates on trying to understand what is essentially unexplainable, just as he did with his parents’ divorce at the book’s start.*



*The complete inevitability of the tornado heightens the intensity of the random dangers that Brian continues to face. In this case, he simply accepts that there is nothing he can do, rather than dwelling on the irrationality as he did with the moose attack. This reaction hints at the further growth that is yet to come.*



The tornado hits suddenly and throws Brian into the walls of his shelter, reinjuring his ribs and blowing coals from the fire onto him at the same time. Brian huddles in the shelter and hears the tornado rip away the wall of his shelter and all his tools, throwing them out into the lake. He thinks desperately that he wants to “stay and be,” wondering if he is praying. Brian opens his eyes to see the lake torn into waves by the tornado. Then, the tornado suddenly vanishes, tearing trees down as it leaves the lake. Brian realizes how quickly his sense of stability has vanished and thinks that he has lost everything. Without the fire to keep them away, the mosquitos swarm around him once again.

Lying awake, Brian slowly understands that this time, he feels able to survive his setbacks. He thinks that he is “tough where it counts—tough in the head,” and finds a new sense of resolve as he finally falls asleep. When he wakes up, his ribs hurt more than ever, but when he goes to drink from the lake he sees that some of his possessions, including the wall of his shelter and his bow, are scattered around the beach, broken but still useable. Then, he looks out at the lake and sees a bright yellow object sticking out of the water down the shoreline. He realizes that the object is the tail of the submerged plane. Thinking of the pilot sunken in the water, he walks along the shore to the plane and focuses his mind on the pilot, thinking: “Have rest.”

## CHAPTER 17

Brian returns to his campsite and surveys the damage. He begins rebuilding by starting a new fire, which comforts him and chases away the mosquitos. Although he has to move slowly because of the pain in his ribs, Brian soon succeeds in rebuilding a version of the wall of his shelter and even builds himself a bed out of pine branches. Brian again feels lucky to be alive, and that he was not injured more severely.

Lying by his fire, Brian plans to find food the next day and contemplates the sight of the plane’s tail sticking out of the water. Beginning to fall asleep, he suddenly realizes that the survival pack must still be inside the plane and imagines all of the “wonderful things” that must be in the pack. He falls into a “healing sleep” imagining exploring the plane the next day.

*As the tornado rips through his camp, any illusion that Brian had truly gained independent control over the natural world is stripped away. He can exist only in open connection with it, a fact that he seems to realize when he chooses the simple words “stay and be” as a kind of prayer. His sense of having lost everything echoes his feelings after the rescue plane missed him, but this time, his desire to go on living is clear and forceful, showing how much stronger he has grown in the intervening weeks.*



*Again, Brian demonstrates a new resilience and a thoughtful response to challenges, even in his most devastating situation yet. His concern for the pilot underscores this change, displaying Brian’s ability to think beyond himself and his own needs in a way that he was initially unable to. The revelation that the plane’s tail is above water is also the book’s most dramatic example of the gifts hidden within the challenges of the natural world. The tornado destroys the life that Brian had built, but it leaves him with the potential for even greater growth.*



*Here, Brian takes quick action to improve his situation, relying easily on the world around him to provide resources even when he himself is in pain. This shows a dramatic change from the isolating, self-pitying thought patterns that held him back earlier in the story. Similarly, Brian relies on the word “luck” even though he has lost so much, again showing how positive use of the right language can be a powerful tool for survival.*



*With the idea of the survival pack, Paulsen highlights how helpful the tornado might ultimately be for Brian, again showing the unexpected ways that seemingly negative occurrences can lead to positive results.*



In the morning, Brian's ribs feel much better, and he is happy to discover that the tail of the plane did not sink during the night. Although he is eager to begin exploring, he remembers what he has learned previously and knows that he has to eat before doing anything else. Brian sharpens a new fish spear and successfully catches several fish. After cooking and eating them, Brian decides that though still hungry, he is now strong enough to attempt exploring the plane.

Brian decides that the best way to explore the plane will be to build a floating raft to use as a solid base while investigating. He struggles at first to keep the logs for the raft together but, remembering that he is no longer the easily frustrated person he once was, he sits and contemplates the problem quietly. Then, Brian realizes that choosing logs with limbs attached will allow him to weave the limbs together and hold the logs side by side. Finally, late in the afternoon Brian finishes the roughly made raft and finds that it floats well in the lake.

Realizing that he will need a way to attach the raft to the plane, Brian tears his old windbreaker into strips to make a rope, then sets off pushing the raft through the water. He discovers that moving the raft is much harder than he expected and, although he is eager to continue, he decides to rest for the night and continue his project in the morning.

Watching the sun set that evening, Brian imagines what his mother and father are doing at that moment. He pictures his mother watching television and cooking, and then forces himself to pay attention to the sunset instead. Looking at all the details of the light, trees, and water, Brian finds the beauty "almost unbelievable" and wonders if, someday, he will be at home watching television and imagining the sunset. As night falls, he feels a slight chill in the air.

The next morning, the air is even colder. Bringing the **hatchet** with him, Brian goes out to his raft and slowly swims it over to the tail of plane, a process that takes more than two hours. Brian is exhausted when he arrives and wishes that he had taken the time to eat breakfast. Examining the tail close up, he finds a place to tie the raft and searches for an opening that he can use to get inside the plane. He sees that all of the openings are underwater and is unsure how to proceed. He thinks of the pilot's body still sitting in the cockpit, but feels unable to give up his chance at the survival pack.

*Brian's thoughtful planning and commitment to living by the rules he has established for himself shows just how much he has learned from living in the wilderness. Where he was once rash and careless, Brian is now methodical and closely attuned to his own needs, at last knowing himself as well as he has come to know the world around him. Through this sense of connection, Brian is now thriving rather than simply surviving.*



*Again, Brian demonstrates his new ability to confront problems calmly and approach adverse situations as lessons to be learned. As before, a close examination of natural resources yields an elegant solution, highlighting Brian's place within the balance of nature.*



*The difficulty of moving the raft reiterates how challenging Brian's situation still is, even though he has learned so much about how to thrive in the wilderness. This new obstacle hints at the reality that life never quite becomes easy, and that patient, sustained effort is the best path toward success.*



*For the first time in several chapters, Brian actively compares his life in the wilderness to his life back home in the city. Though he still misses his parents, he begins to acknowledge how crucial the natural world has become to him. Although he does not know he will soon be rescued, he seems to anticipate the lasting changes that he will bring with him when he returns home.*



*Brian's ability to revisit the plane with a sense of purpose and calm shows how far he has come in accepting the tragedy, although his forgetting to eat breakfast also demonstrates that his success in the wilderness is still somewhat fragile despite all his growth. Additionally, the chill in the air raises the prospect of a new challenge from nature, in the form of the coming winter.*



## CHAPTER 18

Brian continues to move around the tail of the plane on the raft, searching for openings. Frustrated at finding nothing, he punches the plane and is surprised to find that the aluminum exterior collapses under his hand. The outer shell of the plane turns out to be light and easy to break, so Brian uses the **hatchet** to cut away large pieces of the aluminum. Excited, Brian cuts more and more of the metal, but in his rush he suddenly drops the hatchet into the lake below.

Brian is horrified to see that the **hatchet** is gone, realizing that without it he has no means of making fire, tools, or weapons. He is unable to believe his own carelessness, thinking that only his old self would have done something so silly, but he is forced to accept that it is gone beneath the water. Although he does not know how deep the lake is, Brian decides that he must dive down and retrieve the hatchet.

Breathing as deeply as he can, Brian attempts to dive to the bottom of the lake. Even going as deep as he can, he is still several feet from the bottom. He surfaces and then tries again, kicking and paddling as hard as he can. This time, he touches the bottom and opens his eyes to search for the **hatchet**. Brian does not see the hatchet until he is almost out of air, but then he catches sight of it and just manages to grab the handle. He reaches the surface just before he runs out of air.

After recovering his breath, Brian returns to the raft and continues to use the **hatchet** to cut into the body of the plane. He makes a big enough hole to move partway inside, but sees nothing there. He realizes that he will have to go all the way inside to look for the pack. He continues cutting away the aluminum, saving the pieces of metal as he goes. Finally, he has cleared away most of the outside and can see the metal frame of the plane extending down into the water.

*This moment provides a very literal manifestation of the theme of finding opportunity within resistance. The plane seems solid, but it quickly gives way when Brian hits it, revealing easy access to the next step of Brian's goal. However, in his eagerness to proceed, Brian forgets to be careful and loses the hatchet, the greatest symbol of his strength and autonomy. This incident suggests that while initiative and self-reliance are important, caution and thoughtfulness remain just as essential.*



*Brian perceives the loss of the hatchet as a reemergence of his previous, less competent self. However, he also moves quickly past his moment of despair, showing how much he has actually changed from that previous self. This coexistence of growth and limitation within Brian reflects the balance of beauty and danger in the natural world itself.*



*The parallel between Brian and the natural world becomes even clearer here, as he must literally submerge himself in nature in order to regain his means of autonomy. Brian does succeed in getting the hatchet back, but only by giving himself up to lake. Again, Brian's search for independence leads inevitably to a more intense connection to the world around him.*



*Here, Brian hopes that using the hatchet will allow him to get the survival pack without going all the way inside the plane, but again, it becomes clear that immersing himself in the thing he fears will be the only way to get what he wants.*



Brian hesitates to go inside, worried that the plane could sink. However, he reasons that it has been stable for two days and [hasn't moved while he worked on it\[rw1\]](#), so he climbs into the water with his body inside the supports and cables of the plane's frame. Brian dives down feet-first several times, feeling for the survival pack, until he finally touches it with his foot. He dives down one more time, head first, and grabs the cloth bag. Eyes open, Brian catches sight of what was once the pilot's head, now a nearly bare skull with the flesh eaten away by fish. Horrified, Brian vomits in the water and barely manages to return to the surface with the survival pack.

Brian is overcome with fear for several minutes, trying to forget what he saw. Eventually, he can breathe again and hears the "peace sounds" of the birds and trees, which begin to calm him. Working slowly, Brian wriggles back out of the frame of the plane and pulls the cloth bag with him, though it gets stuck several times. Eventually, he gets it out onto the raft.

As evening falls, Brian pushes the raft back to shore, getting weaker and weaker as he goes. After he manages to move the survival kit onto the land, he spends hours dragging it down the shore back to his camp, fighting the mosquitos as he goes. At last, Brian arrives at his shelter and immediately falls asleep.

## CHAPTER 19

The next morning, Brian unpacks the survival pack and marvels at the "unbelievable riches" it contains. He finds sleeping materials, cooking supplies, matches and lighters, and even a sharp knife. He continues to go through what he thinks of as "the presents" and discovers a fishing kit as well as a survival [rifle](#).

*As Brian gains access to the inside of the plane, the natural world comes together with a relic of the civilized world. The water and the plane both block Brian's way to the survival pack, symbolizing his continuing need to confront the harsh realities of both his home life and his life in the wilderness. The gruesome sight of the pilot's head brings this reality into even sharper focus. The tragedy of the pilot's death and the crash continues to hang over Brian, and he feels the agony of it even after all of his successful survival. This episode indicates that emotional growth is an ongoing process, and something that Brian will need to continue even away from the wilderness.*



*Here, nature explicitly provides Brian with support and comfort, simply through its existence. Knowing that the peaceful balance of nature is still there allows Brian to continue his difficult task. The comfort he draws from basic existence of nature hints at the way Brian will continue to rely on his memories of the lake after returning home.*



*This final stretch emphasizes that the mission to get the survival pack has been one of Brian's greatest challenges yet. The intensity of the difficulty he faces makes the rewards he finds in the pack all the more meaningful.*



*The riches of the survival pack make it clear that Brian's extensive efforts to retrieve it were well worthwhile, highlighting the relationship between a methodical approach to challenges and the rewards that can result. Furthermore, Brian's choice to think of the supplies as "presents" shows again how effectively he has harnessed his use of words to frame his circumstances in the most positive way possible.*



Brian assembles the **rifle** and immediately notices how strange it makes him feel. He realizes that the power it gives him means that he doesn't have to understand the wilderness, since he can hunt and survive without knowing anything about the plants and animals around him. Brian sets the rifle aside, disliking the change, and then tries making a fire with one of the lighters. The fire catches easily, which again gives him the sense of being removed from connection with his surroundings. Brian reflects that although it is full of treasures, the pack gives him "up and down feelings."

Returning to the pack, Brian finds an electronic device with a long antenna and a switch. He flicks the switch and when nothing happens, he assumes it is broken and sets it aside. He moves on to the other items in the pack, finding soap and scissors and imagining how good it will feel to bathe in the lake.

Finally, Brian looks through the packets of freeze-dried food in the survival kit. There are dozens of packets, with so much variety that Brian feels he could continue living in the wilderness as long as necessary. He decides that he will ration carefully but first wants to make a feast, so he chooses enough packets for an enormous meal and starts cooking them over the fire. While the food cooks, Brian tastes a sweet drink packet and enjoys the smells of the food, thinking of his mother's kitchen at home.

Suddenly, Brian hears an unfamiliar noise, and moments later, a bush plane with floats lands on the lake right in front of him. Brian cannot at first comprehend what he is seeing as he watches the plane's pilot appear from the cockpit. Disbelieving, the man asks if Brian is the missing kid who vanished two months ago. Brian feels for a moment that he cannot speak, but then he recovers, tells the man his name, and offers him something to eat from the feast he is cooking.

## EPILOGUE

Brian learns that the pilot who rescued him was a fur buyer attracted by the emergency transmitter that Brian had assumed was broken and unknowingly left on. Brian had been alone for 54 days when he was rescued. He had lost a large percentage of his body weight, and his mind changed even more significantly. Brian feels that he is much more observant and thoughtful than he was before his ordeal. He also marvels constantly at how easy it is to get a variety of food back in the civilized world.

*Brian's apprehension upon discovering the rifle and the lighter provides a new perspective on the theme of the importance of connection. Even though the rifle makes Brian more powerful as an individual, it takes away his necessary connection to the natural world, which makes him feel weaker and more ignorant. At this point, Brian accepts the knowledge that full independence is not as powerful as a balanced, interconnected relationship with the rest of the world.*



*Brian's focus on how to use the items he finds, rather than on how he might escape the wilderness, shows how comfortably integrated into nature he has become. While he is happy to have human objects like soap and scissors, he thinks of them in terms of how he will use them in the natural setting where he now feels at home.*



*The abundance that Brian finds in the food packets makes it clear that he no longer has any need to be rescued in order to survive. At this point, Brian is able to live fully in the wilderness, having overcome despair in the face of a variety of setbacks. He also refers to the food as a "feast," demonstrating his commitment to viewing what he has with joy and excitement rather than dwelling on what he lacks.*



*Brian's ability to offer the man food underscores how well he has learned to thrive in the wilderness. Unlike the earlier rescue plane, this one arrives when Brian has fully integrated the lessons of the wilderness into his life, hinting that this growth was in some way necessary for his eventual rescue. It is also significant that Brian's first words to the man are his own name, again linking the idea of self-definition to the idea of salvation.*



*The continued changes that Brian perceives in himself after returning home show just how profoundly time in nature can increase a person's ability to approach life with care and sensitivity. Brian's changed body also suggests that his experiences have stripped away anything unnecessary, hinting at Paulsen's argument that urban life is full of unhelpful distractions.*



Curious about the plants and animals he encountered in the wilderness, such as the gut cherries and foolbirds, Brian researches them to find out their real names and more about them. He also continues to dream of the lake and the woods for a long time after he is rescued but the dreams are “never bad.” The government sends a team to recover the pilot’s body, and reporters photograph the campsite. Seeing those pictures often jogs Brian’s memory and triggers the dreams. Brian is interviewed several times about his experience, but eventually the public interest in his story dies down. Had Brian not been rescued when he was, it would have been difficult for him to survive the coming winter.

While Brian’s mother and father are overjoyed to find him alive, they do not get back together, and Brian’s life quickly returns to normal. He goes on living in the city with his mother, who still sees the man in the station wagon, and Brian eventually visits his father in Canada. Although he is tempted to do so, Brian does not tell his father about the Secret.

*Brian's dreams of the lake and the woods demonstrate that despite all the hardships he faced, the effects of his time in the wilderness are overwhelmingly linked with peace and positivity. His instinct to learn the correct words for the plants and animals he encountered touches again on the idea of the power of definitions, and it seems that Brian may gain an even deeper understanding of what he experienced by learning, in retrospect, to name it.*



*The lack of emotion surrounding Brian's parents' divorce marks a profound shift from the start of the book. What was once devastating to Brian is now a simple fact, and his life continues normally where normalcy had once seemed impossible. It seems that Brian's growth during his adventure gives him the maturity and fortitude to face even this significant challenge with calm.*





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