

Long Way Down



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JASON REYNOLDS

Reynolds grew up in Oxon Hill, Maryland, an unincorporated suburb of Washington, D.C. While a young student, Reynolds grew frustrated by what his teachers assigned him to read—he found that he couldn't identify with the characters or get interested in books that seemed to have little to do with his lived experience. Because of this, he didn't read a novel until he was 17. Two things began to turn Reynolds onto literature and poetry: rap music in the form of Queen Latifah's album *Black Rain* as a young kid, and Richard Wright's novel [Black Boy](#) as an older teen. Inspired by Queen Latifah, Reynolds wrote poetry all through his teen years and through college, even as he failed English classes. His first novel, co-written with Jason Griffin, was a critical and financial failure, so Reynolds took a job managing a Rag and Bone clothing store and contemplated giving up on writing. A friend, however, encouraged Reynolds to write in his own voice. The result was *When I Was the Greatest*. Since then, Reynolds has written several other young adult novels, mostly about young black characters living in neighborhoods that resemble the one where he grew up. His goal is to help improve literacy rates, and specifically, to help convert “book-haters” by writing books that he would've been interested in as a young person.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Long Way Down was inspired by Reynolds's experiences working with incarcerated youth, whose fates, he acknowledges, could've easily been his own. When Reynolds was 19, one of his best friends was murdered on the street. In interviews, he's spoken candidly about the fact that he and his other friends were angry enough to go out, hunt down, and kill the person they believed was their friend's killer, but their deceased friend's mother talked them down: she insisted that no other mothers needed to feel the way that she did. *Long Way Down*, then, speaks to the culture of loyalty, revenge, and violence that exists in some American neighborhoods, especially those with gang violence or drug activity. Though the novel doesn't pay as much attention to the role of the police in these situations, it does make the distrust between police and black communities clear. The novel also gestures to the long-term effects of the crack epidemic of the 1980s: Uncle Mark would've been dealing sometime in the late 1990s or early 2000s, after the height of the epidemic but at a time when demand for the drug was still high.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Reynolds has been upfront about the purpose of his books: to speak to young readers who don't often see themselves represented in book characters. Because of this, most of his books—including *When I Was the Greatest*, *The Boy in the Black Suit*, and *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*—follow young black characters experiencing things that Reynolds experienced as a young person, and that other kids of color still experience today. Reynolds also aims to make his books easy and quick to read—he believes that reluctant readers can more easily feel successful and get through a novel if there aren't too many words on each page. In this sense, *Long Way Down* shares similarities with other verse novels such as those by Kwame Alexander ([The Crossover](#); *Swing*) and [Brown Girl Dreaming](#) by Jacqueline Woodson. Another genre that Reynolds has said does much the same thing is graphic novels, such as Gene Luen Yang's [American Born Chinese](#) and [Persepolis](#) by Marjane Satrapi. As inspirations for his writing more generally, Reynolds has listed [Black Boy](#) by Richard Wright as the novel that sparked his love of literature and spurred him to discover other African American authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston ([Their Eyes Were Watching God](#)), Toni Morrison ([Beloved](#); [Song of Solomon](#)) and James Baldwin ([Go Tell it On the Mountain](#); [If Beale Street Could Talk](#)).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Long Way Down
- **When Written:** 2016-2017
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Verse Novel; Issue Novel
- **Setting:** An unnamed, urban American neighborhood
- **Climax:** Shawn's ghost gets on the elevator.
- **Antagonist:** Violence; The Rules
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Multitasking. Some of Reynold's first successful works were partially written during slow times at the Rag and Bone store he managed.

Spin a Yarn. Though Reynolds has said he no longer crochets to unwind, he used to be an avid crochet hobbyist. Crochet, he's said, taught him the value of going slowly and taking life one step—or one stitch—at a time.



PLOT SUMMARY

Will introduces himself to the reader and swears that his story is true, though he understands if the reader doesn't believe it. He asks the reader to call him Will, like everyone else does. Only his mother calls him William, and his brother Shawn used to too, when he was trying to be funny—but last night, Shawn was killed. Will says that no matter what he doesn't or doesn't have in common with the reader, it's still horribly painful to see a loved one's blood outside of their body.

Though Will is disoriented and sad about Shawn's death, he isn't exactly surprised. When it happens, Will and his friend Tony are outside, wondering if they'll grow taller now that they're 15. Suddenly, gunshots ring out and they get down like they're supposed to. When they stand up, Will sees that Shawn is dead. He died fetching special soap for their mother's eczema. Shawn's girlfriend, Leticia, kisses him and shrieks, while Will and Shawn's mother moans. When the police arrive, a young officer seems to legitimately expect answers, but Will insists that when someone dies in his neighborhood, everyone pretends to be deaf and blind. The police put up yellow tape, zip Shawn into a body bag, and take him away. Will explains that in his neighborhood, "beef" gets passed around. It never does anything good, and it's what killed Shawn. Back in their eighth-floor apartment, Will's mother sobs while Will hides in his room. He tries hard to hold back tears, since "the Rules" of the neighborhood say that he shouldn't cry. The other two Rules are no snitching, and always seek revenge—this means that if a loved one is killed, you must kill their killer. Nobody can break the Rules.

Will describes his bedroom he shared with Shawn. Shawn's half is neat, while Will's is messy. The only thing amiss on Shawn's side is the **middle drawer** of his dresser, which contains his **gun**. Shawn wasn't an angelic person; once he turned 18, their mother stopped trying to control him. However, he was Will's favorite and only brother. He let Will start using his cologne when Will turned 13. The morning after Shawn's death, Will digs into the middle drawer and fishes out the gun. It feels about as heavy as an infant, and Will knows that with it, he can follow Rule No. 3 and take down Carlson Riggs, a former friend of Shawn's whom he believes is also Shawn's killer. Will lays out his evidence for why Riggs killed Shawn: Riggs was a member of the Dark Suns, a gang whose territory included the shop where Shawn had to buy the special soap. Will also just *knows* Riggs did it—he's had lots of practice identifying bad guys from watching crime shows. The next morning, Will pulls the gun out and feels close to Shawn as he grips it. Will tucks the gun into the back of his waistband. His plan is to go early to Riggs's apartment so he can "do it." He creeps past his mother and out of the apartment, calls the **elevator**, and presses the **L button**.

On the seventh floor, a man gets on and checks that the L button is lit up. Will remembers how he and Shawn used to

giggle that "L" meant anyone going to the lobby was a loser, and Will thinks that he's already chosen to be a loser. The man starts to look oddly at Will, and finally he turns around and shows Will his T-shirt, which has a photo of the man and a caption memorializing his own death. The man is Buck, and he's supposed to be dead. Will tries to wake himself up from what he thinks is a dream and deliberates about whether he should be scared or not. Buck was Shawn's mentor after Pop, the boys' father, died. Will wonders if Buck has come to "steal his breath," but Buck says he came to check on his gun. Will tries to adopt a tough stance and listens to Buck explain that he gave the gun to Shawn and told Shawn to keep the gun away from Will. Will announces that he found it anyway, and that he needs it to avenge Shawn's death and follow the Rules, just like Buck would've done. When Will nervously grumbles about the slow elevator, Buck quips that it's a long way down and laughs at Will's insistence that he has work to do. Buck says Will doesn't have it in him, and asks if he checked that the gun is loaded. Will almost shoots himself trying to check, so Buck takes the gun and announces that there are 15 bullets in it. There are supposed to be 16. Buck lights a cigarette and the elevator stops.

On the sixth floor, a beautiful young woman gets in. Will tries to check her out, but the gun digs into his back and makes him wince. The girl scolds Buck for smoking in the elevator and then asks Will why he has a gun. Will is disturbed—the girl can see Buck's ghost and somehow knows Will has a gun. Trying to play it cool, Will says he's not going to talk to a stranger about this, but the girl says she's *not* a stranger: she's known Will for a long time. She opens her purse and shows Will a photo of himself and his friend Dani when they were eight years old, on the day Dani died. He realizes the girl in front of him is Dani's ghost, and says that the day in the photo was the best and worst day of his life. They were playing on the playground when someone started firing gunshots around them, and Will watched Dani get shot and bleed to death while Shawn tried to shield them from the bullets. Will cried all night. The next morning, Shawn taught him the first Rule (no crying). When Will tried to follow it, he wanted to punch something. Now, in the elevator, Dani again asks Will why he needs the gun, and Will says he's going after Riggs. He explains the Rules to Dani so she doesn't think he's being violent for no reason. When she asks what happens if he misses, Will insists he won't. Dani then accepts a cigarette from Buck, which Buck lights as the elevator grinds to a stop.

The cigarette smoke seems to box Will in, and he figures that whoever's waiting to get on won't get into this crowded, smoky elevator. However, big hands reach into the elevator and grab Will's neck. Will yelps, leaps back, and reaches for his gun. He sees that the hands belong to the ghost of Uncle Mark, whom Will recognizes from the many photos of Mark around his house. Uncle Mark extremely tall and impeccably dressed, and he emotionally tells Will that he looks just like Pop. Uncle Mark

was an aspiring filmmaker in life and wanted to make a movie based off of Pop and Will's mother's love story. When Will asks why Uncle Mark is here, Uncle Mark slowly asks the same question of Will and then menacingly forces him to answer. Will says he's following the Rules, just like Uncle Mark would've. Uncle Mark walks Will through the "scene" of killing Riggs, but when they get to the point of Will pulling the trigger, Will struggles to say it. Will tells the reader that Uncle Mark died after he lost his video camera and started dealing drugs to get money for a new one. It was lucrative for a few months until a young kid killed him. Uncle Mark asks Will what happens after he shoots, but Will insists that's the end. With a chuckle, Uncle Mark lights a cigarette and says that's never the end. The elevator stops again.

The ghost of Pop steps in on the fourth floor and immediately envelops Will in a hug. Pop died when Will was three, so Will doesn't remember anything about him. According to his mother, Pop died of a broken heart after Uncle Mark died, but according to Shawn he was killed at a payphone after killing Uncle Mark's killer. At that point, then-16-year-old Buck took Shawn under his wing. In the elevator, Pop and Will start to make small talk. Though Will wants to tell Pop everything, he doesn't—he doesn't want to look weak in front of the other ghosts. He vows not to cry, and when Pop asks Will what Will thinks he should do, Will says he should follow the Rules just like Pop did. This worries Pop, and he asks Will if Will has ever heard his story. Pop explains that he was broken when Uncle Mark died, and he followed the Rules. He killed the man he knew killed Uncle Mark, but couldn't sleep that night or touch his wife, Will, or Shawn. Will insists that Pop just did what he was supposed to do, but Pop says that's not true: he killed the wrong guy, even though he believed he had the right man. Hearing this, Will is disappointed that his father isn't the man he thought he was. He also wonders if he's disappointing Pop right now. Pop steps forward and pulls Will into a hug again. Will feels both confused and comforted until Pop grabs Will's gun and puts it to Will's head. Will shrieks for help, but the smoke blocks out everyone else in the elevator. After Will wets himself in fear, Pop removes the gun away and gives it back to Will. Uncle Mark offers Pop a cigarette, and when Buck lights it, the elevator stops.

A light-skinned stranger gets on and doesn't acknowledge anyone, so Will thinks he must be alive and real. Buck, however, approaches the stranger and shows the man the back of his T-shirt. They embrace happily, and Buck introduces the man as Frick, his killer. Will is shocked, especially when Buck asks if Shawn never shared this story. Will thinks that Shawn didn't, but he remembers Shawn saying that he knew who killed Buck and watching Shawn load his gun. Buck says that one day, he was with Shawn at the basketball court. Shawn was talking about an old friend who's now a Dark Sun, and who tried to get Shawn to stop buying the special soap for his mother in Dark

Suns territory. Will knows Shawn was talking about Riggs. Buck explains that as they talked, he tried to show Shawn a gold chain he'd just stolen from a suburban kid. He gave the chain to Shawn to cheer him up, and Shawn left the court. Will explains how to become a Dark Sun: one must acquire a cigarette burn under the right eye, live nine blocks from Will's building, and perform a "Dark Deed," which can be robbing, beating, or killing someone. Frick pipes up and says that he was supposed to rob Buck as his Dark Deed, but when he approached Buck, Buck just laughed. When Buck then swiped at Frick, Frick got scared and shot him. Will asks what any of this has to do with Shawn, and Frick replies that Shawn followed the Rules. He pulls down his shirt to reveal a bloody bullet hole, and Buck explains that Shawn found out who Frick was from Tony, who spends his days at the basketball court talking about everything to make himself seem cool. Turning to Will, Buck asks how he knows Riggs killed Shawn. Will says it makes sense: Riggs avenged Frick's death. Frick, however, doesn't know who Riggs is. He lights his own cigarette and the elevator stops.

Nobody is there when the elevator doors open. Will is getting impatient and thinks the elevator feels like a coffin. When the doors are almost closed, fingers stop them and they open again to reveal Shawn, wearing the blood-soaked clothes he died in. Shawn steps in, warmly greets the other ghosts, and then turns to face Will. Will hugs Shawn, but Shawn just stands there awkwardly. Will tells Shawn everything and says he's trying to follow the Rules and kill Riggs. He confesses that he's scared, and wants Shawn to tell him if he's doing the right thing. Shawn starts to cry. Will tells Shawn that the first rule is that they can't cry, and looks away so that he doesn't start crying. But Will realizes that he doesn't love Shawn any less because he's crying—he's still Will's favorite and only brother. Shawn makes a pained, grinding sound as the elevator reaches the lobby. The doors open and all the ghosts step out after the smoke. Will stands in the elevator, wet, tear-stained, and afraid. Shawn turns around and asks Will if he's coming.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

William (Will) Holloman – The 15-year-old protagonist and narrator of the novel—the story is told through poems in Will's voice. Will is sensitive, perceptive, and loves language,—but he also desperately wants to grow up and be a man like his dad, Pop; his Uncle Mark; and his big brother, Shawn, all of whom died because they followed the neighborhood "Rules" of revenge killing. The Rules state that when a person's loved one is killed, the person must find the killer and avenge the love one's death. As Shawn was killed in a gang-related the night before the novel begins, Will is intent on following the Rules and killing Carlson Riggs, the man he believes killed Shawn. Will believes that doing this is the only way he'll be able to express

his love and loyalty, as well as deal with his overwhelming grief. Despite Will's posturing, he's nevertheless disturbed by the **gun** he takes from Shawn's **drawer** and the thought of what he's going to do with it. On Will's **elevator** ride down to the lobby of his apartment building, ghosts of family members and friends who were killed by gun violence join him. Collectively, they force Will to question the morality of his plan. Though Will tries to maintain his resolve and act as overtly masculine as possible, everything the ghosts do makes Will feel like a child. The ghost of Buck, Shawn's mentor, forces Will to reckon with the fact that he knows nothing about guns, while the ghost of Uncle Mark makes Will say out loud that he's going to kill someone—something that Will can barely squeak out. Most importantly, however, is what Pop tells Will: that when he tried to avenge Uncle Mark's murder, he got the wrong guy. Further, when the ghost of Frick (the man Shawn killed) gets on the elevator and doesn't know of Riggs, Will has to contend with the possibility that he, too, is going to make a mistake by shooting the wrong person. This concern is echoed by the ghost of Will's childhood friend, Dani, who was accidentally killed in a shooting at eight years old. Though Will clings tightly to the Rules and insists they can't be broken, he begins to reevaluate this when Shawn gets on the elevator and begins to cry, and Will realizes that he doesn't love Shawn less for breaking the "no crying" rule. While the novel ends ambiguously before Will exits the elevator, this revelation leaves open the possibility that Will chooses to not follow through with killing Riggs.

Shawn Holloman – Will's older brother. Shawn is about 19 or 20 at the time of his death in a gang-related incident the day before the novel begins. Will idolizes Shawn, as he was Will's only brother and his beloved mentor. Shawn was cool and considered the king of the neighborhood, since he could do both backflips and Penny Drops (a monkey bars trick). To Will, Shawn always seemed extremely mature—years ago, Shawn took Will's preteen attempts to look cool seriously and coached him on how to be a man. From the time of the boys' father, Pop's, death when Shawn was seven and Will was three, Shawn took over as a kind of stand-in father figure for Will. Shawn's own mentor was a man named Buck, who took Shawn under his wing after Pop died and taught him everything he knew—including how to use his **gun**. Despite Will's idolization, he allows that Shawn had a dark side. After Shawn turned 18, he became even wilder than he was as a minor. Though Shawn kept his side of the room tidy, Will suggests that the **middle drawer** of Shawn's dresser (which seemed broken on purpose) represented the dark streak that ran through the otherwise kind and loving Shawn. After killing a man named Frick, Shawn was shot on the street coming home from fetching his mother special soap for her eczema, presumably by whomever was trying to avenge Frick's death. Because Shawn passed "the Rules" of the neighborhood down to Will, Will knows he's expected to avenge Shawn's death by killing Carlson Riggs (who

he believes killed Shawn) using Shawn's gun hidden in the middle drawer. On Will's way down to the apartment building lobby, he is very confused when Shawn's ghost gets on the **elevator** at the second floor and greets all the other ghosts warmly, but won't speak to Will or answer any of Will's questions about what he should do. To make matters worse, Shawn cries—something he shouldn't do per the Rules. Will realizes that he doesn't love Shawn less because of this, however. The only thing Shawn says to Will is to ask whether or not Will is going to follow the ghosts out of the elevator at the end of the novel.

Buck – Buck was Shawn's mentor after Pop died. He's tall and slim, has no facial hair, and wears gold chains around his neck. When Will meets Buck's ghost in the **elevator**, Buck is wearing a T-shirt commemorating his own death. Though his real name was James, he acquired the nickname Buck because he couldn't grow any facial hair as a young man. As far as Will knows, Buck never went by anything else—the only time Will ever saw Buck's given name was on his headstone. Buck was raised in a difficult family situation: his father was plagued by the "nighttime" (a kind of inner darkness or dangerous streak) while his stepfather was a preacher and tried to get Buck on the right path. This attempt failed, however, and Will wonders if the "nighttime" is something Buck couldn't escape. Following Pop's death when Buck was 16, Buck took Shawn under his wing, ceased selling drugs, and instead started to rob suburban houses. This earned him a reputation as a skilled thief who always had expensive stolen items in his possession. As a mentor to Shawn, Buck passed along "the Rules" of the neighborhood and taught him how to handle his **gun**. Will recognizes that all of Shawn's advice about girls also came straight from Buck. Buck was killed when a man named Frick attempted to rob him. Around the time of his death, he passed his gun down to Shawn, along with the chain that Shawn was wearing when he died. In death, Buck is a jokester and doesn't take Will's desire for revenge seriously. He heckles and teases Will, though this comes off as an attempt to get Will to reconsider his choices. In Buck's serious moments, he also attempts to make very clear to Will how the neighborhood's cycle of violence functions and continues. He does so by drawing clear connections between himself, Frick, Shawn, Will, and Carlson Riggs (whom Will plans to kill to avenge Shawn's death). Buck is also the first to begin smoking in the elevator and provides cigarettes to most of the other ghostly elevator passengers.

Pop – Will and Shawn's father who died when Will was three years old and Shawn was seven. In life, Pop was a romantic and a jokester, though he started out life as an extremely uncool kid. It wasn't until he met Will's mother and she taught him how to woo women that he became the suave and accomplished adult Will has heard about (though he doesn't remember Pop himself). Pop and his older brother, Will and Shawn's Uncle

Mark, were extremely close; Uncle Mark mentored Pop and taught him “the Rules” of the neighborhood. Because of this, when someone killed Uncle Mark, Pop felt compelled to follow through on the third rule and kill Uncle Mark’s killer. Will grows up thinking that Pop was successful in this endeavor and was then killed at a payphone not long after. However, when Pop’s ghost joins Will in the **elevator** and expands on this story, he tells Will a more complete and truthful version. Pop goes to great lengths to draw out the similarities between what he did and what Will plans to do by avenging Shawn’s death and killing Carlson Riggs (Shawn’s supposed killer). Specifically, Pop notes that he *thought* he knew who killed Uncle Mark—but it turned out he *didn’t* know and ended up killing the wrong man. As Pop tells this story, he cries a bit, and the combination of Pop’s tears and his admitted mistake makes Will disappointed in his father. Though the two embrace and Will seems genuinely interested in making sense of these additions to his Pop’s story, Will is caught off guard when Pop suddenly pulls Will’s **gun** out and puts it to Will’s head—only removing it after Will is afraid to the point of wetting himself. Though Pop never explains his reasoning for doing, it’s likely that he wants to make the point to Will of how utterly terrifying it is to find oneself in that position—something that might stir up Will’s sense of empathy and change his mind about killing Riggs. Following this incident, Pop’s ghost says little to Will for the rest of the elevator ride, and Will acts uninterested in trying to get close to Pop again.

Will’s Mother – Will and Shawn’s mother, and Pop’s widow. She isn’t a particularly prevalent character in the novel—when Will talks about his mother, he focuses mainly on her grief over losing Shawn, which is all-consuming. He also talks about how his mother never had much say in what Pop, Shawn, and Will did, and instead must simply suffer the consequences of their choices. She suffers from eczema, an autoimmune skin condition that results in red, flaky skin, and (in her severe case) blisters. It’s itchy and painful, and Will suggests that his mom scratches in part as an outlet for her grief. Will’s mom and Pop met when they were young and had a dramatic and wildly romantic start to their relationship. However, Will’s mom was left on her own with three-year-old Will and seven-year-old Shawn when Pop was shot and killed. Will’s mother doesn’t seem to focus much on the particulars of the drama that Will suggests existed in Pop and Shawn’s life; she claims she can’t even remember the name of the man who shot Will’s and Shawn’s Uncle Mark. When it came to Shawn, Will’s mother knew she couldn’t control him. Following his 18th birthday, she stopped trying, and instead started praying that he’d live and wouldn’t get his girlfriend, Leticia, pregnant. She also formulated the idea of the “nighttime,” which she never fully explains to Will but which he interprets as the violence and danger that exists within men like Pop, Shawn, and Buck. Will and Shawn both seem to genuinely care for their mother—prior to his death, Shawn took dangerous trips into the Dark Suns gang’s territory to get her special soap. It pains Will to know

that by going after Carlson Riggs (who he believes killed Shawn), he’ll break his mother’s heart. In Will’s understanding, however, it’s not okay to prioritize his mom’s pain or emotions over following their community’s “Rules” of revenge.

Uncle Mark – Uncle Mark was Will and Shawn’s uncle and Pop’s brother, who died sometime when Will was a toddler. As Pop’s older brother, Uncle Mark was the one to pass on “the Rules” of the neighborhood to Pop. Mark was an extraordinarily tall man who was always impeccably dressed in suits, dress shoes, and jewelry, with a cigarette tucked behind his ear. There are lots of photos of Uncle Mark around Will’s house, and Will has heard several stories about his uncle—so in some ways, it feels like he knows Uncle Mark when Mark’s ghost shows up in the **elevator** on Will’s way down to his apartment building’s lobby. In life, Uncle Mark was an aspiring filmmaker. He filmed everything on a camera he received for his birthday, but his dream was to make a movie based on Pop and Will’s mother’s dramatic and romantic early relationship. Though Mark started to film, he lost his camera before he could finish. To make the money for a new camera, he began selling drugs. This led to Mark being shot to death a few months later. Will shares that Uncle Mark wasn’t one to get a job or steal (stealing would require running, which might make him sweat or muss his clothes), so dealing drugs seemed like his best option. As a ghost, Uncle Mark plays the role of both a roughhousing peer and a somewhat scary authority figure. He menacingly makes Will tell the truth about his plan to avenge Shawn’s own shooting death, and then forces Will to walk through the “scene” of killing Carlson Riggs (who Will believes killed Shawn). Doing so exposes the cracks in Will’s resolve. Later, the ghost of Uncle Mark helps the ghost of Pop explain what went wrong when Pop tried to follow the Rules and avenge Uncle Mark’s death.

Carlson Riggs – Shawn’s former friend, who Will thinks murdered Shawn. Will believes this because Riggs recently moved and joined a rival gang, the Dark Suns, and Shawn was killed in Dark Suns territory while on an errand to buy his mother special soap for her eczema. Riggs is short and handsome. Will says that when Riggs was young, he was “as soft as his first name,” but also a loudmouth. His mom made him take gymnastics as a kid, which Will insists is why Riggs became so violent and got involved with gangs as an adult—wearing tights and doing cartwheels meant Riggs needed to defend himself for being unmanly according to the neighborhood’s standards. Riggs’s gymnastics background allowed him to teach Shawn how to do a Penny Drop, a flip off of a monkey bar. The Penny Drop was something that made Will feel connected to both Shawn and to Riggs, which now makes the prospect of killing Riggs somewhat more difficult for Will. Despite Will’s firm belief that Riggs killed Shawn, there’s little hard evidence for this—the ghost of Frick (the man who, in theory, Riggs avenged by killing Shawn) doesn’t recognize Riggs’s description. Riggs

himself never appears in the novel and it remains ambiguous as to whether Will will follow through with killing Riggs or abandon his plan.

Dani – Dani was Will’s childhood best friend until she was accidentally killed at eight years old in a revenge shooting gone wrong. The ghost of Dani gets on the **elevator** with Will on the sixth floor—her ghost has grown up to be about Will’s age but wears an adult version of the dress she was wearing when she died. Will describes her as beautiful and considers flirting with her until he realizes who she is. Dani is a sharp, no-nonsense rule-follower, so she scolds Buck for smoking and Will for having a **gun** when she first gets on. She pushes Will to think about the possible unintended consequences of killing Carlson Riggs. In particular, she’s interested to know what Will will do if he misses, prompting him to think about the possibility that he could accidentally kill another child like Dani. As the elevator gets to the fifth floor, Dani accepts Buck’s proffered cigarette and starts to smoke, something that Will suggests would’ve been out of character for the Dani he knew. Dani says little else for the rest of the ride and gets out at the lobby with everyone else.

Frick – Frick was shot and killed by Shawn in retaliation for Frick killing Buck. And, if Will’s assumptions are correct, Frick may be the man whom Carlson Riggs was avenging by killing Shawn—though there’s little evidence to suggest that Riggs killed Shawn or that Frick even knew Riggs. Frick is a heavyset man with light skin and a mop of curly brown hair. Frick’s ghost gets on the **elevator** at the third floor, and he and Buck tell Frick’s story together. Frick seems like a generally kind and soft man who wanted to be seen as tough, which is why he got involved with the Dark Suns gang. His “Dark Deed” of initiation was to rob Buck, but when Buck laughed at Frick, Frick got scared and shot him. Though Frick plays along and is happy to tell Will his story, he’s far less interested in actually acknowledging or getting to know the other ghosts in the elevator. He still seems to resent that he was never initiated into the Dark Suns before his death at Shawn’s hands. Frick’s ghost horrifies Will by showing him the gunshot wound that Shawn gave him.

Tony – One of Will’s best friends. Tony is a great basketball player despite being very short. Because of this, he practices his jumps and hopes that his growth spurt will come soon. Tony spends much of his time on the local basketball court talking about everything and anything—including things that, Will implies, could be considered violations of the second “Rule” of their neighborhood: “no snitching.” However, Will is loyal to Tony and doesn’t believe he’s really breaking the Rules, since Tony only talks to make himself seem tougher and more important—he’s not “snitching” to the police.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Leticia – Shawn’s girlfriend. She’s distraught when Shawn dies.

Marcus Andrews – The neighborhood “know-it-all” whom the police question at the scene of Shawn’s death. Marcus tells the police he didn’t see anything.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LOYALTY AND REVENGE

Long Way Down tells the story of Will, a 15-year-old boy riding the **elevator** in his apartment building down to the lobby. This is only the first part of Will’s journey—once he reaches the lobby, his plan is to avenge the death of his older brother, Shawn, who was shot the night before in what was likely a gang-related incident. Over the course of the minute in which Will is in the elevator, ghosts of other people (many of them family members) who died as a result of similar violent incidents join Will. As the other elevator occupants gradually expand Will’s understanding of the events leading up to Shawn’s death, the novel makes it clear that loyalty and love motivated all of these killings. But it also suggests that such emotions, and the violent actions that Will and others like him want to take as an expression of that loyalty, have irrevocable consequences for all parties involved. *Long Way Down* suggests that while love for and loyalty to one’s family (whether biological or chosen) can be admirable, these convictions can also manifest violently—something the novel suggests is an incredibly dangerous and unacceptable way of defending loved ones.

Given the way in which Will talks about his loved ones (especially his male family members), it’s easy to see that his family is fractured. Will’s father, Pop, was killed when Will was a toddler—as much as Will wants to remember Pop, he doesn’t. The same goes for Buck, Shawn’s mentor who died a few years ago, as well as for Uncle Martin, who was killed before Will was born. The family Will has left then, is his mother and, until the day before the novel begins, his big brother Shawn. In the absence of a biological father or stand-in father figure, Shawn played the most important role in Will’s life, showing him how he needed to behave and teaching him how the world works, just as Buck did for Shawn. This multifaceted relationship—Shawn was, in many ways, a brother, a mentor, and a father figure to Will—means that Shawn and Will were extremely close. While it’s important to not diminish the importance of the relationship between Will and Shawn (Shawn is the reason Will plans to kill someone, after all), the fact that it was just the two of them and their mother speaks to the

fractured nature of families in Will's community, which partially explains the importance of loyalty to that community.

Shawn introduced Will to the concept of loyalty by introducing him to "the Rules," which are three rules that govern life in their neighborhood. The Rules are simple: no crying, no snitching (to the police), and if a friend or family member is killed, the survivor must avenge their loved one's death by killing their killer. Loyalty, in this sense, is the very reason families in Will's community are fractured in the first place—Will suggests that if someone *doesn't* avenge their loved one's death, they're considered disloyal and effectively betray their loved one's memory by doing nothing. Because of this, Will thinks he has no choice but to kill Carlson Riggs, the man who he believes killed Shawn. By not doing so, Will would be labeled by his community as a coward, in addition to the trauma of losing his brother. Will knows, however, that seeking revenge will seriously hurt his mom—now his only living family member. Therefore, the very fact that Will is still willing to arm himself and avenge Shawn's death suggests that Will prioritizes his loyalty to the dead over his loyalty to the living, even if the living will be the ones who get hurt.

In the elevator, Will comes face to face with the ghosts of Buck, Pop, his Uncle Mark, Shawn, and Dani, a childhood friend who was accidentally shot and killed as an eight-year-old. Additionally, Will meets the ghost of a man named Frick, who Will is shocked to discover murdered Buck. Though Pop, Uncle Mark, Shawn, and Frick all died in the process of following the Rules and exacting revenge (and the novel implies that Dani's death was also the result of a revenge killing gone awry), all of them suggest that this kind of loyalty required by the Rules doesn't actually do much good. In particular, Pop illuminates the fundamental flaw in the Rules and how they play out: he thought he shot Uncle Mark's killer, but realizes now that he made a mistake and killed the wrong man. In this sense, it's possible to argue that Pop wasn't properly loyal—he didn't actually avenge Uncle Mark's death, after all—and that he himself then died needlessly. In short, loyalty according to the Rules doesn't necessarily mean loyalty in practice. In fact, the Rules make it hard to figure out one's target, given the "no snitching" rule. By making this clear to Will, the ghosts in the elevator ask him to consider if his plan to kill Riggs is actually the right course of action, and if Will is actually behaving loyally by following through with it. While *Long Way Down* doesn't fully answer this question—the novel ends on an ambiguous note when the ghosts exit the elevator at the lobby and Shawn asks Will if he's coming with them—it does make it clear that avenging one's loved ones can have unforeseen and irreparable consequences.

The Rules are short and simple: no crying, no "snitching" (which Will defines as talking to the police), and "revenge," which Will says means, "If someone you love / gets killed, / find the person / who killed / them and / kill them." Though Will presents the Rules as inarguable, nonnegotiable facts, both he (seemingly unwittingly) and others in the **elevator** (very purposefully) suggest that this isn't actually the case. Rather, the novel proposes that the Rules are only nonnegotiable for individuals who are ruled by negative, destructive emotions, namely grief. The cycle of violence can potentially be broken if an individual can learn to see that the Rules are the reason the cycle exists in the first place, and then come up with a healthier way to cope with grief.

Will presents the Rules as a way of life that's been passed down from generation to generation, creating a chain reaction of violence that's impossible to escape. The ghosts who join Will on his way to avenge his brother, Shawn's, killer confirm this idea by making the chain of violence extremely clear: Buck's killer, Frick, joins the ghosts midway down, and Shawn killed Frick. Similarly, Uncle Mark and Pop's deaths are related to each other: while Uncle Mark was killed due to a disagreement over drug-dealing turf, Pop set out to avenge Uncle Mark's death, per the Rules, and was later killed as a result. Will knows all of this—at least, he knows the broad strokes of who killed whom, and why—and so it's very easy for him to genuinely believe that he has no choice but to continue in the footsteps of his mentors and family members by avenging Shawn's death. Relying on this idea that what he's going to do is inevitable allows Will to largely ignore his grief and chaotic emotions in the wake of losing Shawn.

When considering the role of emotion in the Rules, it's important to compare the first and final rules: no crying, and seek revenge. The idea that those who adhere to the Rules cannot cry very purposefully deprives adherents—overwhelmingly men—of a normal and natural way of releasing emotion. This makes it clear that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of dealing with grief within Will's community. The accepted way to deal with grief isn't through introspection, time, or venting one's emotions—the only correct course of action, per the Rules, is to seek violent revenge. Indeed, Will even says outright that the Rules "weren't meant to be broken. / They were meant for the broken / to follow." With this, he suggests that the Rules are supposed to be a way for individuals experiencing emotional turmoil ("the broken") to cope. But while Will expresses his stubborn belief that the Rules are successful in doing this, his actions and parts of his inner monologue suggest that this is just wishful thinking. Will is terrified at the thought of killing Shawn's supposed killer, Carlson Riggs, who's also Shawn's former friend and a member of the rival Dark Suns gang. When the ghost of Uncle Mark (who was an aspiring filmmaker in life) tries to get Will to walk through the "scene of what will happen"—getting off the



GRIEF, FEAR, AND CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

Early on in the novel, Will introduces the reader to "the Rules" which guide life in his violent

elevator, going to Riggs's apartment, and pulling the trigger—Will physically and mentally chokes when he imagines doing this. What Will experiences at the thought of killing Riggs is, more than anything, fear. Fear, the novel suggests, supplants grief as a person's primary emotion as they stare down seeking revenge. The Rules, in combination with human nature, make it impossible to effectively cope with grief.

Alongside the ghosts' implication that the Rules are ineffective at doing what they're supposed to do, Will also provides evidence that the Rules might not be as inarguable as he'd like to think. He notes that crying a single tear doesn't count as crying or showing weakness—even though crying a single tear *is* still technically crying, and the way in which Will frames this suggests that he's trying to excuse his own past episodes of crying a single tear. Similarly, Will suggests that his best friend, Tyler's, habit of talking publically about everything and anything sensitive or confidential doesn't technically count as snitching, though again, it's very possible to argue that Tyler is indeed talking about things that the Rules forbid. Clearly, the Rules do contain some nuance when it's most convenient for Will, whereas Will sees them as inarguable when he needs to justify his planned revenge killing. In other words, the meaning of the Rules is, to a degree, up to individual interpretations—offering some hope that Will might be able to rethink or reinterpret the Rules and come to a healthier choice about what he's going to do, and a healthier mindset about Shawn's death.

All of this begins to suggest that the Rules simply throw individuals into a cycle of pain and violence from which they feel they can never escape. While Will does seem to gradually recognize this as the novel progresses, what's most compelling for him is seeing Shawn enter the elevator and cry—not just one tear, but many. Will realizes that while he's supposed to hate Shawn for breaking the Rules, seeing Shawn cry doesn't make him love Shawn any less. This incident shows that the Rules *can* actually be broken, and that breaking them won't bring about the disastrous loss of face that Will fears. While the novel leaves it up to the reader to decide whether Will gets off the elevator to go kill Riggs or whether he rides it back up to grieve with his mother, Will nevertheless has to face the truth in front of him: the Rules won't give him the results he wants. Killing Riggs will become yet another traumatizing experience that, in all likelihood, will do nothing to help Will handle his grief. Instead, doing so will only turn Will into a target for someone else who also believes in the necessity of following through with the Rules.



PERSPECTIVE AND REALITY

It's impossible to ignore the supernatural aspect of *Long Way Down*—all the individuals who share the **elevator** with Will on his way to avenge his brother

Shawn's death are ghosts. By presenting a story in which the wisdom of the dead takes center stage, Reynolds poses a

compelling thought experiment: what might happen if someone in Will's position had this unencumbered access to information that, in reality, is usually lost forever when someone dies? Through this, and through the discrepancies between what Will thought was true and what the ghosts tell him actually is true, *Long Way Down* suggests that there can be major differences between what's believed and what's true in reality—and that questioning the validity of one's perspective or beliefs is, at once, one of the hardest and most meaningful things a person can do.

Dani, the second ghost to join Will on the elevator, forces Will to confront the potential repercussions of following through with his plan to avenge Shawn's death. Dani was Will's childhood best friend and was killed as an eight-year-old when someone missed their intended target and accidentally shot her instead. After Will figures out who Dani is, her first question cuts Will to the core: what if he misses when he tries to shoot Shawn's killer? Essentially, Dani is asking Will to consider whether following through on his community's "Rules" of revenge is guaranteed to have its desired effect. Dani, of course, is living proof that success isn't guaranteed—she's dead because someone else trying to follow the Rules made a mistake. And understandably, this isn't a conversation Will wants to have at all, let alone take seriously. Because of this, he chalks Dani's disapproval and line of questioning up to her not understanding the Rules, rather than thinking of it as an important question he really should answer. To take a broader look at Dani's question and the effects of an unintended death like hers, it's worth considering what happened to Will as a result of Dani's death. Dani's death was what prompted Shawn to teach eight-year-old Will the Rules so that he'd stop crying. Dani's death, then, not only killed her—it inducted Will into the cycle of violence and emotional repression that led him to his current state, in which he's considering taking another's life so he can stay true to the Rules.

As compelling as Dani's question might be to the reader, Will doesn't truly begin to question the righteousness of what he's doing until he comes face to face with Pop, who was killed when Will was three, and therefore isn't someone Will remembers. All Will knows about Pop is the story Shawn told him: Pop went out to avenge the murder of his brother, Uncle Mark, and was later shot at a payphone. What Will learns in the elevator is that this story is far more complicated than just that of two men—Pop and his killer—seeking revenge. Pop admits that when he went out to kill Uncle Mark's killer, he got the wrong guy. This is, importantly, something that Pop only found out after the fact, though it's somewhat unclear if Pop knew he made a mistake when he was still alive or only figured it out after he died. Regardless, Pop asks Will to consider what might happen if Will is also out to kill the wrong guy. The novel never confirms one way or the other whether Will is correct that Carlson Riggs, a former friend of Shawn's, is indeed the one

who killed Shawn. Frick—the man whom Shawn killed, and who was undergoing his initiation into the same gang that Riggs belongs to when he killed Buck—doesn't recognize Riggs's description, which suggests that it's likely Riggs *didn't* kill Shawn to avenge Frick's death. The questions and admissions of Pop and Dani force Will to contend with the possibility that the Rules don't work as well as they're supposed to—they're no guarantee that an avenger is going to exact revenge; they simply guarantee that someone is going to die.

Most important, however, are Will's reactions to the questions and thought experiments that the ghosts pose: it's clear that he's never been asked to think about these questions before. In other words, everyone in Will's life has encouraged him to view the Rules in a highly simplified and glorified way rather than to truly think about their potential consequences. Ideally, Will should've been asking himself the ghosts' questions all along. It's worth considering that while Will's elevator ride is supernatural and enlightens him to information that he couldn't have gotten without the ghosts, the simple act of thinking about the dead and what secrets they may have taken to their graves can still be a useful exercise. Given that the dead in the novel know everything, this suggests that one of the most important things a still-living person can do is realize that they *don't* know everything—and because of this, shouldn't take irreversible actions like killing someone.



MASCULINITY AND COMING OF AGE

At 15 years old, Will is on the brink of coming of age, even before his brother Shawn is shot and killed. However, after Shawn's murder, Will realizes

that manhood has unexpectedly arrived early for him: he must, per “the Rules” of conduct in his community, avenge Shawn's death by killing Carlson Riggs, who he believes is Shawn's killer. Much of how Will conceptualizes manhood has to do with acting appropriately masculine—that is, as an adult capable of killing another person. As the ghosts who appear in the elevator on Will's way down to avenge Shawn's death engage with Will, they begin to show him that how he thinks of manhood may be misguided and ultimately, they drive home to Will that he is still a child. In this way, *Long Way Down* critiques Will's perception of coming of age as simply embodying a particular type of masculinity. Instead, the novel shows that such ideals don't actually enable men to live as men. Rather, the violence inherent to manhood in Will's community turns the men into targets, cutting their adult lives short.

Will's coming of age, in many respects, began a long time ago. Shawn introduced Will to the Rules when Will was eight years old, after Will's childhood best friend, Dani, was accidentally shot and killed. This was essentially the first time Will was asked to act like a man—that is, to repress his emotions and to understand how men in his community customarily handle gun deaths. Importantly, Will tells the reader that if he'd known the

Rules before Dani's death, he would've (even at eight years old) felt compelled to seek revenge for her death. While it's somewhat unclear whether this is actually the thought of eight-year-old Will or whether it's 15-year-old Will trying to appear appropriately loyal according to the Rules, it nevertheless situates Dani's death as a step forward in terms of Will's maturity, but not a complete jump into adulthood. This idea of Will's actions catapulting him forward but not entirely turning him into a man forms one of the book's most important points about maturation: that there is no one defining coming of age moment. Rather, growing up and becoming an adult is a series of comparatively smaller choices and experiences.

Additionally, the ghosts, as well as Will's mother, believe that male adulthood is partially governed by “nighttime”—essentially, a darkness and a danger that Will suggests plagued many of his now-dead friends and family members, including Pop, Buck, and Shawn. According to what Will relays of his mother's beliefs, this concept of “nighttime” is what made Shawn a violent and uncontrollable person. Their mother stopped trying to control Shawn when he turned 18, and instead focused on praying that the darkness and violence wouldn't lead to Shawn's death. Buck, meanwhile, seems to have always had elements of the nighttime in him, given his difficult and split upbringing by a troubled, nighttime-ridden father and a stepfather who was a pastor. Buck, Will suggests, couldn't escape the fact that nighttime seemed to be in his genes. According to Buck and Pop, however, Will *doesn't* possess this quality. Buck is the first to say that Will doesn't have it in him to kill anyone, and later, Uncle Mark echoes this sentiment. Indeed, the way that Will handles his gun makes it very clear that even if he feels compelled to behave in a violent way to avenge Shawn's death, the violence of what he's about to do is abhorrent to him and almost unthinkable. Despite Will's clear discomfort with the idea of killing someone, making the choice to fish Shawn's **gun** out of his dresser **drawer** nevertheless brings about an important coming-of-age moment for Will. He says that he's surprised by how heavy the gun is and suggests that it feels about as heavy as an infant, a clear allusion to fatherhood and thus to Will's rapidly disappearing innocence as he attempts to come of age and embrace adulthood.

As much as Will might feel compelled or required to come of age by murdering Carlson Riggs, it's worth considering the long-term consequences of this action, as laid out in the Rules. While Will might come of age and begin to experience some of the darkness and danger that his deceased male mentors suggest is just a part of being a man in their neighborhood, Will may also become a target for a family member, friend, or fellow gang member of Carlson Riggs. That is, if someone close to Riggs also chooses to follow through with the Rules and retaliate against Will, Will won't have the opportunity to live very long as an adult. Though *Long Way Down* never fully

fleshes out what adult masculinity *should* look like (though the tears shed by both Shawn and Pop suggest that, ideally, it's more emotional than the Rules want it to be), it nevertheless makes it very clear that the vision of manhood Will has in mind is fundamentally flawed—it's only attainable for a short period of time before the young man in question inevitably dies. Tying coming of age to this toxic, violent version of masculinity only creates an environment in which men continue to senselessly die. Should Will choose to not go after Riggs after the novel's close, however, he may have the opportunity to define what kind of man he wants to be—and hopefully, to live a long life as an adult.



SYMBOLS

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



THE ELEVATOR

The elevator in Will's building represents his sense of feeling trapped—trapped by “the Rules” of his violent neighborhood, and trapped in his grief over his brother Shawn's death. Most of all, Will feels trapped in the irrevocable choice he believes he's made by stepping into the elevator: once he makes it down to the lobby of his apartment building, he plans to avenge Shawn's death by shooting Carlson Riggs, who he believes killed Shawn. The sense of claustrophobia and of being stuck that Will feels in the elevator is heightened as ghosts from Will's past join him, begin smoking in the confined space, and ask Will uncomfortable questions he hasn't considered: what if he misses? What if he's after the wrong guy?

The elevator seemingly doesn't have to carry this connotation, since it becomes breathable again once they finally reach the bottom and the ghosts (and their cigarettes) exit. In this sense, it also represents Will's ability to choose his fate: to either free himself or remain trapped. Should Will return to his apartment on the top floor without killing Carlson Riggs, the elevator ride back up could potentially symbolize a new future for him. But if he continues out of the lobby and goes to Riggs's apartment, the confinement represented by the elevator ride he's just completed will extend to either a jail cell or a coffin—by shooting Riggs, Will is likely to either condemn himself to prison or trap himself in a life that will be cut short when someone else retaliates against him.



THE L BUTTON

The L (lobby) button in the **elevator** symbolizes, much like the elevator itself, the horrendous fate that awaits Will if he chooses to step out of the elevator and

into the lobby. Once Will reaches the bottom, he plans to avenge his brother Shawn's death by shooting his killer, Carlson Riggs. Will explains that as kids, he and Shawn found the L button hilarious—L, to them, stood for “loser,” so everyone who got out at the lobby was, according to their immature sense of humor, a loser too. While the idea that everyone who gets out in the lobby is a loser is clearly childish, this memory begins to take on new meaning for Will as he rides the elevator down to avenge Shawn's death. While Will may not be a loser in the sense that he and Shawn once meant it, there's no winning to be had by getting off and following through with his mission. Will inevitably loses if he goes through with killing Riggs—either a gang member will retaliate and kill him in return, or Will will wind up in jail, unable to live his life or achieve anything.



THE GUN

Shawn's pistol broadly represents the cycle of violence prevalent in his and Will's community, and the ways in which that cycle of violence corrupts young men and deprives them of their innocence. The most defining coming-of-age moments in Will's life are when he first picks up Shawn's pistol, and when the ghost of the Will's father, Pop, holds the gun to Will's head in the **elevator** on Will's way to avenge Shawn's death. Both incidents cause Will to come face to face with how young, inexperienced, and scared he is—and how shooting someone (or being shot himself) will either force him to grow up before he's ready or cut his life short before he matures. When Will first picks up the gun, he describes it as weighing about as much as an infant, a moment that subtly alludes to fatherhood and Will's burgeoning maturity. This is contrasted by Will wetting himself when Pop puts the gun to Will's head in the elevator, a reaction that Will himself characterizes as childish.

Despite the gun's ability to elicit these reactions that drive home Will's youth and innocence, the fact remains that as the gun has passed from person to person over the last decade, it has also brought about both Will and Shawn's inductions into the adult world of violence. The gun originally belonged to Buck, who began teaching Shawn how to handle and use it after Pop's death; Shawn received it when Buck died and later used it to kill Frick. Should Will go through with killing Carlson Riggs (who he believes is Shawn's killer), the gun will once again make a young man into an adult within the parameters of “the Rules” of conduct in Will's neighborhood, and perpetuate the cycle of violence that governs life in his community.



THE MIDDLE DRAWER

The middle drawer of Shawn's dresser symbolizes the darkness and danger in Shawn himself. Will explains that the broken middle drawer was the only thing out

of place on Shawn's neat and tidy half of their bedroom—and furthermore, it contained Shawn's **gun**. Both Will and their mother ignored this, however, just as they ignored the clear evidence that there was a darker side to Shawn than the jovial, loving, and neat brother and son that Will and his mother wanted to see. He was, despite his best intentions and everyone's fears, a person with a violent streak that ultimately led to his death. Though Will, by breaking into this drawer and stealing the gun, may be experimenting with his own violent tendencies, the novel also suggests that Will doesn't have to let his dark side define him or end his life, as it did for Shawn. The broken middle drawer and the gun within it can thus be seen as a representation of the darkness and violence that, to some degree, exist in all people—and the idea that ignoring this violence in others or allowing it to become one's own defining characteristic are choices, not inevitabilities.

standpoint, it doesn't make any sense.

And yet, of course, this violence persists. These conflicts are something, like "the Rules" of the neighborhood, that Will implies get passed from fathers to sons and from mentors to mentees. In this way, the cycle of violence in Will's neighborhood is kept going, and the fact that it's pointless and unfruitful suggests that the cycle is flawed from the very start.

☛ ANOTHER THING ABOUT THE RULES

They weren't meant to be broken.
They were meant for the broken
to follow.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

As Will explains "the Rules" of his neighborhood (no crying, no snitching, and seek revenge), he suggests that it's impossible to break them, and that people who are "broken" must follow them. In this way, the Rules seem to have come about as a way for traumatized individuals to deal with their difficult emotions. This recognizes, importantly, that people experiencing difficult emotions like grief, anger, and fear need an outlet or coping mechanism. However, the Rules themselves also put forth the idea that one shouldn't use their emotions for anything but violent revenge. This, the Rules propose, is the only way to gain any kind of closure after a loved one's death. However, the Rules don't say anything about the desired effect after someone takes revenge—they don't give any indication that "the broken" will be healed afterward. This suggests that even if the Rules feel nonnegotiable to Will at this point, he won't necessarily get the outcome he's looking for if he follows them.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Antheneum edition of *Long Way Down* published in 2017.

Prologue Quotes

☛ BEEF

gets passed down like name-brand T-shirts around here. Always too big. Never ironed out.

gets inherited like a trunk of fool's gold or a treasure map leading to nowhere.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Will's Mother, Shawn Holloman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Will notes the way his mother scratches her eczema as though something is eating her—like she's "beef." Will extends this metaphor into talking about the metaphorical "beef" that gets passed down and around in Will's community—meaning the cycle of violence in the neighborhood. The way he describes beef here implies, first of all, that the conflict in his community is pointless: it's like fool's gold or a map that doesn't lead anywhere. In this sense, Will already understands that the violence raging through his community doesn't do any good—from a logical

●● NO. 1.1: SURVIVAL TACTICS (made plain)

Get
down
with
some
body
or
get
beat
down
by
some
body.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman, Carlson Riggs

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Will gives one of many reasons why he believes Carlson Riggs killed Shawn. This one offers important insight about Will's neighborhood: in order to survive in their community, individuals must either join in on the violence or become a victim of that violence themselves. This speaks to the cutthroat nature of Will's neighborhood—he and Riggs live in an environment in which any perceived weakness puts them in danger of being hurt or killed by someone else. Though this doesn't excuse any of the violence that Will describes over the course of his story, it does begin to explain why so many people think violence is the only option, from Will himself to all of the family members he meets in the elevator on his ride down to the lobby. In essence, it's impossible to fault any one of them for taking this path when it seems that none of them received the kind of intervention the ghosts give Will.

●● I WRAPPED MY FINGERS

around the grip, placing
them over Shawn's
prints like little
brother holding big
brother's hand again,
walking me to the store,
teaching me how to
do a Penny Drop.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after Shawn's death, before Will gets on his apartment building's elevator, he puts his fingers around Shawn's gun so that his hand is right where Shawn's would've been. This simple moment is something that makes Will feel close to Shawn again, and shows that what Will craves most is guidance and mentorship. Shawn was essentially Will's mentor before he died, but as far as Will is concerned, there's nobody else who might be able to help him since most of his other family members are dead as well. This, in turn, makes Will feel as though he has to step into the role of an adult as he sets out to avenge Shawn's death.

Will's thoughts about Shawn guiding him through handling the gun, however, is also a way for Will to come up with evidence to support his belief that Shawn would want him to do follow through and kill Carlson Riggs. All the evidence Will has at this point *does* points to that—Shawn was insistent that they follow the Rules of the neighborhood, after all. However, assuming what Shawn would want also means Will can avoid engaging in any of his own introspection and coming to his own conclusions about what he should do. If Will were to think more critically about killing Riggs, he might come to a completely different conclusion of what's right.

Seven Quotes

●● [...] I thought about this when the man with the gold chains got on and checked to see if the L button was already glowing. I wondered if he knew that in me and Shawn's world, I'd already chosen to be a loser.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Buck, Shawn Holloman

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

When Buck (whom Will doesn't recognize) gets on the elevator, Will explains how, when he and Shawn were kids, they believed that the "L" (lobby) button meant that everyone but them who was going to the lobby was a loser. Now, Will believes *he's* the loser. This shows just how mature Will is capable of being, even at such a young age—he clearly realizes that killing Carlson Riggs will turn him into a loser of some sort, whether because he dies (loses his life) or goes to prison (loses out on having a normal life). In other words, Will understands that his life is going to change in fundamental and negative ways if he decides to pull the trigger, even if he can't yet articulate the specifics. However, thinking of himself as a loser gives Will the opportunity to make a different choice—if he decides not to get out at the lobby, he could escape his "loser" fate and simply head back upstairs to his apartment.

from ever having a successful romantic relationship, since he will likely either go to prison or die himself. Will doesn't make his connection himself, but the reader can infer that if this happens, not being able to flirt with Dani will be the least of Will's worries. This speaks to one of the major issues with Will's choice: if he continues down the elevator, his life will be fundamentally and forever changed, depriving him of all sorts of normal experiences.

☝ *SHE BRUSHED HER HAND AGAINST MINE*

to get my attention,
which on any other
occasion would've
been the perfect
open for me to flirt
or at least try to do
my best impression of Shawn,
which was
his best impression of Buck.

Six Quotes

☝ Then
the bus-stop
lean back
to get a glimpse
of the world.

But the metal barrel
dug into my back,
making me wince,
making me obvious
and wack.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Carlson Riggs, Buck, Dani

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

When Dani first gets on the elevator, Will doesn't know who she is or that she's really a ghost. He tries to look up her skirt but fails to do so sneakily because the gun in his waistband digs into his back. It's worth considering that if Will follows through and kills Carlson Riggs to avenge Shawn's death, the gun has the potential to prevent him

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Carlson Riggs, Buck, Dani

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Dani touches Will to refocus his attention, and Will tells the reader that he'd normally try to flirt with her. This continues to make the case that even in light of Will's plans to kill Carlson Riggs, he's still a normal teenage boy who desires normal teenage and adult experiences—such as flirting with cute girls. Will doesn't yet seem to realize that if he kills Riggs, the opportunity for a fulfilling romantic relationship may disappear forever. Though killing Riggs might make Will an adult in the eyes of his violent community, he will also lose out on the chance to be an adult in every other way.

It's significant, then, that Will traces his own flirting habits back to Buck. Clearly, mentors in Will's community aren't just passing along the violent Rules to their mentees—they're also trying to guide them toward adulthood in other, more innocent ways. And though Will didn't recognize Buck when he got on the elevator (something that indicates he didn't know Buck well), he's received some of Buck's teachings through Shawn. Thus, the connections among different generations are made clear—and in addition to passing along the cycle of violence,

those connections also impart information about how to be a man in this world.

WHEN THEY SAID

*you were gone,
I cried all night,
I confessed.
And the next morning,
over hard-boiled eggs
and sugar cereal,
Shawn taught me
Rule Number One—
no crying.*

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman, Dani

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Once Will figures out that the young woman in the elevator is the ghost of his childhood friend Dani (who was shot and killed when they were eight years old), Will confesses that Dani's death led to him learning the first "Rule" of the neighborhood: "no crying." Trauma seems to be the primary experiences that forces children grow up in Will's neighborhood. Dani's death was extremely traumatic for Will, forcing him to take a step toward adulthood in order to deal with the pain.

However, that step toward adulthood is also a step away from dealing with his emotions in healthy, normal ways. Being unable to cry for Dani's loss means that Will had to bottle up his emotions and turn to other ways of dealing with them if he wanted to get Shawn's approval and act mature. On the other hand, this also makes the case that coming of age doesn't happen instantly for anyone—rather, the process is a series of small steps. Even as Will moves closer to adulthood in learning the first Rule, he still two other Rules to learn and many years before full-blown adulthood.

I stood in the shower
the next morning
after Shawn taught me
the first rule,
no crying,
feeling like
I wanted to scratch
my skin off scratch
my eyes out punch
through something,
a wall,
a face,
anything,
so something else
could have
a hole.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman, Dani

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Will tells the reader that after Dani's death, he struggled to follow the first "Rule" of his neighborhood (no crying), and felt as though he wanted to act out violently as a result. The third Rule (which states that individuals must seek revenge for their slain loved ones) directly justifies violence, but the first Rule also does a lot to create a culture of repression and violence. At this point, Will is young and can't fully process his grief, so it's telling that when he's cut off from the one outlet he has, he wants to scratch or punch something. This suggests that violence is a natural reaction emotional repression. And by conceptualizing crying as something that only young children who don't yet know the Rules do, the adherents of the Rules are then able to discredit anyone who cries as weak, young, and immature. This is why Will wants so badly to hold it together— he knows this is the only way he'll be seen as an adult in his community.

●● So I explained them to her so she wouldn't think less of me for following them
[...]

So that she knew I had purpose and that this was about family and had I known The Rules when we were kids I would've done the same thing for her.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Carlson Riggs, Shawn Holloman, Dani

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Since Dani died before she learned “the Rules” of the neighborhood, Will explains them to Dani when he meets her ghost on the elevator. Will does so in hopes that his explanation will make Dani see that Will’s plan to kill Carlson Riggs isn’t just senseless violence. Will clearly puts a lot of stock in the Rules—he wholeheartedly believes that they’re the only way to deal with grief and properly demonstrate one’s loyalty to a deceased loved one. This suggests, in turn, that Will doesn’t put a lot of faith in other grieving traditions that honor or remember the dead. Having been influenced by others in his community, Will seems to believe that violence is the only way to show loyalty, deal with one’s emotions, and be a man.

Meanwhile, Will’s suggestion that he would’ve killed someone for Dani may be something he says to make himself look properly loyal—but it’s actually just boastful, wishful thinking on his part considering he and Dani were just young children when Dani was killed. For Will, this may be an attempt to make up for how he grieved Dani when he cried for her, and not actually reflective of how things might’ve played out.

Five Quotes

●● Fly.
Like Shawn.
Foreshadowing the flash.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Carlson Riggs, Shawn Holloman, Uncle Mark

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

As Will describes Uncle Mark’s impeccable manner of dress, he suggests that Mark’s death and appearance—which both resemble Shawn’s—foreshadowed Shawn’s death. This is another way for Will to see that the violence in his community is a cycle or a chain that gets passed from person to person—the same story seems to play out over multiple generations. In the case of Shawn and Uncle Mark, Will implies that both of them were involved in selling drugs and both stood out because of their striking appearances, turning them into targets for other nefarious individuals. As Will makes these connections, he also begins to broaden his perspective by thinking about Shawn in a slightly different way. He’s able to see how the cycle of violence repeats, and how everyone still ends up dead regardless of their particular situation. This, in turn, gives Will more of the information he needs to decide whether to break the cycle or to further perpetuate it by killing Carlson Riggs.

●● *BUT TO EXPLAIN MYSELF*

I said,
The Rules are the rules.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Carlson Riggs, Pop, Shawn Holloman, Uncle Mark

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

While explaining why he has to kill Carlson Riggs to Uncle Mark, Will reminds his uncle that “the Rules are / the rules,”

implying that everyone in their community knows the Rules cannot be broken. Will's total acceptance of the Rules is a convenient way for him to get out thinking critically about what the Rules really mean, what the consequences of following them are, and what other options might be out there for him. If the Rules are as inarguable as Will says, of course it makes sense to follow them. But given that Will is in an elevator with the ghosts of individuals who died from the same kind of gun violence that Will plans to commit, it's important for him to ask some of these questions. In doing so, Will begins to see that the Rules aren't as foolproof as he thought—Pop accidentally shot the wrong guy, and Dani's death was an accident. Learning these things suggests that the Rules *aren't* the rules—they're a trap, and they don't serve the purpose they're supposed to.

●● He knew them
like I knew them.

Passed to him.

Passed them to his little brother.

Passed to my older brother.

Passed to me.

The Rules

have always ruled.

past present future forever.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman, Pop, Uncle Mark

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Will tells the reader that Uncle Mark knows the Rules as well as Will does, and lays out the path the Rules took from Uncle Mark to Will. In doing so, Will convinces himself that it's impossible to argue with the Rules—this is how his world works, and as far as he's concerned, always has. This is, of course, not true—the Rules had to have come from somewhere, and were created by people (probably grieving people) to deal with their emotional pain. Ignoring the underlying reality of the Rules, however, allows Will to think of them as something constant and inarguable. They control his life just as they control everyone else's, and this, to Will is another inarguable fact—if he refuses to believe that anyone has a choice in the matter, he can get out of considering his own choices too.

●● it was like the word
came out and at the same time
time went in.

Went down
into me and
chewed on everything
inside as if
I had somehow
swallowed
my own teeth
and they were
sharper than
I'd ever known.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Carlson Riggs, Shawn Holloman, Uncle Mark

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Uncle Mark talks Will through the “scene” of what shooting Carlson Riggs will look like, and finally gets Will to say outright that he's going to shoot Riggs. The experience of saying this causes Will physical pain, suggesting that he's not actually prepared to follow through with his plan. This is an important exercise for Will to think about going forward, as it shows Will that it's not just Riggs who's going to suffer when Will shoots him. Will will suffer too: he'll have to cope with the guilt of killing someone, and will likely either end up in prison or get shot by someone trying to avenge Riggs's death. This begins to broaden Will's understanding of what the Rules do. In his initial understanding, the Rules simply allow Will to show loyalty to Shawn and deal with his grief. The “scene” of the shooting throws that back in Will's face, however, since he now sees that he's not going to be able to get rid of his pain so easily.

●● *The end?*

he murmured,
looking at Buck,
motioning for a light.

It's never the end,

Uncle Mark said,
all chuckle, chuckle.
He leaned toward Buck.

Never.

Related Characters: Uncle Mark (speaker), William (Will) Holloman, Carlson Riggs, Buck, Shawn Holloman

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

When Uncle Mark asks Will what's going to happen after Will shoots Carlson Riggs, Will insists that shooting Riggs is the end of the story, something that Uncle Mark insists isn't true. Uncle Mark makes an important point here: though they may be able to end this hypothetical "scene" anywhere they want, in real life, Will is going to have to go on and live with the consequences of whatever he chooses—life won't automatically return to normal the moment he shoots Riggs. In all likelihood, Will's life will become even more painful and difficult, given that someone else will probably try to follow the Rules and avenge Riggs's death by killing Will. It's also likely that Will will end up in prison for his crime. Either way, killing Riggs isn't the end of Will's story, something the novel reinforces by literally ending the narrative before Will makes his choice as to whether or not he'll kill Riggs. This echoes Uncle Mark's insistence that killing isn't the end of the story, or even the most important part. The choice, however, is.

Four Quotes

☹☹ I was only three.
And I don't remember that.
I've always wanted to,
but I don't.
I so don't.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman, Pop

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Will shares a story that Shawn told often him, of Pop taking them trick-or-treating one Halloween and making three-

year-old Will laugh. Because Will was so young at the time, he doesn't remember this. Will's lack of memories about his father illustrates another way in which his family is fractured: though Will knows he was loved and admires his father's memory, there's very little for Will to go off of as he attempts to figure who Pop was. In turn, this makes Will feel even more alone and pressured to become an adult, as he doesn't believe there's anyone else who can fill Pop and Shawn's roles in his life. The fractured state of Will's family seems to push him toward violence, and his community only reinforces this violence by linking it to being a man.

☹☹ A BROKEN HEART

killed my dad.
That's what my mother
always said.
And as a kid
I always figured
his heart
was forreal broken
like an arm
or a toy
or the middle drawer.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Shawn Holloman, Pop

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

Will explains that, according to his mother, Pop died of a broken heart—and that when Will was a kid, he figured Pop's heart was literally broken. Though Will's literal interpretation does suggest how immature he was at the time, it's also worth noting that when the ghost of Uncle Mark asks Will to say outright that he's going to kill Carlson Riggs, Will feels physical pain. It's possible that by acknowledging the physical pain Pop may have felt in his grief, Will is trying to speak to the magnitude of grief in general—even if it's not actually something that causes physical harm, it can still feel that way, and should therefore still be taken seriously.

Relating Pop's grief to the middle drawer in Shawn's dresser also begins to connect grief and violence, as the middle

drawer functions as a symbol for Shawn's violent streak. Pop's grief, in this case, led to him killing the man he believed killed Uncle Mark, a violent act that the novel suggests may have done just as much damage as Pop's grief did.

●● WHAT YOU THINK YOU SHOULD DO?

he asked.

Follow the Rules,

I said
just like I told
everybody else.

Just like you did.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman, Pop (speaker), Shawn Holloman, Uncle Mark

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

When Pop asks Will what Will thinks he should do, Will stands firm by his belief that he—like all the male role models in his life—must follow the Rules of the neighborhood. Most importantly, Will suggests that by following through with the Rules, he'd be following in Pop's footsteps, something his tone implies is positive and that Pop should be proud of. For Will, the rules are a way to connect to his deceased family members, whom he misses terribly and wishes he'd gotten to get to know. The most appropriate way to connect to them, however, isn't poring over pictures, stories, and memories. Rather, Will believes that the only way to effectively connect with them and honor them is by performing the same kind of violence that they committed and that ultimately kill them. In doing so, Will's own life will likely be cut short, and Pop will later suggest that this is no way for Will to accomplish his goals.

●● BUT YOU DID WHAT YOU HAD TO DO,

I said,
after listening to
my father admit
what I had already
known,

The Rules
are the rules.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Will's Mother, Pop

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Pop is almost done telling Will the story of killing a man named Gee, whom he believed to be Uncle Mark's killer. However, Will insists that this is all old news—all it does reaffirm that the Rules of the neighborhood should be followed. For Will, it doesn't matter that Pop believes killing Gee was a disturbing, horrendous act—in Will's mind, Pop did what was supposed to do and avenged Uncle Mark's death. This shows that Will, possibly subconsciously, prioritizes loyalty to the dead over the wellbeing of those still living. This is why he never says anything about what his mother will do after he shoots Riggs, either—what matters more to Will is properly demonstrating his loyalty to Shawn, not sticking around to care for his grieving mother.

●● *I didn't know he wasn't the right guy,*

Pop said,
a tremble in
his throat.

I was sure that was Mark's killer.

*Had
to
be.*

Related Characters: Pop (speaker), William (Will) Holloman, Carlson Riggs, Uncle Mark

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

With difficulty, Pop admits to Will that he shot and killed the wrong guy when he tried to avenge Uncle Mark's death. The language Pop uses to describe his thought process, and how sure he was that he had the right guy, is significant—it is, almost word for word, exactly the reasoning Will gives for believing Carlson Riggs killed Shawn. The fact that Pop got it wrong, then, casts doubts on whether Will has the right guy, or if he's simply going to repeat Pop's mistake by

following the Rules.

While it's usually impossible to know the secrets of the dead and come up with this information after someone dies, the novel nevertheless suggests that engaging in these thought experiments that leave room for mistakes is something that everyone should do. It's not enough to simply believe that someone did the right thing; it's better to consider the ways in which they could've been wrong, and model one's own choices after taking these other possibilities into account.

Three Quotes

🗨️ *A DUMB THING TO SAY*

would've been to
tell Buck how important
that soap was
that it stopped Mom from
scraping loose a river
of wounds.
But instead
I just said,
Riggs.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Carlson Riggs, Shawn Holloman, Will's Mother, Buck

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Buck tells what seems to be an unrelated, rambling story about a conversation with Shawn. He mentions that Shawn spoke about having to buy special soap for his mother at a store in the Dark Suns gang's territory. Will insists that it would've made him look dumb to share how important that soap is to his mother's mental and physical health—at this point, Will still believes it's more important to demonstrate his loyalty to Shawn by avenging his death than it is to show his loyalty to his mother by going home to her. Will seems to think that showing any emotion or affection in a healthier way will makes him look pathetic and immature. This is why he has to murder Carlson Riggs—doing so will, in his mind, make him look adult in a way that nothing else can at this point.

Two Quotes

🗨️ *I TOLD HIM*

about the
drawer,
the gun,
that I did
like he told me,
like Buck told him,
like our grandfather told
our uncle, like our uncle
told our dad.

I followed The Rules.
At least the first two.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker), Buck, Pop, Uncle Mark, Shawn Holloman

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

When Shawn finally joins everyone in the elevator, Will shares everything with him and insists that he's doing exactly what Shawn told him to do. This is also the final time that Will draws out the chain of violence that the Rules have created, reaching back to their grandfather. Again, Will's insistence on putting his own actions into this context reinforces to himself that he's upholding the family tradition and doing what men in his family are supposed to do. Following the Rules means avenging Shawn's death, and blindly accepting the Rules means Will doesn't have to think as hard about the negative consequences of his actions. The fact that Will is in an elevator with ghosts, all of whom died due to the gun violence that the Rules promote, doesn't seem to have impacted Will just yet. Ideally, Shawn's reaction, in combination with the ghosts' stories, will give Will the information and the courage to decide that he *does* actually have a choice of whether or not follow the Rules.

●● *AND EVEN THOUGH*

his face was wet
with tears he wasn't
supposed to cry
when he was alive,

I couldn't see him
as anything less
than my brother,
my favorite,
my only.

Related Characters: William (Will) Holloman (speaker),
Carlson Riggs, Shawn Holloman

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

At the climax of the novel, Will comes to a shocking conclusion: he doesn't love Shawn less even though Shawn's ghost is breaking the Rules by crying. Finally, Will understands that showing emotion isn't a bad thing, and it doesn't change someone into a bad or unworthy person—it simply makes them human. This offers hope that once Will reaches the lobby, he'll have the wherewithal to critically evaluate what he knows about the Rules. In a best-case scenario, this would mean that Will could decide against killing Carlson Riggs—doing so would likely mean he'd end up dead, like Shawn, or that he'd go to prison. Ignoring the third Rule and allowing Riggs to go free might be worth it—instead, Will could focus instead on how to handle his emotions in a healthier way. Though Shawn says little else to Will, his tears show Will that it's not a bad thing to cry, which is possibly the best thing Shawn can do—this simple gesture gives Will proof that the Rules can indeed be broken.



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.

PROLOGUE

Since nobody believes anything these days, the narrator says, this is the first time he's telling this story. He understands if the reader doesn't believe it—the reader might think the narrator is lying or going crazy, but his story is true and really happened to him. The narrator then introduces himself: his full name is William Holloman, but everyone just calls him Will. He instructs the reader to call him Will, too, since after Will tells his story, the reader will either want to be his friend or want nothing to do with him. Only Will's mother and brother, Shawn, call him William, and Shawn only did so when he was trying to be funny. Now, Will wishes he'd laughed at Shawn's jokes more, since Shawn was killed the day before yesterday.

Will doesn't know the reader's last name, or if they have brothers, sisters, parents, or other relatives. But if you share blood with someone, Will says, you don't want to see it outside their body. Will admits that the sadness is hard to explain. He asks the reader to imagine waking up, strapped down, while a stranger rips out their molar. He asks the reader to imagine the pressure in their ears, the blood, and the pounding in their head. Will says that the worst part will be slipping their tongue into the empty space where they know there's supposed to be a tooth.

Although it feels difficult, strange, and sad to say that Shawn is dead, Will isn't particularly surprised by his brother's death. This lack of surprise is possibly even stranger and sadder than the tragedy itself. Will says that the day before yesterday, he and his friend Tony stood outside, wondering if they'd get taller now that they're 15. Shawn grew a foot or more when he was 15, and passed down all of his clothes that no longer fit. Tony hopes he'll grow—he's a great basketball player, but he's short, and it's impossible to get very far as a short guy unless you can jump.

During this conversation, Will, Tony, and everyone else in the area hear gunshots. They run and tuck themselves down, praying they won't get hit. Once the shots stop, Will and Tony look up to count bodies. There's only one: Shawn. Will says he's never been in an earthquake, but it seems like the ground ate him up in that moment.

The fact that Will is so concerned with whether or not the reader will believe his story speaks to his youth, to his desire for someone to take him seriously. The matter-of-fact manner in which Will presents Shawn's death suggests that perhaps Will is suppressing his true emotions about the tragedy. Meanwhile, Will's regret over not laughing at his brother's jokes while he was still alive introduces the novel's examination of how people often make choices they regret when their perspective is limited to the present moment.



Here, Will speaks to the idea that losing a loved one is a universally traumatic experience. Even if the reader may not be able to fully relate to Will's life, he suggests that grief is universal. Importantly, the fact that grief can translate to any reader suggests that this emotion is something that all humans experience—something that Will doesn't always act like applies to him.



Will's comment that he and Tony haven't experienced their growth spurts yet lets the reader know that they're still children, at least physically. That Will is wearing Shawn's hand-me-downs also illustrates this point, while Will's lack of surprise that Shawn is dead suggests that violence like this unfortunately isn't something that's unheard of in Will's neighborhood. In fact, it's so common that even a young person like Will is desensitized to it.



The way that Will describes feeling in the immediate aftermath of Shawn's death speaks to his depth of emotion. This is proof that he does experience intense and overwhelming grief, even if he tries to suppress it.



According to Will, usually only moms, girlfriends, or daughters scream when someone is killed. At the scene of the shooting, Leticia, Shawn's girlfriend, kneels beside Shawn's body and shrieks as she kisses his forehead. Will thinks Leticia does so because she hopes her screams will keep Shawn alive—but he also thinks that, on some level, Leticia knows she's kissing Shawn goodbye. As the sound of sirens approaches, Will and Shawn's mother moans, "Not my baby."

Police officers arrive, shine lights in everyone's faces, and ask if anyone saw anything. No one says anything. One cop, who looks young and honest, seems to expect answers. Marcus Andrews, the "neighborhood know-it-all," says that he didn't see anything—even Marcus knows better than to act like he knows something. Will clarifies that gunshots make people deaf and blind, especially when the shots kill someone. It's best to be invisible, and even Tony runs away. Will isn't sure if the cops talk to him, since he can't hear anything but his heartbeat in his ears. He holds his breath and hopes he can give some back to Shawn.

When bad things happen, Will and his family can usually look up and see the moon. In the past, it's always made Will feel better that there's something up there sending light to them. But on the day Shawn dies, the moon is dark, which someone told Will happens once a month before the moon goes back to normal and becomes new. Will thinks the moon is lucky it's not down on Earth, where nothing is ever new. Will clenches his teeth as he looks down at Shawn's body, which seems to have been abandoned like a piece of furniture. Shawn is still wearing his gold chain—his killers didn't even take it.

A random thought pops into Will's head: under the glow of streetlights, blood soaking into clothes looks like chocolate syrup. Will knows, however, that blood is nothing like chocolate syrup. In Shawn's hand, there's a plastic bag that reads "THANK YOU, HAVE A NICE DAY." Inside is some special soap for their mother's eczema. Sometimes, their mother scratches and picks at her flaky skin until she bleeds, cursing "the invisible / thing trying to eat / her." Will wonders if there's something invisible trying to eat everyone, as though they're all beef.

Again, the way Will talks about who screams after a murder makes it clear that this is something Will experiences often. It's different, however, now that it's his family grieving, which shifts Will's perspective. He now understands that the screaming isn't just screaming—it's a way to release emotion and start to grieve.



This passage makes it clear that Will's community doesn't trust the police, which perhaps plays a role in why killings like these are so common. It seems that achieving a sense of justice for murders like Shawn's likely falls to the community, not to the police. Meanwhile, Will not being able to hear anything suggests that he's in a state of shock, meaning his brain is probably trying to protect him from the intense grief he's experiencing. While a normal response to trauma, this another sign that Will's first reaction is to suppress his emotions, not let them out.



The fact that Shawn's killer didn't take Shawn's chain is a hint to Will that this killing was probably personal—not because the killer wanted to rob Shawn or make some other point. Again, the way that Will talks about the moon not providing comfort right now illustrates just how dark of a place he's in. His clenched teeth, however, suggest that he's not allowing his grief out.



The bag containing Will and Shawn's mother's special soap shows that her sons care deeply for her, and the image drives home the inhumanity of Shawn's death—he was murdered while fetching medically necessary soap for his parent. He wasn't, as far as Will can tell, doing anything to provoke someone, which makes Shawn's killer look even more coldhearted to those assembled here. It's also significant that Will wonders if there's something eating everyone. It's obvious that Will's grief is "eating" or bothering him, but the long-term consequences of this emotional torment are unclear.



In Will's neighborhood, beef gets passed around like name-brand T-shirts. Like the T-shirts, the beef is always too big and never gets ironed. The beef is inherited, but it's like fool's gold or a treasure map that leads nowhere. Beef is what knocked on Shawn's door, kicked it down, and left only his gold chain behind. Eventually, the police put up yellow tape around the crime scene, and everyone goes home. The police zip Shawn's body into a bag and roll him away, leaving his blood on the pavement. The tape frames the blood and the old bubblegum on the ground—tomorrow, Will thinks, kids will play mummy with it.

Back in his eight-floor apartment, Will locks himself in his room and covers his head with a pillow so he doesn't have to listen to his mother sobbing in the kitchen. She only stops crying when she takes a sip from a glass, and those silent moments are the only time Will feels able to breathe. Will holds back tears—it feels like there's a tiny person trapped behind his face, kicking and punching at his eyes and throat. Will whispers to himself to stay strong and tells the tiny person to stay put. Crying, he says, is against "the Rules."

The first rule is no crying. The second is no snitching. The third is that if someone you love gets killed, you must find the killer and kill them in return. Will says that the Rules didn't come from Shawn, Shawn's friends, Will and Shawn's dad or uncle, or any of the guys outside. They didn't come from Will, either. Will also explains that it's impossible to break the Rules—rather, "broken" people must follow them.

Will and Shawn shared a bedroom. Each side is the same, with a bed and a dresser, and there's a TV in the middle. Shawn's side, the left, is perfect, while Will's is messy and disorganized. Shawn has posters of Tupac and Biggie, while Will wrote an anagram in pencil on his wall, just in case his mother makes him erase it. It reads: "scare=cares." Will explains that an anagram means taking the letters of a word and rearranging them to make a new word. Sometimes, the words are still connected, as with "ocean=canoe." He thinks that the same letters in different words that still make sense together are like brothers.

Even from this early stage (both in the novel and in life), Will is well aware that the "beef," or cycle of violence, that circulates in his neighborhood doesn't do any good (which he shows by comparing it to things that are worthless). That doesn't mean, however, that the "beef" isn't deadly—but Will recognizes that the violence in the community isn't doing anyone any favors. This is a mature perspective given Will's young age, and it suggests that he has the capacity to decide whether or not he wants to be swept up in the "beef."



Will holding back tear is a way of denying himself a normal and natural emotional outlet, and the fact that crying isn't allowed suggests that Will has grown up in an environment that encourages emotional suppression. Despite Will's attempts, however, he's still attuned to and pained by his mother's sorrow. This suggests that Will is still feels those emotions himself, and cannot stand being around someone else who—probably because she isn't expected to be masculine and tough—can express herself.



Will situates "the Rules" as law in his neighborhood. It's a requirement that instead of grieving, people who have suffered a loss must turn their negative emotions into violence. Will's tone suggests that he recognizes this isn't a good thing, but he still doesn't seem to see the Rules as negotiable. This is likely due to his youth and limited understanding of his actions' consequences.



Will's interest in anagrams mirrors his interest in people, and suggests that he has the ability to think critically about relationships. On a more structural level, this mirrors the way that other characters in the novel will try to illuminate connections between different people for Will and show him how closely-related everyone and everything in his community is. This particular anagram suggests that Will associates being afraid with caring about someone.



The only thing out of place on Shawn's side is the **middle drawer** in Shawn's dresser, which sits like a jagged tooth in an otherwise perfect mouth. Shawn kept his **gun** in the middle drawer, and Will suspects Shawn messed it up on purpose to keep Will and their mother out. Will admits that Shawn wasn't one to be home by curfew, or to call and check in about where he was. This was especially true after Shawn turned 18, at which point their mother stopped trying to control him and started to pray that he wouldn't go to jail, get Leticia pregnant, or die.

Will's mother used to say that she knew Shawn was young and needed to get out, but warned him to be careful of the "nighttime." Will thinks Shawn probably had his headphones on and didn't hear her. Will usually went to bed alone, staring at Shawn's half-full bottles of cologne and the **middle drawer**. He never touched anything because he didn't want to Shawn to put him in a headlock. It wasn't always this way, though: when Will was 12 and Shawn was 16, they'd stay up all night talking about girls. They'd talk about Tupac and Biggie too, but now Will wonders if people think these rappers were the best just because they're dead—people are loved more when they're dead.

When Will turned 13, Shawn spritzed Will with cologne and said Will's first girlfriend would like it. Will's first girlfriend actually hated it, however, so Will broke up with her. Shawn thought it was funny that Will broke up with her because of that, but the teasing headlocks felt more like hugs. Now, Will thinks that the cologne bottles will never empty. Will will never have to fear that touching something will earn him a headlock. Thinking about how Shawn is never coming home feels like a headlock to Will. He wonders if he should love Shawn more now that he's dead. Shawn was Will's only brother, and Will's favorite.

All of a sudden, the room seems lopsided to Will. He's curious about Shawn's **middle drawer**, which seems to call to Will. Will thinks that the off-centeredness of the drawer is a sign of what's inside, and the fact that what's inside should be able to fix things. Will works at the drawer until it opens an inch and he can touch the cold steel inside. There are many nicknames for a **gun**: a piece, a biscuit, a hammer. Will says it's a tool for Rule No. 3.

In Will's mind, Shawn's middle drawer indicates that there was something purposefully, violently wrong with Shawn, in spite of a handsome and put-together appearance. The way that Will's mother had to shift to praying for Shawn's wellbeing when he turned 18 shows how little power she has to influence her male family members' actions, or how the wider culture functions. It's possible that because she's emotional and doesn't adhere to the Rules, she doesn't get a say in them.



The way that Will describes his early relationship with Shawn paints a picture of a close, loving, and supportive brotherhood, which indicates that Shawn likely stepped into somewhat of a fathering role to Will after Pop's death. The idea that people are better or more loved when they're dead suggests that in Will's community, there's some incentive to engage in violence behavior, since dying boosts one's legacy.



Breaking up with a girlfriend because she didn't like Shawn's cologne speaks to the intensity of Will's idolization of Shawn—as does his sense that Shawn's headlocks were an expression of love and not actually violent. This indicates that Will's idea of how to demonstrate love and loyalty are a bit skewed. He's beginning to see now that he doesn't love Shawn more just because he's dead—rather, he's loved Shawn all along.



Fishing out Shawn's gun isn't just the first step to carrying out Rule No. 3. In some ways, it's also a method for Will to become more like Shawn, which likely appeals to Will given how much he idealizes his older brother. There's little indication thus far that Will is much like Shawn in other ways, so he may also see this as a good first step to making Shawn proud.



In Will's neighborhood, Carlson Riggs is known for being loud, but gentle. Some say he talks so much trash because he's short, but Will thinks it's because Riggs's mom made him take gymnastics as a kid—wearing tights means you need to at least talk like you can defend yourself. Shawn and Riggs were friends. The best thing Riggs did was to teach Shawn how to do a Penny Drop; the worst thing he did was shoot Shawn. A Penny Drop is hanging off the monkey bars by the legs until the performer swings off and lands on their feet. It's hard to do, but Shawn taught Will how to do it after he learned the trick from Riggs. People who can do a Penny Drop or a backflip are king. Shawn was king, so Will was the prince.

Not long ago, Riggs moved to a part of town that's home to the Dark Suns gang. He wanted to join so that he could associate with the gang and not be just a loudmouth anymore. The Dark Suns wait for people to cross into their territory, which starts nine blocks from Will's building—the corner store that carries their mother's special soap is right inside their territory. Riggs understood that he needed to get in with the Dark Suns or someone would beat him. Will and his mother used to watch crime shows, and Will could always identify the killer. This is a gift, like his knack for anagrams. Riggs *has* to be Shawn's killer, Will thinks.

Will has never held or touched a **gun**. When he picks up Shawn's pistol from the **drawer**, it's heavier than Will expected—it seems as heavy as a newborn baby. Will knows the gun's cry will be louder than a baby's, though. When Will hears his mother in the bathroom, he turns the light off and leaps into bed, hiding the gun under his pillow. Sleep eludes Will, which reminds Will of how he used to hide from Shawn. In the morning, Will wakes up and realizes he didn't dream. He decides to pretend he dreamt about Shawn so that he'll feel better about going to sleep on the night Shawn died. Still, Will feels guilty for waking up and reaching under his pillow.

Will puts his fingers over Shawn's prints on the **gun** and feels like he's holding Shawn's hand again. He remembers Shawn teaching him to do a Penny Drop and coaching him on the timing of the trick. Now, when Will looks at himself in the mirror and thinks he resembles a zombie. He slept in his clothes, so he stinks of death and sweat. Will doesn't care. He tucks the gun into the waistband of his jeans so it sticks out like a tail. His shirt, a name-brand hand-me-down from Shawn, covers it. Will's plan is to wait for Carlson Riggs outside of Rigg's apartment building. Will thinks it'll be safest in the morning, when none of the other Dark Suns are out. He's going to hit the buzzer, wait for Riggs to come down, and pull his shirt over his mouth and nose. Then he'll "do it."

Here, Will reveals that his neighborhood's definition of masculinity is narrow and not up for interpretation. Carlson Riggs is at a disadvantage because he hasn't grown up in a "properly" masculine way, and now he seems to be making up for it by turning to violence. This suggests that Will's community—and by extension, Will himself—tie adult masculinity to violence. This helps to explain why Will takes the gun, too, as shooting someone (Carlson Riggs, presumably) will thus allow Will to become an adult and man.



The title to Will's poem about Riggs, "Reasons I Thought (Knew) Riggs Killed Shawn, No. 1: Turf," reveals that Will isn't actually sure Riggs killed Shawn. However, Will believes there's enough circumstantial evidence to pin Riggs as the killer—this is obviously questionable, especially since Will learned to identify killers by watching crime shows. These shows usually follow a formula, which Will very well may have been good at recognizing, but that doesn't mean Riggs is definitely Shawn's killer. Will's assessment, again, illustrates his youth and naïveté.



Noting that the gun feels as heavy as a newborn infant alludes to fatherhood—by picking up the gun, Will is losing some of his own childish innocence. He's not a kid anymore in his mind, as he's staring down the one thing that's going to catapult him into adulthood: killing someone else. Will's guilt and attempts to hide this from his mother show that he does feel horrendous about what he's doing, but in his mind, it's more important to follow the Rules than it is to protect his mother's feelings.



The fact that Will feels so connected to Shawn when he holds the gun shows again that even if Shawn didn't include Will in any of his violent dealings outside of the apartment, he nevertheless led by example and primed Will to engage in this kind of violence as well. Will feels as though Shawn is leading him into adulthood now, since it almost seems as though Shawn left the gun in a place where he knew Will would find it. This helps Will feel more secure in killing Riggs, since he thinks Shawn would support him in doing so.



The sun beams through the kitchen window, illuminating Will's mother, who is asleep at the table. Her arms are swollen like she's been scratching all night. Will wants to tell his mother that Shawn's death wasn't her fault, but instead he sneaks out of the room so that he doesn't break her heart even more. In the hallway outside Will's apartment, the lights buzz like the lightning bugs that Shawn and Will used to catch in jars. They'd watch their captives until their lights went out. The **gun** digs into Will's back, rubbing it raw. Time seems to stand still as he calls the **elevator**, steps in, and starts down.

Again, it's very important that Will chooses not to comfort his mother, and instead chooses to leave the apartment so he can go shoot Riggs. This is the moment in which Will chooses violence over emotion, even though he can see that staying and comforting his mother would likely have more positive results than killing someone. His belief in the Rules, however, means that he must ignore the possibility that open expressions of emotion, grief, and love are superior to violence.



SEVEN

Will notes that in **elevators**, everyone must follow the “elevator rules:” they get in, check that their floor button is lit, and then face forward. Nobody speaks. On the seventh floor, a man who's older than Will (“but not old,” according to Will) gets on. The man checks to see if the **L button** is lit. When Will and Shawn were kids, they'd ride the elevator for fun and giggle at everyone else who pressed the L button—“L” meant they were losers. Will wonders if the new passenger knows that within Will and Shawn's world, Will has already chosen to be a loser.

The “elevator rules” and the Rules of the neighborhood both seem somewhat arbitrary to Will. This connection plants the seed in Will's head that he doesn't necessarily have to follow the rules laid out for him by other people. Further, his admission that he's chosen to be a loser shows that Will does, on some level, understand the consequences of killing Riggs—he'll likely either go to prison or be killed himself in retaliation.



Will is uncomfortable knowing that the man is looking at him. He recalls seeing men desperately trying to see up girls' skirts at bus stops. Will feels like one of these girls and thinks that if this man keeps staring, he's going to get into trouble. Finally Will asks the man if they know each other. The man smiles, looks Will in the eye, and asks if Will doesn't recognize him. His voice is familiar. The man smiles to reveal sharp, jagged teeth and turns around. There's a photo of him on the back of his shirt, squatting with middle fingers in the air. The caption reads, “RIP Buck you'll be missed 4eva.”

Will's comparison of himself to a girl being violated at a bus stop magnifies how uncomfortable he feels. Being started at and intimidated by the older man likely makes Will feel less masculine and adult, and therefore more vulnerable and upset. This is likely why Will engages with Buck in the first place—he wants to reassert his own power.



Will's stomach leaps. He says Buck's name and stumbles backwards. Will thinks this can't be true and stutters, but Buck finishes his sentence: Will thought Buck was dead. Will rubs his eyes—he's never smoked or done drugs, but he knows he shouldn't be able to talk to a dead man. Trying to be cool, Will agrees that he thought Buck was dead, hoping that Buck will say he faked his death—or that Will will wake up from a dream, with the **gun** under his pillow and his mother asleep at the kitchen table. Buck seems to notice Will's panic and says softly that he is dead. Will pinches his armpit, slaps himself, and blinks. Buck doesn't move.

That Buck is dead despite being a relatively young man drives home the consequences of living in their community: it's very likely that men will die young, like Shawn and Buck did. Coming of age in this environment is like a death sentence. The fact that Will hopes he'll wake up still at home suggests he's already regretting his decision to kill Riggs, and subconsciously craves a second chance.



Will says he knows that the reader thinks he was scared of death, but he crosses out the “of” and amends it to read that he was scared to death. He momentarily thinks that he shouldn’t be afraid; Buck was like a big brother to Shawn, and Shawn knew Buck longer than he’d known Pop. On second thought, Will admits he is scared, and wonders if Buck came to get him or to steal his breath. Will offers the anagram “alive=a veil.” Will asks Buck why he’s here and hopes that Buck won’t tell him that he (Will) is dead too. Buck says casually that he came to check on his **gun**.

Will stands in silence until Buck stage whispers that Will’s “tail” is showing. Will puts his hand behind him to feel the **gun**. It feels like an extra vertebra or additional backbone. He considers moving it to the front, but he remembers Shawn saying that even angry dogs tuck their tails between their legs as a sign of fear. Buck says that he remembers giving the gun to Shawn. Shawn was about Will’s age, and Buck taught him to use it and instructed him about the Rules of the neighborhood. Buck made Shawn promise to put the gun where Will couldn’t get it. Will tries to make himself sound tough as he says that he got it anyway.

Will says he’s glad he got the **gun**—he needs it now that Shawn is dead. Will reasons that he doesn’t need to tiptoe around Shawn’s fate—since Buck is dead, he probably already knows that Shawn is too. Regardless, Will explains what happened. His anger tastes sour in his throat as he says that Carlson Riggs of the Dark Suns was the one who killed Shawn. Buck folds his arms, shakes his head, and frowns. He asks Will what he’s going to do. Will replies that he’s going to do what he needs to do, and what Buck himself would’ve done: follow the Rules.

The **elevator** vibrates as though it’s off track, like the **middle drawer**. Scared, Will asks what’s taking so long and pounds on the door. Smiling, Buck says the elevator has always been slow, but Will insists this is ridiculous. Buck tells Will to relax—it’s a long way down. Will wonders if Buck didn’t hear him or, like most older people, isn’t taking Will seriously. Will assures the reader that he’s “so forreal.” He snaps that he doesn’t have time to relax, since he has a job to do. Will grabs at his crotch and tells the reader that his “macho” masks his fluttery heart. Buck laughs, and to Will, this feels as painful as a bullet.

Here, Will implies that the reader will think he’s childish for believing in ghosts at all, and especially for believing that Buck has possibly come to take him to the other side. The anagram Will comes up with here suggests that in general, he suspects being alive isn’t all that different from being dead—only a thin veil of some sort separates the living from the dead.



Will feels more confident because of the gun, and his attempts to sound tough show just how much stock Will puts in appearing manly. Toughness in his mind, is tied exclusively to violence and to following the Rules. When Buck talks about giving the gun to Shawn, it begins to draw out the connections between Will and Buck, and illustrates how violence—and the weapons used to carry it out—get passed down from mentor to mentee.



In Will’s mind, there is no plan B—his only option is to follow the Rules of avenging a loved one’s death, even as he stands face to face with someone who lost his life by following that very Rule. In other words, Will clearly isn’t thinking about the long-term effects of following the Rules, even as one of the most likely consequences stands right in front of him: Will could easily end up being killed himself, just like Buck.



Will’s comment about old people not taking him seriously points again to his youth and his desire to be taken seriously, especially by male role models like Buck. Again, however, his attempts to make himself look more manly read more fearful than mature, especially given Buck’s reaction. Buck’s laughter suggests his perspective is different than Will’s, and he likely believes that Will isn’t actually ready to surrender his innocence by killing someone.



Buck teasingly asks Will if he has a job to do and if he's going to follow the Rules, wiping his tears of laughter away. Will says he is going to, and tries to stand in a manly way, but Buck puts a finger to Will's chest. It feels like Buck is pressing the **L button** as he says that Shawn had it in him, but Will doesn't. Buck asks if Will even checked if the **gun** was loaded. Will didn't, and now almost shoots himself trying to figure out how to do so. Buck asks for the gun and easily slides the clip out. He says there are 14 bullets in the clip and one in the hole before putting the clip back in. Will asks how many bullets there should be. Buck says there should be 16, but shrugs.

Will reaches for the **gun**, but Buck won't let go. Will tries to yank the gun out of Buck's hands, but Buck holds on and laughs. Buck finally lets go and Will stumbles back and hits the wall. Under his breath, Buck repeats that Will doesn't have it in him. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes, puts one in his mouth, and lights it. The match sounds like a finger snap. The **elevator** stops.

SIX

Will has just an instant to put the **gun** back in his waistband, turn around, and try to look normal before a girl steps into the elevator. The girl is beautiful and looks about Will's age. She's wearing a flower dress, light makeup, and perfume that cuts through the cigarette smoke. The girl checks to see that the **L button** is lit while Will looks her up and down and tries to see up her skirt. When he leans back, however, the gun digs into his back and makes him wince, exposing his attempt for what it is.

The girl turns to Buck and sarcastically says that she didn't know smoking was legal in **elevators**. Will is disturbed that the girl might be able to see Buck and wonders if she thinks Will is the one who's been smoking. Buck makes faces at Will. The girl confirms that she can see the smoke, and points at Buck while fanning her face. The girl says she didn't know **guns** were allowed on elevators, either, which makes Will panic. Will doesn't know how the girl can see Buck, since he thought the man was a figment of his imagination. Now, Will knows this is real. Will is sure the reader must think he's nuts—maybe he is, but he swears this is true. He fans the smoke and stares at Buck, who leans back and takes a drag of his cigarette; the ash doesn't fall off the end.

The realization that there aren't as many bullets as there should be in the gun tells Will that there may be more to Shawn's story than what Will knows—Shawn might not have been murdered in cold blood; it's likely he killed someone too. Meanwhile, Will's inability to handle the gun properly speaks to his youth and innocence—he has no business trying to shoot someone when he barely knows how to operate the gun in the first place.



Goading Will into playing tug-of-war with the gun again drives home Will's youth, and how susceptible to manipulation he still is. It's not hard for Buck to draw him into the game, as Will wants so badly to succeed and prove himself to be cool and manly.



When the gun makes it impossible for Will to surreptitiously check out this girl, it more broadly points to the fact that if Will goes through with killing Riggs, he may not have many—or any—opportunities at romance at all. Choosing this violent path could lead to Will's imprisonment or death, which will deprive him of many other life experiences—even if, in his mind, killing Riggs will somehow catapult him into adulthood.



Will reiterates that he's well aware of how far-fetched his story sounds—he's still very concerned with how he comes off to others, even to the reader. However, whether or not the ghosts are real doesn't necessarily matter, since it seems like they'll offer Will a learning opportunity regardless. Buck's choice to stand back and silently tease Will reinforces his perception of Will as just an immature kid—one who would much rather flirt than confront ghosts in the elevator.



The girl touches Will's hand. Under normal circumstances, Will knows he'd take this opportunity to flirt or act like Shawn. However, Will knows that his impression of Shawn is just Shawn's impression of Buck. Since Buck's ghost is in the **elevator**, Will doesn't flirt, and he thinks it's hard to think about killing and kissing at the same time. The girl asks why Will needs "it." Will tries to act confused, but she clarifies that she means the **gun**. Will says coolly that that's not something to ask a stranger, and the girl agrees.

The girl puts a hand on Will's shoulder so he can smell her perfume and says she *does* know Will. Will is excited—he doesn't want to flirt in front of a ghost, but they won't be on the **elevator** forever. Plus, he remembers Shawn saying that if a girl says she knows you, that means she's been watching you. Will figures that Buck taught Shawn this, and hopes it's true. Will asks the girl where she knows him. She smiles and says she knows him from the playground monkey bars. Will thinks she's joking and says he's not a monkey, but the girl tells him she's serious. When Will says he's too old to be at playgrounds, the girl tells Will that she knew him when he was little.

The girl opens her purse, pulls out her wallet, and shows Will a photo the way white people in movies do to show off their kids. The photo is of Will and Dani at eight years old: Will is wearing Shawn's hand-me-downs: Dani is wearing a flower dress and shorts. In the photo, Dani hangs upside-down on the monkey bars with her tongue out. The sun is in Will's eyes, but the sun seems to come from Dani's eyes. The girl in the elevator asks Will if he remembers and snaps her wallet shut. Will says he does, and that it was one of the best and worst days of his life—but he wonders how the girl knew Dani. The girl pauses and asks Will if he remembers that she kissed him.

Will's eyes go wide and he asks, "Dani?" He realizes this girl is Dani, in the same flower dress from the photo. Her face is older, but still looks much the same as it did back then. Will says he remembers things, but then he can't continue. Dani finishes his sentence for him and says, "gunshots." Dani recalls how gunshots came from everywhere, and that her body felt like it was burning. She wanted to jump and swing away to somewhere else, just like they pretended they could do on the monkey bars. Buck quips that he wants to throw up. Will remembers Shawn screaming to get down. Shawn had laid on Will and Dani to protect them, and Will remembers staring at Dani as she died. Her mouth was open and he could see blood.

The connection of Shawn's flirting habits to Buck again shows how mentors influences mentees. It's more than just the Rules that get passed down: everything, from how one acts like a man to how one flirts, is learned from mentors like Buck and Shawn. Meanwhile, the girl in the elevator can apparently see Buck's ghost, and seems to know Will has a gun even though it's hidden in his waistband. This suggests that she, too, is a ghost—even if Will isn't ready to admit this to himself.



Again, Will clearly wants this girl to be real and alive. He doesn't want to address the supernatural experience he's having, especially since it'll force him to consider difficult questions. Will's attempts to flirt with the girl show that he truly does want to grow up and have relationships—he doesn't want to die or go to prison, which are the two most likely outcomes if he follows through with shooting Riggs.



Will's willingness to admit that this day was the best and worst day of his life shows that on some level, Will is willing to tap into his emotions and share them with others.



Will can't bring himself to say "gunshots"—that is, he's unable to directly acknowledge how Dani died. Her cause of death is the same as Shawn's and Buck's, and the same as what Riggs's will be if Will follows through with his plan. This suggests that on a subconscious level, Will isn't actually prepared to kill Riggs. Dani's death is an incredibly traumatic thing for Will to have witnessed as a child, and in many ways it seems to have catapulted Will forward into a version of maturity that was beyond his years. Trauma, in Will's community, is what forces young people to grow up.



Sometimes, Will feels like God is showing off pictures of his children from his wallet—since the world doesn't want to see the kids, God just puts his pictures away. Will confesses that when he learned Dani was dead, he cried all night. The next morning, Shawn taught him the first Rule: no crying. Will tells the reader that he never felt that way before Dani died. The morning after Shawn taught Will the first Rule, Will stood in the shower and felt like he wanted to scratch his skin off or punch something so that there could be a hole in something else. He offers the anagram “feel=flee.”

Will awkwardly tells Dani that it's good to see her, which he means wholeheartedly. He thinks that she would've grown up gorgeous had she lived. With a grin, Dani says it's good to see Will too, but he still hasn't answered her: why does he need a **gun**? Will's face hardens as he tells her Shawn was killed. When Dani asks who did it, Will snaps that Dani should know, but Dani asks Will to tell her himself anyway. Will says he thinks Carlson Riggs of the Dark Suns did it—it had to be him.

Dani died before she learned the Rules. Will explains them to her now so that she won't think he's out to get someone for no reason. He wants her to know that he has a purpose—this is about family. Had Will known the Rules when Dani died, he would've avenged her death as well. Dani asks Will what will happen if he misses. Will says he won't, but Dani persists and questions how he knows he won't miss. She asks if Will has ever shot a **gun**. Will says it doesn't matter, and repeats that it doesn't matter to himself. Dani is disappointed and puts her hands to her face as though she's trying to wipe away her worry, which Will doesn't think she'll be able to do.

Will turns to Buck, hoping he'll say something that will help. Instead, Buck merely pulls out his cigarettes and offers one to Dani. She takes one and thanks Buck. Will asks if Dani smokes; in response, Dani asks if Will shoots. She places the cigarette in her mouth and leans forward for Buck's match. As Buck strikes the match, the **elevator** stops.

Here, Will makes it very clear that there's no option in his world but to ignore his emotions and turn them into something else: violence. His anagram, which equates feeling with running away, suggests that this is Will's option if he's not allowed to cry. He can't outwardly express himself except through violence, rather than through tears or healthy communication.



Will insists that Carlson Riggs must have killed Shawn, but he doesn't provide any evidence or reasoning as to why he thinks so. It's clear, then, that Will is basing his claim on a gut feeling that may or may not align with reality. Dani's question is confrontational enough to suggest that she doesn't think Will should avenge Shawn's death at all, which is also why she refuses to tell him who really did kill Shawn.



Will is somewhat unclear here: he insists he would have avenged Dani's death if he'd known about the Rules back then, but there's no indication he had easy access to a gun back then or would have been able to use it at such young age. It seems, then, that Will is trying to prove his loyalty to Dani and to the reader by insisting that he's always been an avid follower of the Rules. Asking Will what happens if he misses forces Will to confront the possibility of killing another innocent kid like Dani, while Will's unwillingness to engage with her shows that he still believes there's no way to get out of the Rules.



Taking the cigarette and lighting up is a way for Dani to make the elevator even more claustrophobic for Will. In this sense, the ghosts seem to be intentionally making Will feel uncomfortable so that he'll understand the consequences of killing Riggs. If Will goes through with the plan, he'll end up trapped for the rest of his life—though likely in a prison cell or a coffin, not an elevator.



FIVE

The **elevator** feels like a box of smoke. Buck and Dani puff and puff on their cigarettes, but Will expects the smoke to rush out when the doors open. It doesn't. He thinks that cigarette smoke isn't supposed to feel like a wool blanket or a blizzard—it can be thick, but it shouldn't be solid enough to hold onto Will. Will coughs and fans the air, expecting the person outside to take the next elevator instead. Even if other people can't see the ghosts or their smoke, nobody wants to get on an elevator with a teenager who seems to be going crazy. However, the person does decide to get on Will's elevator, so Will steps back to make room. He's close to Dani and Buck, but he can't feel their breath.

Two big hands reach through the smoke, grab Will's shirt, and hold him by the neck as the doors close. Will can barely breathe and can't see anything. Suddenly, the hands release Will and grab him again in a headlock, just like Shawn used to do. Will hears laughter, but it feels like he's being held underwater and is drowning while the ocean laughs. He wonders how to tell this water that drowning isn't funny. When the hands release Will, he looks to Buck and Dani for help. They move to the corner, laughing and smoking.

Will yelps and puts one hand on the **gun**. The newcomer asks Will what he's reaching for and why. He calls Will "nephew." Will repeats the word in his head as a question, and the newcomer asks if Will still hasn't learned to fight back yet. There are lots of pictures of Uncle Mark at Will's apartment. He's always impeccably dressed in suits, with jewelry and a cigarette tucked behind his ear. He was handsome like Shawn, and always ready for the camera. Will thinks that he "foreshadow[ed] the flash." Will asks if he's going insane as Uncle Mark calls Will forward. As Uncle Mark towers above Will, Will remembers that his uncle is supposed to be dead. Uncle Mark puts his hands on Will's shoulders and says that he looks just like Pop.

According to Will's mother, Uncle Mark videotaped everything, from dance battles to gang fights, with a camera that Mark's mom bought him for his 18th birthday. He dreamed of making a movie and had a script idea, in which an uncool boy met his landlord's young girlfriend. The girl taught the boy everything about how to woo and treat girls, so the boy used his new skills to woo the girl. When the landlord found out, he kicked the boy out. The boy and the girl were in love, homeless, and happy. Will finds this silly. The boy is Uncle Mark's little brother, Will and Shawn's Pop. The girl is Will's mother.

Will's inability to understand what's happening here and why the smoke is behaving in this way mirrors his inability to understand the long-term consequences of shooting Riggs. However, Will is able to imagine what another person's perspective of the elevator will be if they get on. This suggests that it is possible for Will to amend his understanding of his own situation by imagining things from a different perspective—and, through doing this, potentially make a better choice.



Relating the hands that choke Will to the headlocks Shawn used to put Will in shows again how close Shawn and Will were—Shawn colors everything that Will experiences and knows about. This is, in part, because Will is grieving for Shawn right now and probably has Shawn more at the forefront of his mind than he normally would. Though it doesn't occur to Will, remembering Shawn is a healthier way to grieve than violence is.



Getting to meet deceased friends and family members helps Will connect more deeply with the long line of men who have passed down the Rules, along with other habits and cultural touchstones of the community. In particular, Uncle Mark's comment that Will looks just like Pop suggests that Will and Pop have a lot in common. His willingness to trust Mark more than Buck or Dani also shows that Will craves a relationship with his blood family—something he can't have, given the violence that has killed so many of his male family members.



Uncle Mark, like Will, is interested in arts and storytelling (Will's choice to tell his story through poetry, as well as his love of anagrams, point to an interest in creative writing). Mark's movie idea shows that he wants to tell the stories of the people close to him.



In the **elevator**, Uncle Mark pulls Will into a hug, but Will can't figure out how to hug a ghost. He thinks it's weird to know a person he doesn't know, but he also thinks it's weird to not know this person he knows. Will asks Uncle Mark why he's here as he looks his uncle up and down. At this, Uncle Mark looks sad, and Will figures that Uncle Mark expected Will to be excited to see him. Will is kind of excited, but seeing Mark's ghost is weird. Uncle Mark straightens wrinkles in his shirt, brushes his impeccably tailored pants, and squats to inspect his shiny leather shoes. He puts a finger in his mouth and scrubs at a nonexistent smudge on the toe.

A better question, suggests Uncle Mark, is why Will is here. Will thinks that one should always be skeptical of someone who answers a question with a question, because it's usually a setup. He offers another anagram: "cool=loco," and asks Uncle Mark what he means. Will wants to avoid talking about the coldness in his heart and the **gun** in his pants. Uncle Mark stands up and repeats Will's question. He cracks his knuckles and warns Will to not play around—Will needs to tell the truth now.

Will agrees to tell the truth and says that "they" killed Shawn last night. Uncle Mark interjects and asks if Will woke up today ready to fix things because he suddenly realized he could kill someone. Will nods, but Uncle Mark loudly asks Will again if he's correct. Will confirms that Uncle Mark is right, but says that the Rules are law. Uncle Mark huffs and closes his eyes. Will wonders if Uncle Mark thinking about the Rules—he knows they were passed to Mark and that he passed them to Pop, who passed them to Shawn, who passed them to Will. Will tells the reader that the Rules have always ruled, and they will rule forever.

Uncle Mark purses his lips, opens his eyes, and very seriously says that they're going to "set the scene" and talk through how Will's plan is going to go down. In Uncle Mark's "scene," Will stands over Shawn's bloody body. He takes his mother inside, and then finds Shawn's **gun**. Will thinks about the Rules, and the next day, he decides to find Rigg—the guy who he knows killed Shawn. Will gets into the **elevator**, goes down to the lobby, and walks the nine blocks to Riggs's apartment. He pulls the gun out. At this point, Will gets stuck and can't say anything else. He hopes that Uncle Mark will call "cut."

Uncle Mark likely died when Will was very young, so even if Will feels like he knows Uncle Mark through his mother's stories, he's not someone that Will actually remembers. This means that Will's perception of Uncle Mark in has come from other people's stories, not from Will's own experience. Now, Will can begin to expand his perspective and figure out who Uncle Mark really is.



Here, Uncle Mark takes on the role of a somewhat scary authority figure, something it doesn't seem like Will has had in his life since Pop died. If the ghosts are a figment of Will's imagination, it's possible to read this passage as Will's subconscious desire to have someone like Uncle Mark call him out and make him think critically about his actions. Given Will's mother's grief, there's no one to parent or mentor him right now.



Will lays out how the Rules have passed from man to man in his family for the last couple of decades. It's telling that while others try to make Will see how violence cycles from one generation to the next, Will merely focuses on how the Rules are passed down. This suggests that Will doesn't want to think about the violence inherent to the Rules, and would rather think about them in an idealized way. Idealizing them, moreover, makes it much harder to question or disagree with them.



Forcing Will to talk through what has already happened and what he plans to do makes him confront the fact that at this point, he still hasn't said outright that he's going to kill Riggs. He's mentioned that Rule No. 3 calls for killing, but when he talked about killing Riggs earlier this morning, he used "do it" as a euphemism. This suggests that on some level, Will is terrified of actually carrying his plan out and wants to avoid the truth at any cost—which is why he wants Uncle Mark to let him off the hook by calling "cut."



Uncle Mark encourages Will to finish. Will thinks that up until now, things were going well—the last part is just tripping him up. Uncle Mark demands that Will finished while Dani whimpers and Buck laughs. Will says again that he pulls the **gun** out, but he can't say what happens next. His mouth dries out and it almost feels like an allergic reaction to the thought of killing. Buck finishes the scene for Will by saying, "and shoots." Finally, Will can say the words himself. To the reader, he says that this movie would've been better than the one Uncle Mark was trying to make when he was alive. It wouldn't be as happy, but it'd be better.

At some point, Uncle Mark lost his camera and couldn't afford another one. He could've asked his mom, but Will says that would've been pointless. He could've stolen one, but that would mean he'd have to run and sweat. He also could've gotten a job, but Uncle Mark wasn't into having a job. So for one day, Mark did what lots of people in Will's neighborhood do: sold drugs. In an hour, Uncle Mark had enough money to buy a new camera, but he decided to finish out the day. Will is sure that the reader can tell where this is going. Uncle Mark held his corner for a month and made lots of money, but he became a target for a young hustler. Will's mother can never remember that hustler's name.

That hustler shot and killed Uncle Mark in order to take the corner from him. Everyone on the street ducked and hid, and then pretended like the yellow tape was a "neighborhood flag." Will thinks that Uncle Mark should've bought his camera and shot his movie after his first day selling drugs, but he never shot anything again. Will's Pop did, though. Will offers the anagram "cinema=iceman" and says that he's not sure what an iceman is, but it makes him think of cold-blooded bad guys. In the **elevator**, as Will says, "and shoots," it seems like the words go right into Will's body and cut him inside.

Uncle Mark reaches into his pocket and pulls out two cigarettes. Will is annoyed and hopes the second cigarette isn't meant for him—he doesn't smoke, and he reasons that people who are alive, like him, can't get away with smoking in **elevators**. Uncle Mark rolls a cigarette between his fingers and asks what happens next in Will's movie. Will says nothing else happens—it ends when he shoots. As Uncle Mark puts the cigarette in his mouth and motions for a match, he chuckles and says that's never the end. Buck lights the match and the elevator stops.

Buck continues to tease and belittle Will by finishing the scene for him. Especially given Buck's dramatic flair, this suggests that he's trying to trivialize Will's plan to kill Riggs or even make it seem cool. However, Will is well aware that shooting Buck is extremely serious and isn't a positive thing at all. Will's belief that that this movie would be a good one suggests that he's been taught to value violence like this over emotion, love, and support—what his parents' love story was all about.



Through Uncle Mark's story, Will lays out the many ways in which men in his community can get into trouble and meet their ends. Dealing drugs, he suggests through Mark, is something that may be lucrative—but only until someone inevitably shoots the dealer. The fact that Will's mother can't remember Mark's killer's name suggests that violence deaths like Mark's are common and not necessarily noteworthy in Will's community. The violence isn't always something personal—at times, it's just business.



Again, describing the yellow tape as a "neighborhood flag" suggests that Will and his neighbors see a lot of crime scenes, which speaks to how widespread this kind of violence is there. The sensation of feeling as though the words are cutting him up inside begins to make the case that shooting someone doesn't just kill the intended target; in some way, it damages or kills the shooter too. Uncle Mark, in other words, wants Will to understand that killing Riggs isn't without consequences.



Uncle Mark also wants Will to understand that even if Will follows the Rules by killing Riggs, it's not over—Will would then become a target for someone trying to avenge Riggs. Additionally, Will is likely to end up in prison for his crime. This clearly isn't something Will has considered, which shows how poorly the Rules prepare kids like Will to get through life.



FOUR

Even though there are three people smoking in the elevator, the smoke doesn't block the door this time. Will knows this doesn't make sense, and he asks the reader to stick with him. As the door slides open, Will recognizes Pop immediately—he's been waiting for Pop since he was three years old. Pop steps into the elevator, stares at Will for a moment, and then envelops him in a hug. Will wonders if it's possible for a hug to dissolve or peel back time, or the parts of one's soul that bleed. After letting Will go, Pop shakes Uncle Mark's hand and hugs him. The only sounds are those of hands touching and of backs being patted.

Will doesn't remember Pop. Shawn would try to get Will to remember Pop dressing up like Michael Jackson for Halloween and trying to moonwalk in the elevator; he insisted that Will laughed so hard he farted and wet himself. Will still doesn't remember, even though he wants to. According to Will's mother, Pop died of a broken heart. As a kid, Will always thought that Pop's heart was literally broken, like a toy or like the **middle drawer**. Shawn, however, said that Pop died for killing the man who killed Uncle Mark. A man approached Pop at a payphone, asked him if he knew a man named Gee, and shot him.

Will used to ask Shawn how he knew everything about Pop's death. Shawn always said he heard it from Buck, since Pop died on Buck's corner. At that point, 16-year-old Buck started looking out for seven-year-old Shawn. Will remembers none of this. Now, in the elevator, Pop greets Will. His voice is unfamiliar, but it's what Will always thought Shawn would sound like someday. Pop asks how Will has been, and Will replies that he's okay. Will thinks it's weird talking to his dad like a stranger and wonders how he's supposed to make small talk with Pop—the idea of a father is completely foreign Will. He wants to tell Pop everything about Shawn, his mother, and the Rules, but he holds back because Buck, Dani, and Uncle Mark have warm, odd looks on their faces.

Pop tells Will that he already knows. Will can hear the sadness and love in Pop's voice. Will chokes back tears and admits that he doesn't know what to do, wiping his face so he doesn't cry. Will vows to never cry in front of Pop, Dani, or anyone else. Pop asks Will what he thinks he should do. Will says he should follow the Rules, just like Pop did. Pop and Uncle Mark exchange a look as Uncle Mark asks if Will has ever heard Pop's story. Will says that Pop was killed at a payphone. Pop looks worried, seems to deliberate for a moment, and then says that that's not the story he means. He says Will doesn't know.

Though Will tries to be unemotional and tough, he obviously still craves emotional intimacy with other people—specifically, he craves relationships with his family members. Given what the reader knows about Buck, Dani, and Uncle Mark's stories, it's clear that Will's relationships have been fractured due to other people following the Rules of violent revenge. As such, Will must figure out how to balance his love for his family and friends with his understanding of how the Rules should work.



Not having memories of Pop is another way that Will's family is fractured. Whereas Shawn remembered what it felt like to have a father around to care for him and make him laugh, Will has never had that kind of adult mentor figure in his life. It's significant that Will's mother describes Pop's death in purely emotional terms. She's seems to be aware of how the Rules function: they're a way for men to deal with their emotions, albeit not a healthy one.



Will's desire to tell Pop everything speaks to how unprepared Will feels to kill Riggs and how desperately he needs adult guidance and emotional connection. At this point, however, Will is still prioritizing the Rules, which insist he can't show weakness by confiding in Pop or asking for advice. Connecting Pop's voice to Shawn also encourages Will to begin to make his own connections between the different generations of men in his family. Ideally he'll be able to see that they're connected by blood, love, and emotionally intimacy—not just the Rules.



Will clings tightly to the idea that he can't show any vulnerability—even to ghosts that might not exist outside of his own head—because doing so means he's weak. However, this denies him any opportunities to broaden his perspective and think about the Rules in a more nuanced way. In other words, emotional repression traps Will in a state where he can't as easily acquire new information, as considering that new information would require him to question the Rules.



Pop says that after Uncle Mark died, his heart was shattered. Will and Shawn were little, and Pop didn't feel like a father or a husband when he was grieving—but he didn't cry, didn't snitch, and knew to follow the Rules. So that night, Pop walked to where Mark hung out and waited until a man arrived and sold someone else drugs. Pop knew that man killed Mark, so he pulled his hood up and started shooting. The man went down, but Pop says he shot him again because he was so angry. Something had gotten into Pop, Will thinks—it must've been what his mother calls the “nighttime.”

Pop raced the long way home and got rid of his **gun**. Back at home, Pop says he took a hot shower. He couldn't kiss Will's mother, or Will and Shawn. Pop sat in the bathtub and felt like the porcelain kept him from falling asleep and having nightmares. Will insists that Pop did what he had to do—he already knows this story, and the Rules are law in their neighborhood. Uncle Mark and Pop look at Will. There's some combination of guilt and grief in their eyes, which makes sense when Pop admits that he killed the wrong guy.

Confused, Will asks if Pop didn't kill Gee. Pop says he killed Gee, but Gee didn't kill Uncle Mark—he was involved with Mark's killer, but was just a kid trying to make money. With a stutter, Will asks why Pop killed him then. In a trembling voice, Pop says that he didn't know Gee wasn't the right guy. He was sure that Gee killed Mark—he had to be. Will leans next to Dani, thinking that Pop isn't the patient, precise father he imagined; the Pop in his mind didn't shoot people randomly. Will is disappointed that he's been missing someone who messed up. Pop stares back at Will, but Will can't tell what he's thinking. He wonders if he's just what Pop imagined, and if that disappoints Pop.

Will thinks of how he used to see kids on playgrounds stand on their dads' feet. The dads would walk with their kids on their feet, and the kids had to trust that their dads would take them to the right place. Pop takes the first step forward, and he and Will meet in the middle of the **elevator** and hug again. Will tries to forget all of his confusion and lose himself in this feeling of being embraced by his father. But suddenly, Pop pulls the **gun** from Will's waistband and puts it to Will's head.

Based on Pop's story, the “nighttime” seems to mean a sense of unbridled fury, and the desire to make others suffer as a form of retribution. The nighttime is, in this sense, the result of the emotional illiteracy in Will's community. Carrying out the violence of the Rules is the only way for men to feel as though they can make themselves feel better—but all this does perpetuate the cycle of violence.



Up until Pop admits he killed the wrong man, Will seems to accept that murdering another person is just what Pop had to do. In Will's mind, violence and emotional disconnect are just par for the course in following the Rules. This attitude contrasts greatly with Pop's confession, as telling the truth about this helps show Will that the Rules aren't foolproof, and it's not always worth it to follow them.



As Pop explains his thinking about killing Gee, he very purposefully uses the same kind of language that Will has used throughout the novel to assert that Riggs is the one who killed Shawn. Pop's confession, however, shows that while this kind of hunch may feel correct, following through based on assumptions can go terribly wrong. Killing the wrong person means that Pop didn't actually follow the Rules and avenge Uncle Mark's death—Gee died for nothing.



Will clearly wants to trust Pop and reassume the role of a child in need of guidance, rather than continuing to act like an adult who knows everything. That Will is able to step forward and hug Pop like this is a hopeful step in the right direction—he seems willing to forgive Pop for his transgressions, at least for now.



Will shrieks and asks what Pop is doing. A single tear falls down Pop's cheek (which, according to Will, doesn't really count as crying). Will's chest seems to crush him as Pop cocks the **gun**. To Will, this sounds like a door closing. Will calls for help, but he can't see anyone else in the elevator or even smell their cigarette smoke. Suddenly it's just Will and Pop, and Will thinks they're both losing their minds. Pop stands over Will. It's the first time Will has had a gun to his head or been this close to death. He can't believe that Pop is the one holding the gun.

Will allows that he should've been wondering whether Pop could actually shoot him, since the version of Pop in the **elevator** isn't real. But their hugs were real, and the **gun** is real—there's a bullet in the gun for every year of Will's life. Will's stomach hurts and he feels himself splitting apart. He wets himself and suddenly he can smell cigarettes and urine. Pop uncocks the gun, hugs Will, and puts the gun back into Will's waistband.

Will screams, pushing Pop away. He's wet and feels weak and childish. Pop leans against the wall and stares up until Uncle Mark approaches him and offers him the extra cigarette. Pop stares at Will as he puts the cigarette in his mouth. Buck steps forward with a match as Will steps into the corner, wishing the **elevator** would get to the lobby and that everything could hurry up. Buck lights a match and the elevator stops.

THREE

A chubby, light-skinned stranger with a mop of dirty brown hair gets into the **elevator**. He doesn't acknowledge anyone, so Will figures he's real and not a ghost like the others. Will is embarrassed about having wet himself, but he's relieved he's not entirely crazy. Buck starts trying to get the stranger's attention, and the man finally turns. Buck asks if the man is Frick, and the man reluctantly says he is as he shakes Buck's hand. Smiling, Buck asks if Frick remembers him and shows off the back of his T-shirt. Frick looks confused for a second, and then opens his arms to Buck and asks, "what's good?" Will thinks that *nothing* is good. Buck introduces Frick to everyone in the elevator, including Will, whom he refers to as Shawn's little brother.

Though Pop never explains why he holds the gun to Will's head, it's likely that he wants to impress upon Will just how high the stakes are in a situation like this. He wants Will to understand the terror of staring down his death, and to show Will that murdering someone is horrifying for both the killer and the victim.



Wetting himself out of fear shows Will that when push comes to shove in violent moments like this, he will revert to acting in a way that he himself deems childish. He wets himself, after all, just like the infant he compared Shawn's gun to would. Pop feels comfortable giving the gun back now that Will has been put in his place.



Though Pop hasn't been around to raise Will, holding the gun to Will's head is an important (albeit harsh) teaching moment between father and son. Pop is able to show Will that if he follows through with killing Riggs, he will be plagued with lifelong regret and fear.



The addition of this stranger show Will that the kind of violence the Rules call for doesn't just affect Will's family. Instead, it has far-reaching effects on the families of other people who get drawn into the neighborhood's various conflicts.



Before Frick can say anything, Will asks how Buck knows Frick and why Frick is in the **elevator**. Buck scoffs and says that Frick murdered him. Will is shocked and can't formulate a coherent thought; he can only ask "wait" and "what" again and again. Buck starts to explain, but then stop to asks Frick why he's called by that nickname. Frick says that his real name is Frank, but that he's a twin, and his uncle called him and his sister Frick and Frack. Buck pauses and says that because of Frick, the only reason people in the neighborhood know Buck's legal name is because it's on his tombstone.

Buck's legal name was James, but he always went by Buck. Buck was short for "young-buck," a joke name Buck's stepfather gave him because he couldn't grow facial hair. Will explains that Buck was two-sided: he had a stepdad and a real dad. His stepdad, a preacher, raised him, but Buck's real dad seemed to hold more sway. He was a bank robber who would steal anything. According to gossip, Buck learned to be good, but the bad was still in his blood. Will wonders if badness is the "nighttime" his mother talks about. The nighttime will put a **gun** in one's hand and sharpen one's teeth.

At first, Buck sold drugs on the corner, but he stopped after Pop got shot. Then, Buck became Shawn's stand-in big brother and started robbing suburban neighborhoods. He mainly stole money, but sometimes sneakers and jewelry, which he loved to show off. Now, Will is shocked to learn that Frick killed Buck. Buck throws a hand on Frick's shoulder and asks Will if Shawn never told him the story. Will says that Shawn never talked much about it; he'd just said that someone shot Buck and that he knew who it was. Will remembers Shawn's dark face and the cops coming to ask questions. Shawn said nothing. He locked himself in his room, and the next day, Will caught him putting bullets into the **gun** clip.

Buck explains that he and Shawn were drinking at the basketball court. Shawn was talking about getting into a little fight with a Dark Sun, since he had to go down to the store to buy special soap for his mother. Will thinks it'd be dumb to tell Buck about how important that soap is to their mother, so instead he says that Riggs was the Dark Sun that Shawn was talking about. Buck replies he doesn't know the guy's name, but apparently the guy ran up to Shawn and insisted that Shawn didn't belong there. Buck says that Shawn was upset because he and this kid had grown up together, but Buck advised Shawn to let it go—however, Shawn was always emotional. Will knows Shawn was talking about Riggs.

The idea that Frick is the only reason people know Buck's legal name situates Frick as someone who's going to add a new perspective to the story Will is gradually putting together. Further, having Buck's killer right here in the elevator, looking so nondescript, challenges Will's narrative of who kills and who's important in this story. Frick may not look like much, but he's still played a role in Will's life by killing Buck, which surely affected Shawn.



Will's comment that the "nighttime" was in Buck's blood is telling—it implies that Buck didn't have a choice of whether or not to end up where he did in life or in death. This idea is questionable, though, given that the book has also suggested that everyone has a choice—even people like Buck who seem destined to fail. Insisting that Buck had no choice is a way for Will to create a narrative in which Buck's death was inevitable, not the result of choices Buck made.



Even if families are generally fractured by violence in Will's community, there are still people like Buck willing to mentor and care for young people. This offers some hope for Will, as it suggests that there's someone in the community who might be willing to step into Shawn's role as Will's mentor. Meanwhile, Shawn's brief story of Buck's death is clearly a way to avoid difficult questions, just as Will has been doing all along in the elevator.



Will is still trying his hardest to prioritize loyalty to the dead over loyalty to the living, as evidenced when he refocuses the conversation back to Riggs instead of explaining the soap. The idea that Shawn was an extremely emotional person who took things personally suggests that he may have been more like Will than Will lets on. Further, while Shawn may well have been talking about Riggs, this isn't inarguable proof that Riggs killed Shawn—just that they weren't on good terms.



Buck says that while Shawn was talking about this guy, he was trying to show Shawn a chain he stole from a kid in the suburbs. The terrified kid had handed it over right away. Will asks what this has to do with Frick. Buck tells Will to hold on and says that he gave Shawn the gold chain because Shawn was so upset about the Dark Sun. After this, Shawn left the basketball court. With a smile, Frick interjects that *this* is where he comes in. Meanwhile, Will explains to the reader how to become a Dark Sun: one must live nine blocks from Will's building, obtain a cigarette burn under the right eye, and perform a "Dark Deed"—robbing, beating, or killing someone. Will thinks that Dark Suns must also be "corny."

Frick says that for his initiation, his Dark Deed was, funny enough, just to rob Buck. Will doesn't think this is funny at all. Frick says that everyone knew Buck always had stolen things on him, but nobody would mess with him because of his fathers. Will explains that "gangstas" always respect older, original gangstas (OGs) and preachers who act like gangstas. Frick explains that his plan was to steal from Buck at the basketball court, but when he pulled his **gun** on Buck, Buck laughed. Buck told Frick he couldn't deal with a dude who seemed as silly as the suburban kid he just stole from. Everyone on the **elevator** except Will laughs.

Frick brushes off the laughter and says that nobody can fault him for trying to earn his stripes. He catches Pop and Uncle Mark's eyes, and they both nod and agree. Frick continues his story and says that Buck swung at him like Frick wasn't holding a **gun**. Frick got scared and pulled the trigger. At this, Buck makes a gun with his fingers and says, "Bang-bang." Will asks what this has to do with Shawn, and Frick answers that Shawn followed the Rules. Will swallows and struggles to get words out. Buck puts the finger gun against Frick's chest and says "bang-bang" again. Frick corrects Buck and says that Shawn only pulled the trigger once. Will thinks of the 15 bullets in his gun.

Frick laments that Shawn killed him before he got his "Shining" and rubs under his right eye. Then, he yanks down his collar to reveal a disgusting, bloody hole in his chest. He says that Shawn's fingerprints are in his chest somewhere. Buck laughs and says he's certain it's Shawn's middle fingerprint. When everyone's done laughing, Will asks how Shawn knew Frick killed Buck. Buck explains that there was only one other person who was at the court every night. He was a young kid trying to dunk: Tony. Will tells the reader that Tony's talk isn't snitching; snitching is specifically talking to police. When Tony talks, it's a way for him to seem bigger and more important.

Though gang-related violence may have led to Shawn's death (and definitely led to Frick's), Will has made it very clear that gangs offer very important social services to members. Members of a gang get to feel important, and they gain the protection of other individuals who are required to care about them. Essentially, men who join gangs are given a kind of family, but one that is governed by the Rules.



Performing his Dark Deed would've been Frick's major coming-of-age moment, but it's also likely what set Frick down the path that led to his death. Even though gangs may make their members feel more supported, the violence intrinsic to these groups means that the men never truly get to come of age. They may be initiated into groups or thought of as adults, but all that does is mark them to be killed soon after.



Having this chain of violence illustrated so clearly allows Will to easily see the deadly consequences of following the Rules. Whoever killed Shawn was also likely following the Rules, just like Will intends to do by killing Riggs. The fact that Will is struggling to make sense of this or gather his thoughts implies that he hasn't really thought about this before, even if he recognizes that the Rules have been passed down through generations of men. For the first time, he has to face the real consequences of this violence.



Even if Will insists that Tony's talking isn't snitching, it's possible to argue that indeed, it is—there's nothing to stop the police from overhearing, and there's also nothing stopping a rival gang member picking up on what he says and using it to exact revenge, just like Shawn did. Talking, however, does the same thing for Tony as joining the Dark Suns did for Riggs: it makes him seem more important in the community. This once again suggests that there's a very specific way to be a recognized as a man in Will's neighborhood.



Buck asks Will how he knows that Riggs got Shawn. Will says it makes sense—Riggs avenged Frick's death. Dani pipes up and asks Frick if he knows Riggs. Will gives a quick description of Riggs, but Frick looks confused and asks who he's talking about. Will wishes he knew an anagram for "poser." Frick looks at Will like he's crazy, turns around, and stares at the **elevator** door. Will realizes he can only see his own reflection in the door. Frick pulls out his own cigarettes and lights one. Finally, the elevator stops.

Frick's inability to recognize Riggs's description throws a major wrench into Will's plans, as it clearly suggests that he's after the wrong guy. This is a major turning point for Will—he now has to decide if he's going to follow through on his (probably incorrect) gut instinct, if he's going to figure out who really killed Shawn and go after them, or if he's going to abandon the Rules altogether and accept that they're an inadequate way of dealing with grief.



TWO

No one is there when the **elevator** door opens, so Will punches the **L button** over and over. Will mumbles "come on" under his breath. He's scared, upset, and uncomfortable spending one more second in this elevator. It's starting to feel like a coffin. Uncle Mark chuckles that Will would never survive in prison as the doors finally start to close. Will feels happy they're almost there, but just before the doors shut, fingers slip in and cause them to open again. It's Shawn. He steps into the smoky elevator wearing the blood-soaked clothes in which he died.

The idea that the elevator is starting to feel like a coffin reinforces the implication that if Will chooses to get off the elevator at the lobby, he's going to die in some way: either he'll end up in a coffin in the ground, or he'll spend the rest of his life in a jail cell.



Everyone is thrilled to see Shawn. He slaps hands with Buck, spins Dani around, and embraces Uncle Mark. Beaming, Shawn approaches Pop. They hug and then shake hands like men. Then, all the ghosts line up against the wall as Shawn turns to face Will. Will recounts how, as a kid, he'd follow Shawn around making a strange noise. Shawn would wait for Will to get bored and then ignore him for the rest of the day, which always surprised Will. Now, Will and Shawn look at each other. Will says Shawn's name, but Shawn says nothing.

Shawn treatment of Will when he made this odd noise as a kid was a way for Shawn to teach Will how to behave: if Will made that obnoxious noise, he didn't get attention. Now, it's possible that Shawn is doing much the same thing by indicating that if Will kills Riggs, he also won't get the recognition or outcome he's looking for.



Will steps forward and hugs Shawn, but Shawn stands there awkwardly instead of hugging him back. Will thinks Shawn looks like "a **middle drawer** / of a man." He asks Shawn why he won't say anything, and then tells him about the drawer and the **gun**. Will tells Shawn that he's doing what Shawn always told him to do, which is what Buck taught Shawn to do, what their grandfather taught Uncle Mark to do, and what Uncle Mark taught Pop to do. Will says that so far, he's followed the first two rules: he hasn't cried and hasn't snitched. Will explains that he's on his way to follow through on Rule No. 3 and kill Riggs. He says three times he knows it was Riggs.

In this moment, Will still doesn't seem to understand that if he follows through with the Rules, he'll likely end up dead like his friends and family members in the elevator. Killing Riggs isn't a way for Will to get his life back or show loyalty to those who are living (like Will's mother). Further, suppressing his emotions and resorting to violent revenge instead means that Will can't come to terms with his grief and move on.



Will confesses that he's scared and needs to know if he's doing the right thing. He asks if the Rules are the rules, and he asks "Right?" many times. The words seem to take the shape of a question mark, with Shawn's name at the bottom. Will tries to hold back his tears and looks away from Shawn. Around him, everyone else's lit cigarettes look like glowing **L buttons**. Will looks back at Shawn and sees that he's crying, with tears pouring from his eyes and snot running from his nose. Will reminds Shawn that the first Rule is no crying as one of his own tears falls down his face—but it's only one, so it doesn't count. Will repeats the rule to himself.

Even though Shawn isn't supposed to cry and never did when he was alive, Will realizes that Shawn is still his favorite and only brother. A grinding, moaning sound, like the one an **elevator** makes, comes from deep within Shawn. That noise is the only thing Shawn communicates to Will. The elevator stops. Will suddenly thinks that when his ears ring, it sounds more like a flatline than a bell. In the moment before the doors open, everyone stands there in the thick smoke. The elevator is crowded and feels like a coffin.

Will looks around. All he can see through the smoke is the orange glow from the five cigarettes. Shawn isn't smoking, so he's invisible. Will senses that Shawn's cigarette is burning in Will's stomach, and it feels like stinging fire. Will wants out; the **elevator** door opens and the smoke rushes out. Everyone else rushes out behind the smoke and the **L button's** light goes off. Will stands alone, dried tears on his face and his pants still wet. The **gun** is still in his waistband. Shawn turns back to Will, tears still in his eyes, and asks Will if he's coming.

Will cannot escape the fact that Shawn seems unsupportive of Will's plan to kill Riggs. Only in death can Shawn finally show his emotions and cry. While this is, of course, a devastating fate for Shawn, Shawn's tears also show Will that it's possible life doesn't have to be as unemotional as Shawn thought it did. Will still has the opportunity to make healthier choices.



This realization is Will's major coming-of-age moment, as he finally understands that expressing emotion doesn't mean a person is weak or less worthy. The horrible noise that Shawn makes again connects Will's plan to ending up in an confined, elevator-like space of some sort—whether it's a coffin or a prison cell.



The L button's light going off reminds Will that if he chooses to get out of the elevator and follow through with killing Riggs—something even he conceptualizes as a "loser" move—his own light (his life) will, at some point, go out too. The novel's ambiguous ending means the reader is left to decide what Will is going to do. Regardless of whether Will's new perspective does lead him to abandon the Rules, readers will hopefully be encouraged to undergo the same kind of thought experiments in difficult situations that Will underwent in the elevator.





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