

Ordinary People



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JUDITH GUEST

Guest graduated from the University of Michigan in 1958 and became a grade-school teacher shortly thereafter. Though she has been writing since the age of eleven, Guest claims to have completed very few pieces until she entered a short story-writing contest in 1970. Shortly thereafter she stepped away from teaching to "concentrate on *finishing something*"; the result was *Ordinary People*, a short story that eventually grew into her first novel after three years of work. Published in 1976, the novel was awarded the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize the same year. Guest has since written five more novels in addition to several short stories and non-fiction pieces. She currently lives in the Twin Cities region of Minnesota.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ordinary People is one of the many psychological novels to emerge from the 60s and 70s. Books like [Flowers for Algernon](#) (1966) appeared at a time when psychiatry was gaining interest in mainstream American culture. At about the same time, "realistic fiction" for young adults was coming into its own. While Guest's novel was not explicitly written or marketed as a book for young adults, the presence of complex teen-aged characters put it on par with novels such as [Lord of the Flies](#) and [Catcher in the Rye](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Ordinary People*
- **When Written:** 1976
- **Where Written:** Michigan
- **When Published:** 1976
- **Genre:** Psychological realism
- **Setting:** Evanston, Illinois (a town just outside of Chicago; home to Northwestern University), especially Conrad's school, Lake Forest High; some scenes in Chicago and Dallas, Texas
- **Climax:** Conrad learns about his friend Karen's suicide.
- **Antagonist:** While each character may feel at odds with different characters at different times, many of them struggle hardest against their own thoughts and emotions.
- **Point of View:** Third-person subjective; alternates between an "omniscient" narrator and the (implied) ideas and voices of each character

EXTRA CREDIT

From Page to Screen. *Ordinary People* was adapted into a film in 1980. Directed by Robert Redford and starring Donald Sutherland and Mary Tyler Moore, the film eventually won four Academy Awards—including the year's title for Best Picture.

Too Hot to Handle? *Ordinary People's* challenging content is not without its critics. The American Library Association lists the novel as one of the 100 books "most frequently challenged" between 1990 and 1999, making it a mainstay of many Banned Books Week reading lists.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Jarretts are a well-to-do family who live near Chicago. Calvin (Cal) Jarrett, a tax attorney, and his wife Beth Jarrett have two sons, Jordan (better known as Buck) and Conrad. Tragedy strikes the family one summer when the oldest, Buck, dies in a sailing accident. Conrad feels personally responsible for his brother's death, and after a gradual spiral into depression he tries to commit suicide by slashing his wrists. Thankfully Cal and Beth find him in the bathroom before he dies; they eventually commit him to a mental hospital, where he stays for eight months.

The novel begins one month after Conrad is released from the hospital. Cal has arranged for Conrad to start seeing a therapist named Dr. Tyrone Berger, yet he finds it difficult to get through each day. Spending time with his friends and swimming teammates Lazenby, Stillman, Truan, Genthe, and Van Buren wears on him constantly. In choir practice he meets a new student named Jeannine Pratt, whom he finds to be stunningly beautiful. He realizes that swimming no longer gives him the joy he once experienced. Most significantly, his relationship with Beth is strained; they hardly speak to one another, as Beth avoids him as much as possible.

Conrad visits Berger for the first time. The psychiatrist's appearance, attitude, and approach all unsettle Conrad, but they agree to meet twice a week. The sessions come at an awkward time for the Jarretts, who find it difficult to navigate their family situation. Beth is annoyed when Cal mentions Conrad's therapy sessions at a party. Berger advises Conrad to loosen his grip on his emotions. Meanwhile, an old friend from the hospital, named Karen, contradicts Berger's advice. And with the exception of Lazenby, Conrad's friends offer little help at all. Some relief comes with quitting the swim team in order to make room for his meetings with Berger.

As Christmas approaches, though, things begin to look up for Conrad. He makes progress with Berger, and his relationship with Jeannine begins to blossom. Unfortunately some news

from Beth dampens the mood: to her surprise and embarrassment, a friend of hers reveals that Conrad quit the swim team. The revelation sparks a huge argument between Conrad, Cal, and Beth. Cal feels trapped between his wife and his son, both of whom feel wronged by the other. Cal is further disappointed when his attempt to surprise Conrad with a car for Christmas falls flat.

The new year brings a turn for the better. Cal pays Berger a visit of his own, which makes him more aware of his own feelings. Conrad begins dating Jeannine in earnest. She gradually begins to open up about her own troubled past, which makes her one of the few people with whom Conrad feels a sense of trust. Once again, though, Conrad meets difficulty when he encounters his friends from the swim team in the school parking lot after a meet. A few bitter words from Stillman spark a fistfight. After the fight subsides Lazenby expresses his disappointment about his waning friendship with Conrad.

Cal and Beth take a trip to Dallas. While there, Cal plays in a golf tournament, and Beth catches up with her brother Ward and his wife Audrey. Conrad stays behind in Chicago with his grandparents. One day he reads in the newspaper that his friend Karen has committed suicide; the announcement sends Conrad into a deep bout of depression, during which he recalls the moments leading to his own brother's death. Meanwhile, still in Texas, Cal finally unleashes his growing resentment toward Beth. He finds her coolness toward Conrad disturbing.

In a surge of emotion, Conrad calls Berger to talk through his overwhelming breakthrough. Eventually Conrad realizes that his fear and anxiety are rooted in guilt – blaming himself for Buck's death was his biggest source of torment. He makes the realization just as Beth and Cal return from their trip. Their eye-opening argument drives them apart, and Beth decides to move out. The novel ends on a positive note, however: Cal and Conrad take their first steps toward a more open relationship, Conrad makes strides with Jeannine and Lazenby, and he realizes that Beth loves him despite her emotional distance.

Calvin (Cal) Jarrett – Calvin, who is called Cal throughout the novel, is father to Conrad and Buck and husband to Beth Jarrett. A childhood spent in an orphanage fuels Cal's deep desire to care and provide for his family, and is a major factor in his eventual decision to become a lawyer. Despite his material comfort, Cal harbors a deep sense of responsibility for both of his sons' misfortunes. A sense of helplessness in the face of fate – combined with the looming memory of his one-time mentor Arnold Bacon – is Cal's main obstacle.

Beth Jarrett – Beth is mother to Conrad and Buck and wife to Cal Jarrett. She is the envy of many characters in the novel; she is physically attractive, driven, and a perfectionist. Her reaction to hardship is tightly controlled, and usually leads her to conceal her feelings. She is emotionally distant from Conrad (he describes her as a "deeply personal person"), and from the rest of her family as well.

Dr. Berger – Conrad's psychiatrist. He is wildly different from Dr. Crawford or any of the other staff members from the hospital in which Conrad was kept for three months. Though off-putting in his appearance and mannerisms, Berger's simultaneously relaxed and confrontational approach helps Conrad recognize the difficulty and benefits of healthy relationships.

(Joe) Lazenby – Lazenby is one of Conrad's oldest friends; the two have known each other since early childhood, and both are members of their school's swim team. Besides Cal, he is the character who is most proactive in his attempts to help Conrad recover. Unfortunately Conrad spends much of his time distancing himself from Lazenby, which puts considerable strain on their friendship.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jordan (Buck) Jarrett – Conrad's brother; Beth and Cal's son. Though he only appears in flashbacks and secondhand references, Buck is arguably the most important character in the novel. His death in a sailing accident triggers the emotional hardship through which the Jarretts struggle throughout *Ordinary People*.

Jeannine Pratt – A relatively new student at Conrad's school, Jeannine is Conrad's love interest. She sings in the school choir with him, and she is treated as an angelic figure for much of the novel. However, her troubled past enables her to help Conrad work through his own.

(Kevin) Stillman – Another of Conrad's friends, and a fellow member of the swim team. Though the two are supposed to be friends, Stillman often antagonizes Conrad, and the two come to blows near the climax of the novel.

Dr. Leo Crawford – Conrad's main counselor during his time in the mental hospital. Like Buck, Crawford himself never appears in the novel. But his care sets a precedent to which Conrad, his family, Karen, and Berger react in their journey to recovery.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Conrad Jarrett – Conrad is the protagonist of the novel. He is the youngest son of Calvin and Beth Jarrett; his older brother, Buck, dies in a sailing accident before the novel's plot begins. *Ordinary People* traces Conrad's recovery from a severe bout of depression and attempted suicide brought on by his brother's death, for which he feels responsible. With the help of his father, his psychiatrist Dr. Berger, and his friends Lazenby, Karen, and Jeannine, Conrad undergoes the painful but liberating process of escaping guilt and learning to love himself and others.

Arnold Bacon – Cal's former mentor. Bacon plucks Cal from the Evangelical Home and takes him under his wing as a protégé; he puts Cal through law school and helps him establish his career as a lawyer. Bacon's character and words haunt Cal as he struggles to figure out his own personality.

Ray Hanley – Cal's legal partner. Cal looks to Ray for advice about running a family, but Ray is largely unable to give his friend much guidance.

Coach Salan – Coach of Conrad's swim team. He is a constant point of frustration for Conrad. Above all else, Salan is insensitive to Conrad's mental issues.

(Phil) Truan, (Don) Genthe, (Dick) Van Buren – Conrad's (estranged) friends; members of the swim team.

Ward Butler – Beth's brother. He lives in Dallas with his wife Audrey.

Audrey Butler – Ward's wife; Beth's sister-in-law.

Charlie and Kerry Butler – Ward and Audrey's sons.

Howard and Ellen Butler – Conrad's grandparents; Beth's parents.

Mike Pratt – Jeannine's younger brother.

Cherry – Cal and Ray's secretary.

Lynn Searles – A former secretary of Cal and Ray's. She was "the best legal secretary" the firm ever had, but she leaves the firm after having an affair with Ray.

Suzanne Mosely – A girl in Conrad's trigonometry class. He sympathizes with her academic struggles.

The Murrays, the Genthes, and the Klins – A few families in the Jarretts' neighborhood.

Robbie – A friend of Conrad's from the hospital.

A policeman – Encounters Conrad as the climax of the novel begins.

A woman – Follows Conrad through his local library in a pivotal scene.

Ms. Pratt – Jeannine's mother.

Paul Ferrier – Ms. Pratt's boyfriend.



MENTAL DISORDER

Ordinary People explores, expands, and complicates the idea of what it means to suffer from mental disorder. At first glance, Conrad seems to represent a typical understanding of mental disorder. Having lost his brother in a sailing accident and blaming himself for the outcome, Conrad attempts suicide and is committed to a mental hospital. Even after his release he continues to consult Dr. Berger, a therapist. Conrad's main task (which is arguably the central activity of the novel) is to overcome the crushing sense of guilt that fuels his torment.

But however distinctive his situation may be, Conrad isn't the only character struggling with the impact of his brother's death. While Conrad's parents might at first appear to be coping with the tragedy as well as might be expected, Guest uses the language of mental disease to describe them both. Beth, beneath her composed exterior, is plagued by "hysteria" and "madness." These emotions especially come to the fore when Beth feels "distinctly trapped" in her living situation—when cleanliness or quiet are compromised and she finds herself unable to change the circumstances. Cal, too, with his lack of direction and guilt-ridden approach to parenting, feels "trapped and hot" when a casual visit with Berger slowly leads him to confront the truth about his own misguided thirst for control. Even Berger's appearance and mannerisms initially strike Cal and Conrad as signs of the doctor's "madness."

Ultimately, the novel suggests that mental disorder is more than a matter of medical diagnosis. Conrad's friend Karen recalls an observation she made while the two were in hospital: "People were, you know, turned on all the time. And you just can't live like that. You can't live with all that emotion floating around, looking for a place to land. It's too exhausting." In contrast, Berger advises Conrad that "The thing that hurts you is sitting on yourself...[D]epression is not sobbing and crying and *giving vent*, it is plain and simple *reduction of feeling*." Mental health in the novel is a balance between these extremes of being too "turned on" and experiencing a "reduction of feeling." Because they can neither "hold it together" in the face of grief, nor remain emotionally honest, all of the Jarretts are ill at ease in ways that stifle their relationships both with others and with their inner selves. A lack of emotional balance has nothing to do with looking or feeling "sick". As many of the characters in *Ordinary People* discover, mental disorder can set in even when everything *seems* to be under control.



FATE VS. RESPONSIBILITY

The habits and behaviors of many of the characters in *Ordinary People* are largely motivated by the desire to control their world. From the moment he meets her, Cal recognizes Beth as a decisive go-getter: "I knew when you aced Ray on that first serve," she recalls, "I was going



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.

to marry you and that was all there was to it." Her obsessive cleanliness and general concern for keeping up appearances stem from the same decisiveness, the same need to control the situation. Beth similarly tries to control the information that she and her family share about their issues. For instance, she reproaches Cal for discussing Conrad's therapy sessions at a party, describing such openness as being "in the worst possible taste. ...Not to mention a violation of privacy." For Cal, meanwhile, his sensitivity to his environment and Conrad's emotions define his nervous approach to parenting. He calls this hyper-awareness *responsibility*—"You cannot afford to miss any signs...". He wants to make sure he never misses anything—he wants to be in control.

The urge to take responsibility will not allow these characters to act without latching onto some "statement of purpose." As the book's opening states: "To have a reason to get up in the morning, it is necessary to possess a guiding principle. A belief of some kind. A bumper sticker, if you will." Cal, especially, feels pressed to put his mission into words; *Who the hell are you?* is a question he spends much of the novel trying to answer for himself. But his effort is undermined by the nagging sense that he's actually unable to take on as much responsibility as he feels he should. Regarding Conrad's mental illness, "[Cal] does not believe himself to be innocent. It has to be his fault, because fault equals responsibility equals control equals eventual understanding."

Similarly, Conrad blames himself for his brother Buck's death. Berger works to free Conrad from this type of thinking. Conrad's recovery requires him to realize that, despite his own actions, many things in his life—the feelings of others, his emotions, even Buck's death—are out of his control. Conrad's crushing guilt and eventual suicide attempt are rooted in his need to assign blame and responsibility for an event that was purely accidental. "Guilt. Is not punishment, Berger said. Guilt is simply guilt." Not every character in *Ordinary People* is able to realize this, but those who *do* eventually learn to escape the stress that comes with an overwhelming need to assign (or take) blame for, to assume responsibility for and therefore control, everything that happens.



"FAMILY" AND LOVE

The world of *Ordinary People* is filled with groups of people. Conrad is a member of his swimming team and choir. Cal spends much of his day immersed in business with co-workers. Beth is responsible for organizing activities at her country club. All of the Jarretts are related by blood, of course, and Beth's immediate and extended family members also enjoy a significant presence in the novel. But there are varying degrees of intimacy between all of these people, which also makes for different levels of emotional vulnerability.

As a nuclear family, the Jarretts might be expected to love one another. Unfortunately, Buck's death and Conrad's suicide attempt put their familial bonds under intense stress. The word *love* might not even suffice to describe the relationship between the characters for much of the book. At one point Beth desperately notes, "Mothers don't hate their sons!", as if her relationship to Conrad consisted not of love, but obligation and blame. Further, Cal notices that Beth's seemingly mysterious, untamable nature is what keeps her from showing love to her son ("emotion is her enemy"). When Conrad discusses his mother with Berger, Berger suggests that "[m]aybe she's afraid, maybe it's hard for her to give love"—but Conrad also realizes that he has been unable to forgive his mom for her apparent coldness. Through their struggles, we learn that the Jarretts harbor many insecurities that prevent them from being honest about their needs, fears, and disappointments. They seem to think that just by having the labels associated with their roles—mother, father, son—that it should create the appropriate relationships. And in taking that for granted—or resenting it—they fail to make or maintain the necessary human connections between each other.

Nearly all of the families in *Ordinary People* are marred by alienation or resentment. Despite being surrounded by a host of relatives, Beth is unwilling to open up even to her extended family. When Cal asks his friend Ray for advice about parenting, Ray admits to "barely knowing" his adult daughter. Jeannine Pratt nurses a grudge against her mother, who is dating a friend of her ex-husband. Cal's personal experiences with family drive the point home: Chapter 6 recounts Cal's rescue from the orphanage by Arnold Bacon, a lawyer who takes him on as a protégé. The emotions and language surrounding it are deeply familial—one line from Chapter 6, for example, reveals Bacon's motives for taking Cal under his wing: "He needed to know that he was leaving his baby protected." Cal, meanwhile, believes that "It was the closest thing to a father-son relationship—it was a father-son relationship, he thought." Yet when Cal decides to marry Beth, Bacon, feeling betrayed, cuts Cal loose. "It was, as Bacon pointed out to him, a financial obligation." Nothing holds these groups of people together except some imaginary contract; at root, they are just as disparate as any other group of people in the novel.

In the end, love proves stronger than family ties. And love can only flourish when a relationship leaves space for vulnerability and discomfort. Conrad and Cal realize this, as do Conrad and Jeannine. Even Conrad and Lazenby's strained friendship begins to recover when Conrad overcomes his resentment and struggles through the awkwardness of making amends. As a passage near the end of the novel notes: "...Painful, the problem he has with [the words 'I love you, man']; they threaten to overpower him, cut off his breathing." Love is risky, sometimes as painful as it is pleasurable, but its demands are what separate it from any other way of relating to others.



BODY/MIND DUALITY

For Conrad (and many of the other characters in the novel), there is a struggle to reconcile physical sensations with mental convictions. When

achieved, that reconciliation forms the basis of recovery and well-being. As Berger repeatedly warns Conrad, "The body never lies." Conrad and his family members are often tangled up in their own thoughts, blaming themselves for ideas they cling to, or worrying about what others may think of them. Yet in many cases, Conrad's biggest enemy is not his mind but his body. His reactions to stressful situations are often physical before they become mental, and Guest's narration repeatedly weaves sensory material into mental reactions. In those moments, Conrad's physical reactions play a big part in shaping his thoughts, emotions, and actions.

At the opening of the novel, Conrad faintly realizes that putting mind and body in agreement will keep him healthy. He therefore tries to control and repress physical signs of anxiety by sticking to a plan he's made to get him through the day. Even if he doesn't quite believe it, he believes he must "Get the motions right. Motives will follow. That is Faith." But despite his good intentions, Conrad spends most of the novel splitting the mental and physical parts of himself – exploring his mental and emotional life with Berger, but experiencing lots of physical stress everywhere else. The same is true for Conrad's school activities. He finds no joy in swimming, where he cannot "[improve his] timing" or "[perfect] a stroke" without the right motivation; his schoolwork is a constant source of mental stress. But singing in his school choir demands equal amounts of concentration and control – which makes it one of Conrad's favorite activities. And his relationship with Jeannine begins to deepen in a moment of play-acting depicted in Chapter 20: the words and ideas of an imaginary couple are brought to life by Conrad and Jeannine's own bodies, which eventually leads to their first kiss, more dates, and, eventually, the first time they have sex—one of the novel's most vivid depiction of both physical and emotional healing.

Conrad finally learns to forgive himself when, at the book's climax, his memories of the boating accident meld with the different physical sensations he experiences while showering. Before that point, his nightmares are often intensely physical. Mind and body often seem at odds with one another, but they don't have to be – nor should they be. When Conrad integrates them, he "is in touch for good, with hope, with himself, no matter what. Berger is right, the body never lies."



SYMBOLS

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



COLOR

Guest uses **color** to represent characters' emotional states. Because Conrad and many of the other characters in the novel are deeply affected by changes in their environment, the appearance of places, things, and even people come to represent various states of being. Three colors occur most often. *Blue* represents anxiety; it is manifested in the outfit Jeannine wears when Conrad sees her for the first time, and is also the color of Dr. Berger's piercing eyes. *Gray* symbolizes failure; many of the narration's descriptions of weather mention the gray sky of early-winter Illinois. Lastly, *gold* marks truth or insight; ideas or characters that are valued highly by a character are decked in the color, as Jeannine is in later parts of the novel, as is Cal's bathroom mirror in the second chapter.



WATER

Water appears in several different forms throughout *Ordinary People*. It is arguably the basis of the Jarretts' main conflict, since Buck's death in a sailing accident is the root cause of Conrad's suicide attempt and the ensuing fallout. It also appears in Conrad's environment. As a member of his school's swim team, Conrad spends much of his time in and around water; tellingly, the activity is one which brings him a lot of stress. Precipitation either works against him (as it does in the form of rain or puddles) or yields to him (in the form of melting snow, for example). Most dramatically, water acts as a bridge between Conrad's physical and emotional well-being. Late in the novel the narrator explains that Conrad "does his best thinking" in the shower – and the shower happens to be the place where Conrad works through the trauma of his brother's death. The physical feeling of water joins forces with the memory of sailing to help Conrad process the accident holistically.



MUSIC

Music is a comforting presence in the novel. In sharp contrast to **swimming** or schoolwork, choir practice offers Conrad a sense of calm and belonging; it is a rare opportunity for his body and mind to work in harmony with one another. He and Jeannine meet and are in choir together; Conrad is as attracted to her talent as he is to her beauty and personality. The transformation of their relationship is conveyed through their conversations about music. Whether Conrad is playing some of his original songs for Jeannine, or Jeannine is teaching Conrad about classical composers, music is one medium through which the two learn to trust one another.



RELIGIOUS IMAGERY

Christian slogans and imagery crop up in a few scenes, though they are relatively rare. They act as an omniscient "conscience" – a sense of right and wrong, or a symbol of guidance – against which Conrad and Cal work to discover their own form of guidance. Some of the bumper stickers Conrad recalls in the novel's opening scene (the "guiding principles" mentioned by the narrator) are religious in nature: for example, "Christ Is the Answer...What Was the Question?" One of the things Conrad notices when visiting Dr. Berger's office for the first time is a small index card containing a message signed by "Jesus C.". And though he tries to draw on it in his adulthood, the spiritual guidance Cal receives as a child in the Evangelical Home isn't enough to help him deal with major issues like grief and fate. After he and Jeannine have sex – a major plot point in the novel – Conrad explains that he believes not in God, but in Jeannine. For Conrad and others, the hope of healthy, loving relationships outweighs any form of established belief.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Ordinary People* published in 1982.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ To have a reason to get up in the morning, it is necessary to possess a guiding principle. A belief of some kind.

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel begins, the narrator poses an important idea: we all need something to live for. Simply moving from day to day without hope or meaning is incredibly difficult--nobody can get away with doing so for long. Most people have a guiding principle of some kind--religion, family, work, art, etc. We all have to worship something.

Conrad, we'll eventually see, is in a crisis precisely because he has no guiding principle--he's lost his reasons for living. Conrad's brother, Buck, died in a tragic accident, leading Conrad to try to kill himself. Conrad used to live for his family and friends; now, however, he's forced to reevaluate what is and isn't important to him. The passage suggests that the novel is all about rebirth and rediscovery: Conrad will have to find a new "guiding principle."

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ He was named Calvin, for his dead uncle; Jarrett had been his mother's maiden name. When she came to see him, she came alone. No one claiming to be his father had ever been in attendance; he had no memories of being any man's son. So, if anyone should ask, he can always point out that he had no example to follow.

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Here, we're introduced to another of the novel's main characters, Calvin Jarrett. Cal is a gentle, good-natured man, who thanks his lucky stars that he has a beautiful wife, a good job, and a loving son. We're told that Cal came from a rather rough background--he was raised in an orphanage, rarely saw his mother, and he never knew his father. Cal likes to joke that because he never had a father, he never had an example to follow when he became a parent himself. The passage is important, then, because it shows Calvin making light of sadness and loneliness--we get the sense that he's learned how to laugh at his own pain over the years. Ironically, Calvin's lack of a father may explain why he's such a loving father himself--instead of just modeling himself off of how he's supposed to behave (like his wife, we'll see), Calvin does what he feels to be right when raising his child.

☞ Responsibility. That is fatherhood. You cannot afford to miss any signs, because that is how it happens: somebody holding too much inside, somebody else missing signs.

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Calvin continues to muse on his son, whom he clearly loves deeply. Calvin notices that Conrad has been unhappy lately, despite the fact that Conrad claims to be fine. Calvin is obsessed with control and external details--because Conrad refuses to communicate with him openly, Calvin has no choice but to pick up on the "signs."

In spite of the fact that he never had a father on whom to

model his behavior, Calvin seems to be a remarkably attentive father. He wants the best for his child, even if he doesn't always know how to provide it. Above all, Calvin is wise enough to realize the "stakes" of his parenting--he wants to make sure that Conrad has someone to talk to, so that his depression and self-hatred aren't just "held inside." At the same time, this constant desire for control and understanding may in fact be driving Conrad to act less communicative than he might otherwise be.

☛ Choir is the one time of day when he lets down his guard; there is peace in the strict concentration that Faughnan demands of all of them, in the sweet dissonance of voices in chorus. He has sung in here since he was a freshman. ...Every minute of every hour that is spent there, they work, and there is only one way to prove yourself. You sing, and sing, and sing. All else is unimportant.

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learn a lot about what makes Conrad tick. Conrad is still getting over the trauma of his brother's death and his own attempted suicide--he's intensely depressed, and doesn't always have someone to talk to about his feelings. Singing, however, keeps Conrad sane. He enjoys choir because he's asked to do one thing and one thing only--sing. Singing is at once familiar and foreign; thus, Conrad doesn't have to go through the motions of pretending to be "normal." Furthermore, singing is a kind of combination of exercise for both the body and the mind--Conrad hasn't been able to take any pleasure in his usual physical pursuits, but even the "exercise" of singing helps his mental state.

The passage also suggests that Conrad might have some "guiding principles" after all. Even Conrad, who's in the grips of depression, has things to live for: art, music, his friends, his family, etc. Singing is a relief for him because it gives him an outlet for exercise, and it allows him to vent his feelings without drawing attention to himself.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ Self-possessed is what she is; he emphatically does not own her, nor does he have control over her, nor can he understand or even predict with reliability her moods, her attitudes. She is a marvelous mystery to him; as complex, as interesting as she appeared to him on that first day he met her some twenty-two years ago on the tennis courts at the Beverly Racquet Club.

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett, Beth Jarrett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we get a better sense for the relationship between Calvin and Beth. Beth is a beautiful, self-possessed woman who always knows how to take care of herself; she places great stock in being confident, collected, and reliable. Calvin is dazzled by his wife's confidence, and respects her greatly for it. He seems to be very much in love with her; in part, we sense, he continues to love her because he doesn't totally understand her--she's still a dazzling mystery to him after 22 years.

The passage shows Beth's strengths, and yet also implies that her strengths might be weaknesses when it comes to caring for children. Beth's emphasis on strength and confidence doesn't endear her to her son, Conrad, who's in the grips of depression, and likewise Beth finds it difficult to understand Conrad. Beth struggles to open up to other people; as a result, Conrad has an equally hard time opening up to her.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ The worst, the first session has been gotten through. And the guy is not bad; at least he is loose. The exchange about the razor blades reminded him of something good about the hospital; nobody hid anything there. People kidded you about all kinds of stuff and it was all right; it even helped to stay the flood of shame and guilt. ...So, how do you stay open, when nobody mentions anything, when everybody is careful not to mention it?

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett, Dr. Berger

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Conrad has just finished his first meeting with his new psychiatrist, Dr. Berger. Berger is an interesting figure in the novel because his manner clashes with the closed off, reserved attitude of Conrad's family--Berger doesn't have such a severe personality. Instead, Berger thinks that it's important to be open with other people--he's "loose." Conrad clearly appreciates Dr. Berger's attitude, and finds it a refreshing alternative to his family and community. This emphasizes how honesty and directly addressing a problem--actually talking about razorblades and suicide instead of just alluding to them in euphemisms--is crucial for working through mental disorder.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☹☹ "Things were so different in the hospital. People were, you know, turned on all the time. And you just can't live like that. You can't live with all that emotion floating around, looking for a place to land. It's too exhausting. It takes so much energy, just to get through a day..."

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Conrad reunites with an old friend, Karen, who was also in the hospital because of her depression. Karen and Conrad meet, and Karen tells Conrad that she remembers her time in the hospital as exhausting, not liberating. In the hospital, she was surrounded by people who were "turned on"--full of energy and raw emotion--at all times. There was so much focus and intense observation at the hospital, too--Karen felt that she was always being observed by a doctor or a nurse.

This quote offers a sympathetic and surprisingly accurate portrait of depression as well--the sense that it isn't so much about always feeling bad, but rather feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by everything, no matter how small. Thus being around so many other people with mental disorders (as in the hospital) could provide companionship and compassion, but also more emotional weight for the depressed person to bear.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☹☹ Later on, he may become bored and drink too much. Or else he will enjoy himself, relax, and drink too much. Another familiar pattern. He has noted this about himself lately: that he drinks too much when they go out. Because drinking helps. It has gotten him through many evenings, either deadening the pain or raising him above it to where small events seem pleasurable and worth recording.

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Calvin thinks about his tendency to drink too much at parties that he attends with his wife. While Beth (seemingly) finds it easy to be relaxed and have a good time at parties, Calvin finds it tough not to express his true feelings. Calvin and Beth have been through a lot lately--their son died, and their other son tried to kill himself. Beth seems much more adept than her husband at "bottling up" her feelings.

The passage suggests that Conrad isn't the only one who struggles with his true feelings. Calvin, just like his son, has a lot on his mind, and can't always find someone to talk to. Drinking at parties (essentially hurting his body to try to comfort his mind) and talking about the "real issues" is a way for Calvin to let off some steam and relieve his inner tension. Often, Calvin feels that he has no other way to tell people how he feels.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☹☹ In bed he waits for sleep. He cannot get under until he has reviewed the day, counted up his losses. He must learn more control, cannot allow himself the luxury of anger. He has seen it happen before. Guys become easy targets for the Stillmans of the world. Next time laugh when he needles you.

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett, (Kevin) Stillman

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Conrad has had a rough day. He tried to open up to a fellow student who was crying--and when he did so, his old friend Kevin Stillman teased him for it. Conrad was irritated with

Kevin, but knows that he can't let teasing get under his skin.

The passage illustrates Conrad's desire for control (something he shares with both his parents), as well as the lack of communication between Conrad and his friends. Despite the fact that Stillman has known Conrad for years and years, he seems to have no idea how to treat his old friend; he has no respect for Conrad's delicate mental state. Conrad knows, at least on paper, that he's supposed to laugh when Stillman makes fun of him--that's what they've always done together. And yet he can't rewire his brain to "play along"--depression has changed him.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ He has done it, maybe for the wrong reasons, but it was the right thing to do. There is no problem improving your timing, or perfecting a stroke, if the desire is there, but you cannot fire it up, cannot manufacture desire, when there is no spark at all to build on. This was not a mistake, what happened today. It is not to be looked at as a failure.

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Conrad makes the difficult choice to quit his school's swim team, a team he's enjoyed for many years. Conrad feels ashamed of quitting the team (alienating him from his longtime friends), but he tries to tell himself that he made the right decision. Conrad's reasoning is interesting--he tells himself that there's no point in swimming if he isn't enjoying it anymore. This physical activity no longer gives him pleasure because of the mental suffering he's been going through.

Conrad's decision to quit might seem reasonable, though it's important to notice that Conrad is running away from his problems rather than facing them head-on. Conrad's denial of his problems is apparent in the structure of the passage; the way Conrad keeps repeating, "not a mistake," to himself.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ "...Beth, too. How is she? I only see her at bridge once a month, and we never seem to get a chance to talk." "She's busy, too," Cal says. "She's chairing the tennis tournament at Onwentsia next spring. She spends a lot of time over there."

"I admire her organization," Carole says. "She's such a perfectionist. And yet she never lets herself get trapped into things she doesn't want to do. Now, there's an art. I'm just beginning to learn the trick myself. I hope it's not too late!"

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett (speaker), Beth Jarrett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Cal runs into a family friend, Carole Lazenby, the mother of Lazenby (Conrad's friend). Carole asks Cal for an update on Beth--Carole has known Beth a long time, and complains that she only sees Beth at bridge now. Interestingly, Carole seems not to realize that anything is wrong with Beth--despite the fact that Beth has lost a son recently, Carole thinks of Beth as a perfectly composed, organized person.

Beth's commitment to organization and control is impressive, one could say--but it's also unnerving how little emotion Beth shows regarding her sons; one gets the idea that she's in denial about Conrad's depression. And the fact that Carole asks Cal for updates on Beth underscores the sad fact that *Cal*, too, doesn't really know Beth is doing--Beth is so focused on outward appearances and controlling everything that Cal himself doesn't really have any information on his wife that Carole isn't already aware of.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ Berger laughs. "When's the last time you got really mad?" He says, carefully, "When it comes, there's always too much of it. I don't know how to handle it."
 "Sure, I know," Berger says. "It's a closet full of junk. You open the door and everything falls out."
 "No," he says. "There's a guy in the closet. I don't even know him, that's the problem."
 "Only way you're ever gonna get to know him," Berger says, "is to let him out now and then...."
 "Sometimes," he says, "when you let yourself feel, all you feel is lousy."
 Berger nods. "Maybe you gotta feel lousy sometime, in order to feel better. A little advice, kiddo, about feeling. Don't think too much about it. And don't expect it always to tickle."

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett, Dr. Berger (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Conrad has another therapy session with Dr. Berger. Conrad admits that he doesn't know how to talk about his feelings with his parents. For instance, he hasn't told them about his decision to quit the swim team. Berger gives Conrad some advice: Conrad needs to do a better job of expressing his feelings, even to himself. Keeping his feelings bottled up inside (or "in the closet," as Berger says) is a recipe for more resentment and self-hatred down the line.

Berger is wise; he recognizes that Conrad's steady healing from depression isn't going to be easy (it's not going to "tickle"). Ad yet he emphasizes show important it is for Conrad to be honest with himself, and to communicate with other people--not just Berger himself, but his family and friends as well.

☝☝ His nerves are raw. His eyes feel as if they have sunk back into his head, pulling the flesh down. "Beth. Please. Let's just go upstairs!"
 "No! I will not be pushed!" she says. She moves away from him to stand before the window, looking out. Calmly she says, "I will not be *manipulated*."

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett, Beth Jarrett (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this tense scene, Conrad explodes at his mother for refusing to visit him while he was in the hospital. Beth, he suggests, is so closed-off that she won't admit the truth--she doesn't love him as much as she says she does. Curiously, Beth doesn't respond to Conrad's accusations with understanding or sympathy. She weeps, but mostly she just digs in her heels, insisting that she won't be manipulated into changing her behavior. In other words, Beth sees Conrad's outburst as a simple attempt to manipulate her, rather than a sincere expression of his feelings (which we know it to be).

The passage is a great example of how Berger's techniques actually help Conrad in the long run. Conrad's outburst might not seem productive in this chapter alone, but because he lets Beth know how he's been feeling, the fundamental problems in Conrad's family become clearer, and Conrad moves one step closer to remedying them.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ Afterward. The hammer blows of guilt and remorse. He has no weapons with which to fight them off. No words of comfort, none of Berger's advice applies. He has slandered her, to her face and behind her back. He has pushed everyone away who tries to help. If he could apologize. If he only could but they are no longer at home to him and it is not their fault. All his fault. All connections with him result in failure. Loss. Evil.

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This is the aftermath of Conrad's horrible fight with his mother. Conrad has suggested that Beth doesn't really love him--she didn't visit him while he was in the hospital. Conrad feels guilty for yelling at his mother, and he thinks that he's pushing away his own family members, the people who are most likely to take care of him and listen to his problems.

It's interesting that Conrad automatically sees himself as the "bad guy" in his fight with his mother. While Conrad's outburst was rude and uncalled for, there was a lot of truth

in it: at least he was trying to express his feelings instead of bottling them up like his mother. As the novel moves along, we get the sense that Conrad's first instinct (and a common symptom of depression) is to blame himself for other people's problems--by the end of the book, we'll see how important this kind of crushing guilt was in pushing Conrad to attempt suicide in the first place.

☛ "If I were here," she had said, "I would never come back. Not for a house in Glencoe, not for the children, not for anything. It is too humiliating."
 "Why? She loves him. What does it matter?"
 "It matters that we know about it," she said.
 "Suppose nobody knew about it? Then would it be humiliating?"
 "I would know," she said, "and you would know. That's enough."

A thrill of fear had touched him. Is it that some people are not given a capacity for forgiveness, just as some are cheated out of beauty by a pointed nose, or not allowed the adequate amount of brain matter? *It is not in her nature to forgive.*

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett, Beth Jarrett (speaker), Ray Hanley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beth and Cal discuss their friend Ray Hanley, who's had an affair recently. The discussion brings out a lot about their personalities. Cal seems more willing to forgive people for their mistakes--even adultery. Beth, on the other hand, seems incapable of forgiveness of any kind--if her husband were to cheat on her, she claims, she would never be able to take him back. Cal, thinking that Beth is more frightened of the public humiliation of an affair--i.e., other people knowing about it--suggests such a possibility to Beth. Beth, however, insists that she would never be able to forgive him for having an affair, no matter who did or didn't know about it--and no matter the repercussions (like losing her house or custody of her children).

We and Cal both begin to get a better idea of Beth's character here. Beth is not a forgiving person--it's almost like something in her genetics. But Beth usually makes up for her inability to forgive by being an incredibly positive-seeming person; she's always collected and calm around other people. Beneath the surface, though, there's a lot of resentment and hatred, which she never shows other people.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☛ The keys dig into his thigh. Next to him, Lazenby sits, elbow against the door, his hand propping his check. What he said is true. The three of them were always together, why does he think of it as only his grief? *Because damn it it is.* His room no longer shared, his heart torn and slammed against this solid wall of it, this hell of indifference. It is. And there is no way to change it. That is the hell.

Related Characters: (Joe) Lazenby, Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Conrad has a fight with his former friend, Stillman. Afterwards, Lazenby reaches out to him--he really wants to know why Conrad finds it so difficult to get along with his old friends. More to the point, Lazenby wants to know why Conrad insists on bottling up his feelings. Lazenby reveals that he misses Conrad's brother, Buck, almost as badly as Conrad does--and yet Conrad insists on keeping his grief a secret instead of sharing it with people who might be able to understand it, such as Lazenby.

The passage makes an important point: grieving people often suffer because they have nobody to talk to, or because they think that nobody else understands their feelings. Conrad makes a point of cutting himself off from his friends, because he's still trying to find the courage to deal with his brother's death. Lazenby represents a "light at the end of the tunnel"--proof that there are good people out there, who want to help Conrad, and know how.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☛ She pulls in her breath, and her arms are around his waist, her head on his chest. He stands, holding her; tests the feeling of someone leaning on him, looking to him for support. He feels as if he could stand here holding her forever. Her lashes are wet, golden in the harsh overhead light. He lifts her chin with his hand and kisses her. Her face is tear-streaked, her mouth loose under his, turned slightly down. He has never felt so strong, so needed.

Related Characters: Conrad Jarrett, Jeannine Pratt

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jeannine Pratt opens up to Conrad about her feelings regarding her parents. Jeannine tells Conrad that her mother was seeing a man named Paul, a friend of her father's, before her parents were divorced. Jeannine begins to cry as she says this, and the two kiss. Conrad feels an incredibly rush of strength and security.

Why is Conrad so moved by Jeannine's own show of emotion? For once, Conrad isn't the one who needs emotional support--instead, he's giving it to other people. The beauty of Conrad and Jeannine's relationship is that they've both been through some pain--they feel comfortable opening up to each other about their pain, and look to each other for support and love in their times of need.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝☝ But it surprises him that she would be as reserved with Audrey. She likes Audrey. And it was an honest question. An honest interest, not like Marty Genthe's. Why duck it? He is in the process of making a discovery: that he never knows how to read her, and she offers him no clues. There are fewer and fewer openings into the vast obscurity of her nature. He is on the outside, looking in, all the time. Has he always been?

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett, Audrey Butler, Beth Jarrett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, narrated from Cal's point of view, Cal and his wife are visiting with a friend, Audrey Butler. Audrey asks Beth about Conrad, and to Cal's surprise, Beth doesn't offer a genuine response--she seems reserved, as if she's hiding something. Cal can't understand why Beth is being so reticent with someone she considers a friend.

Cal's observations remind him that Beth has been more closeted and quiet in general lately--and perhaps always has been. While she continues to be cheerful and confident around friends, she almost never tells Cal about her feelings--Cal, more and more, feels that he's on the outside, looking in at Beth (and wonders if their previous closeness was just a delusion of his). As the novel goes on, then, Cal and Beth become more distant with each other: their

different responses to Conrad's emotional struggle drive them apart and reveal the basic differences in their personalities.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ "Geez, if I could get through to you, kiddo, that depression is not sobbing and crying and *giving vent*, it is plain and simple reduction of feeling. Reduction, see? Of all feeling. People who keep stiff upper lips find that it's damn hard to smile."

Related Characters: Dr. Berger (speaker), Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Berger offers one of the novel's key insights about sadness and depression. Most people have the impression that depression consists of being sad all the time, or experiencing strong negative emotion. In actuality, depression is usually a feeling of apathy, exhaustion, or nothingness--depressed people, not just Conrad, often say that they're incapable of feeling anything.

Berger's remarks illustrate a basic misunderstanding of how people get over their depression. Crying and yelling aren't signs of depression; they're demonstrations that the depressed person is feeling *better*; his body itself is "flushing out" the bad feelings. Berger's advice is especially important to Conrad because he's been raised in a sheltered, isolated environment in which expressing one's emotions isn't always encouraged.

☝☝ "Hate him? How could I hate him? Mothers don't hate their sons! I don't hate him! But he makes *demands* on me! He tries to blackmail me!"

Related Characters: Beth Jarrett (speaker), Beth Jarrett, Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this important scene, Beth and Calvin quarrel about Beth's relationship with Conrad, their son. Beth says that she doesn't "hate" Conrad--assuming, for some reason, that Calvin is accusing her of hating Conrad (despite the fact

that Calvin never said so). Beth's explanation for why she doesn't hate Conrad is fascinating--instead of offering specific reasons, she just says that mothers aren't *supposed* to hate their sons.

Beth's attitude toward Conrad is indicative of her reserved, closeted personality. She doesn't hate Conrad, but not hating someone isn't the same as loving them. Beth is motivated by a sense of her social role as a mother--she thinks of being Conrad's mother as a duty--thus, she's very different from Calvin, who loves Conrad unconditionally. It's important to note that Beth is finally facing her feelings about Conrad and Calvin. While Beth is usually more likely to keep her true feelings bottled up, her conversation with Calvin brings out the truth: she *is* distancing herself from Conrad, because she doesn't know how to interact with him, and perhaps never did.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☝☝ She laughs. "Why won't you take anything seriously?" He lies down flat, the hat over his face. "No sense taking the questions seriously, if there aren't any answers." "Con. Do you believe people are punished for the things they do?" "Punished You mean by God?" "Yes." "I don't believe in God," he says. ...She turns toward him, and the ends of her hair fall lightly against his chest. "What do you believe in?" "Oh, tennis courts, wallpaper," he says, "Florsheim shoes, Miami Beach—" "Liar," she says, her arms sliding around his neck. "—you," he says, kissing her. "Liar again, but that's nice." And he squeezes her tightly, feeling the sense of calm, of peace slowly gathering, spreading itself within him. He is in touch for good, with hope, with himself, no matter what. Berger is right, the body never lies.

Related Characters: Jeannine Pratt, Conrad Jarrett (speaker), Conrad Jarrett, Jeannine Pratt

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, we see Conrad translating his therapy sessions with Dr. Berger into action. He's been dating Jeannine Pratt for some time now, and they've just had sex for the first time. Jeannine wants to know what

Conrad believes in--i.e., what his "guiding principles" are. Conrad surprises Jeannine by saying that he believes in her, but not God.

What does Conrad mean? After his suicide attempt, Conrad finds it difficult to subscribe to traditional "guiding principles" like school, family, or religion. Instead, Conrad has to figure out for himself what's worth living for--thus, he makes new friends, goes on dates, goes to therapy, etc. Note that the passage ends with a reiteration of the advice Dr. Berger gave Conrad: the body never lies. Conrad has been raised in a chilly household in which bodily contact of any kind is often repressed. Conrad gets over his repression and depression in part because he finds physical pleasure with Jeannine.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☝☝ And there are too many rooms to which he has no access; too much that he doesn't understand any more. If he could know what he used to know! But what did he really know? There is addiction here: to secrecy; to a private core within herself that is so much deeper than he ever imagined it to be. He has no such core; at least, he cannot find it, if it is there. Is it fair to deny her the right to keep it, because he hasn't this space? This need?

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett, Beth Jarrett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Cal begins to accept that he'll never really understand his wife, and vice-versa. Beth is an intensely private person--she doesn't feel comfortable showing off her emotions or expressing them to other people, even her own family. As Beth packs her things, seemingly intending to leave Cal forever, Cal wonders how they've grown so far apart. As he thinks, Cal comes to realize that he and Beth have *always* had major differences--it wasn't until Conrad's depression began that Cal became aware of how different he and his wife were.

In a nutshell, Beth seems to have a "secret center," which she can't share with anybody. Cal, by contrast, has no guardedness--he prefers to share his feelings with other people. The passage doesn't necessarily say that Cal's approach to life is better than Beth's, but it does suggest that Cal and Beth are leaving each other because of

irreconcilable differences--their strategies for coping with grief, and with life itself, are just too different.

For he sees something else here: that her outer life is deceiving; that she gives the appearance of orderliness, of a cash-register practicality about herself; but inside, what he has glimpsed is not order, but chaos; not practicality at all, but stubborn, incredible impulse.

Related Characters: Calvin (Cal) Jarrett, Beth Jarrett

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

In the end, the novel seems to feel sorry for Beth. In part because of the way she was raised, she struggles to cope with grief--she doesn't know how to show emotions or share them with other people. While people cope with grief in many different ways, the novel comes to suggest that Beth's strategies for coping with her feelings simply aren't healthy. The key word in this passage is "deceiving." Cal realizes that his (soon-to-be-ex) wife can only get through life by lying to herself. She tells herself that everything is fine--even if it's clearly not. For years, however, Beth's deceptions have worked: she's fooled all of her friends and neighbors (and Cal himself) into believing that she and Cal have the perfect marriage, and even fooled *herself* into believing that she's happy. Cal comes to feel sorry for his wife: she's so stubborn in her behavior that she can't stand showing any weakness, and possibly doesn't even know how to.

In a letter that she wrote to his grandmother she said, "The Aegean is bluer than the Atlantic, and rough and bumpy. It looks just the way the boys drew it on those funny school maps." For she had saved them all--the maps and papers and a construction-paper valentine trimmed with Kleenex-lace that he had made for her--and packed them away in a box he had found in the basement, when they had moved out. Do you save stuff like that if it means nothing to you?

Related Characters: Beth Jarrett, Conrad Jarrett

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel comes to an end, Conrad comes to realize that Beth--in spite of the fact that she has trouble showing her feelings--really does love him deeply. Beth has kept Conrad and Buck's childhood arts and crafts, and clearly thinks of Conrad with nothing but affection. The problem isn't that Beth doesn't love her son--she just doesn't know how to tell him.

The passage is crucial because it reminds us that Conrad's road to recovery hinges upon his decision to forgive Beth. Conrad shows that he's become a much more mature person over the course of the book--he's learned to see the world from other people's point of view, recognizing that we all have different ways of coping with grief and loss. Even if Beth doesn't have the courage or confidence to open up to Conrad, it's suggested, Conrad will make the effort to get closer to his mother and make an effort to understand her feelings.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

It's been exactly one month since Conrad Jarrett has returned home from the psychiatric hospital in which he's spent the past eight months. On the morning of September 30th, he lays awake in bed burdened with fear and anxiety. He tries to motivate himself to get out of bed and start his day, but is thwarted when he remembers the load of assignments he has to complete in the coming week. Even the thought of deciding what to wear and how to prepare for the day prove too much for him to tackle.

Soon his thoughts are crowded out by memories of the hospital—the advice of his doctor, Crawford, to lighten up and nurture his sense of humor; the recreational activities he and other patients would do as part of their morning routine; the look of failure that marked many of his fellow residents.

Conrad hears the voice of his father, Calvin, calling to him from the other end of the hall. Conrad is jolted out of his funk and begins following his routine to prepare for the day. In the bathroom, he notices that a recurrent rash has begun breaking out on his face again. (Strangely, his doctors are unable to determine what triggers it.)

Conrad tries to make himself relax, remembering that he is supposed to be on the road to regaining a healthy, "normal" life. But the mysterious rash, as well as a brief moment in which he forgets the name of his next door neighbors, stirs up his fear and anxiety all over again. As he dresses, Conrad realizes that his worry stems from the unease caused by asking questions that aren't easily answered.

Conrad begins to shut down again. His throat begins to itch. For a moment he is tempted to abandon his routine, but he soon reminds himself that keeping busy will help him avoid dread. For now, he clings to "routine" and "guiding principles" in order to make it through his day.

Though he's left the hospital, Conrad has not yet overcome his mental disorder. The struggle to control himself – even in something as simple as getting out of bed – is one he tries to overcome in order to get well.



Conrad often lapses into flashbacks. How he decides to act in the present is heavily influenced by ideas and voices from the past, which are woven seamlessly into the dialogue and narration.



Keeping busy is another of Conrad's coping strategies, but it doesn't ease his anxiety or put him in control of his present. Despite his effort, the mysterious rash is something completely out of his control.



Conrad's acute perceptiveness often overpowers his thinking. What he sees and feels becomes increasingly hard to make out.



As the chapter closes, Conrad beats back his physical unrest with plans and motivational slogans. For the moment, he's overcome his anxiety.



CHAPTER 2

Down the hall from Conrad's room, Calvin (Conrad's father, called Cal for short) and Beth (his mother) are also starting their day. Beth urges to Cal to make sure their son doesn't "look like a bum" when he leaves for school. Cal, meanwhile, quietly muses about his good fortune. He feels especially blessed that his wife is so beautiful, but is also grateful for his job as a tax attorney and his family's comfortable living situation. His present luck is a far cry from his childhood days in the Evangelical Home for Orphans and Old People. Cal (who was named "for his dead uncle") only saw his mother rarely, and never met his father.

Given his own lack of a father and family as a child, Cal worries about how to be a good father. But he believes that it involves a keen sense of responsibility: "looking for signs" of unhappiness in his son. He isn't sure if his son is truly happy, even though Conrad insists that he's fine. Cal notes to himself that Conrad hasn't spent much time with Lazenby, Truan, Genthe, or Van Buren – four boys who'd been Conrad's friends since they were all young kids. But Cal doesn't want to press his son too hard for answers.

Being a good father, Cal believes, requires giving a healthy amount of distance. He feels that his best accomplishment as a father and husband, though, has been making enough money to give his family as nice a life as possible.

All of the Jarretts gather in the kitchen for breakfast. Cal checks in with Conrad to see how things are going. With a healthy dose of sarcasm Conrad tells his dad that things are "fine," and adds that Lazenby will be giving him a ride to school. To Cal, Conrad seems just like "his old self"; yet, he worries that something is still amiss. Conrad hasn't put back on the weight he lost in the psychiatric hospital, and the breakfast conversation leaves Cal feeling a little uneasy. He reminds Conrad to "stick to the plan": that is, calling Dr. Berger, a psychologist in Evanston, to schedule a visit. Conrad insists that he has no time to see Dr. Berger because he has swim practice every evening, but Cal urges him to make the call when he has the time.

CHAPTER 3

Conrad stands on his front porch, awaiting his ride to school. Lazenby is running a few minutes late, and for a moment the thought of having to drive to school with his mother makes him anxious. Eventually his friend pulls into the driveway—with Stillman and Van Buren in tow.

Cal and Beth's actions and behavior suggest a picture-perfect relationship – he's successful, she's beautiful, they love each other – but their conversation is cautious. In this scene, their ideal appearance is connected to a deep concern for the opinions of others (what "seem[s] courteous"). Cal's dramatic backstory is marked by luck and hard work; control is something he values highly.



Unlike Conrad, who responds easily to internal sensations, Cal is obsessed with noticing external details. They are his surest way of knowing how his son (and other people) feel inside, and they allow him to keep a courteous distance between himself and others. Unfortunately, he does not find superficial relationships very satisfying.



Cal's surest sense of control comes with the things that give him the appearance of success: being courteous, keeping his distance, and making money.



This is a scene where all of the Jarretts' coping mechanisms are on display. Cal wants lots of information about Conrad; Conrad uses sarcasm and makes excuses to try to get out of his appointment; Beth ignores the conversation. None of them are willing to fully address the amount of help Conrad still needs, but politeness keeps things from getting too messy.



With the "crisp and cool" weather whipping around him and the words of his parents and grandparents echoing in his mind, a wave of discomfort attacks Conrad inside and out.



Conrad and the rowdy threesome make their way to school. Complaints about swim practice and the previous night's homework ensue. During the conversation, it's made known that Conrad is one year behind his friends in school (he's a high-school junior; they are seniors). Soon, the car passes Jeannine Pratt, a student who's still fairly new to the school. Upon first sight of her Conrad is captivated—however, Stillman's teasing quickly sours the moment.

First-period English class gives Conrad a tough time. He gets distracted during class, and his teacher senses his stress. He insists he's fine. He feels he must say this—after all, keeping up with schoolwork, swimming, and choir leave him no time to slow down. Choir rehearsal brings him some relief from the day's rocky start; it eases his feelings of isolation and helplessness. As the period ends, Conrad meets Jeannine for the first time.

After choir comes swimming practice. Conrad's coach Salan is surprised to catch him yawning, and after practice he awkwardly confronts Conrad in order to check in with him. When Salan asks him if he's enjoying his time on the team, Conrad responds with a shaky "I guess." Salan offers a couple of well-meaning questions about Conrad's mental health, but they only increase the awkwardness of the situation. Conrad assures his coach that he will be more alert at the next practice.

During the ride home, Lazenby and Stillman discuss a couple of impressive sophomores on the swim team. (It so happens that the two swimmers have constantly beaten Conrad in practice "every day for two weeks.") Eventually Conrad makes it home. At first he thinks he's alone—the house is dark and quiet—but he accidentally startles Beth as she enters the house and climbs the stairs. They have a stilted chat about their day; after a few minutes she complains about having a headache and withdraws into her room. Conrad does the same as a new bout of unease begins to brew inside of him.

CHAPTER 4

Beth has asked Cal to lunch with promises of "good news." As Cal enters the restaurant to meet her, he recalls her surprising liveliness on the phone. It reminds him of the first time they met: he and Ray played a round of tennis against Beth and one of her friends at a local country club. Noticing his wife at a table, he realizes that the beauty and decisiveness he currently appreciates in her were evident even from their first meeting. Even now he imagines her being the envy of all the patrons in the restaurant.

Unfortunately, Conrad's friends are as big a source of stress for him as his family. Their mocking, sarcastic conversation stifles his ability to relax, or even to be emotionally honest. The physical stress he feels before getting into Lazenby's car is only aggravated by the ride to school.



As explained in the first chapter, Conrad feels that schoolwork is the area of his life over which he has the most control (however little that may be). Music, though, unites his mind and body. Yet meeting Jeannine is the first instance in which we see Conrad completely without control—though not in a negative way; he's just stunned by her.



While schoolwork stresses Conrad mentally, swimming brings him physical discomfort. He isn't able to provide the coordination and alertness the sport demands. The narrator's close attention to Salan's imposing physique and the swimming suggest a world that intrudes on Conrad's attempt to keep calm. Nevertheless, Conrad tries to assure himself (and his coach) that he's got everything under control.



Conrad's attempts at control are not as effective as he might have hoped. The sense of control he's felt through the day completely dissolves when he unexpectedly runs into Beth. This encounter contrasts sharply with Jeannine's greeting after choir practice. Here, surprise is not liberating, but stifling.



To Cal (and others), Beth's beauty is treated as proof of her presumed perfection. This, combined with her intensely proactive personality, make her a person whose focus is entirely outward. She impacts others, but – as will be seen later on – avoids being impacted herself.



As Cal approaches Beth, she produces a folder full of information from a travel agency. Beth eagerly explains that a small getaway is exactly what the family needs to unwind after a few months of intense strain. Cal disagrees. Conrad is still readjusting to life as a student, and he feels that time off would hinder his progress. Most importantly, he believes the family's trip to Florida the year before was to blame for their troubles. Beth urges Cal not to blame himself, and claims that the vacation is something the entire family needs. The conversation ends in a stalemate.

Back at the office, Cal mulls over some projects he is working on. He glances out of his office window, remembering the progress he'd made since his early days as a law partner with his friend Ray. Ray breaks in to discuss some business, and also to make some small talk about Beth and Conrad. Conversation about his son puts Cal on edge, so Ray decides to back off and leave Cal to his work.

After a little while Cal decides to look up Dr. Tyrone Berger's phone number, all the while reviewing his responsibilities as a father and Conrad's duties as an obedient son. He just wants to make sure Conrad made it to his first psychiatric appointment like he'd promised. A twinge of guilt still gnaws at him; Cal does, in fact, feel responsible for his son's attempted suicide. Beth's assertion that it was "nobody's fault" is too difficult for him to accept.

CHAPTER 5

Conrad visits Dr. Berger's office for the first time. Anxiety begins to overtake him when he steps inside the dark and shabby building. Upon reaching Dr. Berger's suite, though, he's greeted by the surprising sight of overturned paper and scattered furniture. Conrad notices the doctor's piercing blue eyes and "the look of a crafty monkey" he has about him. Berger's demeanor and questions unsettle him. Berger is light and humorous, even asking Conrad about his attempted suicide in an off-handed manner. Conrad tells Berger about how he tried to kill himself by cutting his wrists with a razor blade. For a brief moment Conrad suspects that the weird scene in Berger's office might be some kind of test, but he soon dismisses the idea.

Beth and Cal's parenting styles come into direct conflict. So do their ideas about control: Cal wants to know as much as possible in hopes of controlling the situation, but Beth wants to keep her distance. Cal's attitude reflects his ideas about fatherhood and relationships – and so do Beth's.



Between developing projects and caring for his son, Cal has a difficult time figuring out exactly how and why he is needed in others' lives.



Cal realizes that seeking control offers him little hope; calling Dr. Berger will do nothing to ensure that Conrad keeps the appointment. Yet Cal is determined to do what he can in order to make himself a part of the situation. He realizes his folly, even as he acts.



Therapy is one of the many recovery tools Conrad has not yet tried. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it marks yet another situation in which he has little control. Berger's dynamic appearance and casual mood, which represent a kind of openness Conrad can't experience when he's with family or friends, affect him in much the same way as Jeannine does.



Dr. Berger and Conrad settle into their first session. When Berger asks what he'd like to accomplish in their sessions, Conrad expresses a desire to be "more in control." Accordingly, he quickly becomes skeptical of Berger's approach. He dislikes the doctor's nonstop stream of questions—it reminds him of his time in hospital—and is put on edge by his haunting blue eyes (which are described as "high-beams"). However, he answers Berger dutifully. He mentions his father, who worries about him constantly; his mother, who seems not to worry at all; and his brother, who died in a sailing accident. Berger urges Conrad to meet with him twice a week, which means that Conrad will have to skip swim practice to attend sessions with Dr. Berger.

Undergoing therapy with Berger requires Conrad to allow someone else to control him. The fact that Conrad will have to give up swimming for therapy foreshadows the radical shift in perspective that awaits him. Solving his problem will require him to move his attention away from his body and onto his mind.



After the appointment, Conrad reflects on his time with Berger. In retrospect, he appreciates the doctor's casualness. It's a kind of openness that reminds him of his time in the hospital: "No one hid anything there." But he also recognizes the uniqueness of that feeling; beyond the walls of Berger's office, he grows self-conscious again. As he heads home he avoids making eye contact with passers-by, lest they see and notice his problem.

In his reflection, Conrad mentions the desire to "stay open." He wants to be open and honest about his issue, but feels unable to do it with any of the people he knows (except Berger, that is).



CHAPTER 6

Cal studies his secretary, Cherry, as she looks for a file in the office. He notices her appearance and her dress—and soon slips into noticing a bundle of details about her and the scene outside his window. Eventually his eye lands on his calendar, and he remembers the tasks he has to accomplish during the day. Finally, he remembers a fight that he and Beth had the night before. What started as another argument about vacationing in London ended with Beth asking Cal to stop worrying so much about Conrad, and the family as a whole.

The sense of "responsibility" and "noticing" that causes Cal to obsess about Conrad's well-being is on display here. In contrast to his hyperactive sense of attention, Cal's only sense of self is found in the lists of jobs he has to do.



The fight with Beth reminds Cal of his struggle to answer the question *Who the hell are you?* for himself. He compares himself to a figure in his past, one "who knew who he was" quite well: Arnold Bacon, a lawyer and his former mentor. Bacon plucked Cal from the Evangelical Home when he was seventeen; he'd noticed his excellent grades and paid young Cal's way through college and law school. The two maintained a deep relationship until Cal met Beth—an event that turned Bacon against him. Because Bacon didn't have patience for law students who married while in school, he withdrew his support. Cal remembers this rejection as his first experience with grief.

Cal's own wounds remain to be healed. As an orphan, he lost the closest thing he'd ever had to a father-son relationship when Bacon broke contact with him. Ultimately, the fragility of his relationships gives rise to his lack of self-confidence. Unable to identify himself in relation to others, he merely drifts through the circumstances he encounters.



Cherry returns to Cal's office with the papers she'd been looking for. Once again he studies her behavior, this time thinking up reasons to explain why she seems to "work so hard" at presenting herself. With his secretary and Bacon still in mind, Cal determines that *[He's] the kind of man who—hasn't the least idea what kind of man [he is]*. He also remembers that his son Jordan (known as Buck) would have turned nineteen that very day.

Perhaps the surest thing in Cal's life is the sense of guilt he feels about the past. Despite the many people and things that occupy his present, the most vivid parts of his day are his memories of Bacon and his dead son.



CHAPTER 7

On a Saturday, Conrad reunites with Karen (a fellow patient he befriended during his time in the hospital) in a soda shop. They briefly discuss life after the hospital; Karen is keeping busy as a member of her school's drama club, and Conrad mentions his time on the swim team. The conversation soon veers into more serious territory when Karen brings up the subject of therapy. She notes that she was seeing a psychiatrist briefly but eventually decided to stop; she felt that she wasn't getting anything helpful out of it. Conrad feels obligated to mention Berger too – but only to explain that seeing him was his dad's idea, and that he personally doesn't like Berger very much. He feels guilty for saying so.

What seems like a pleasant moment is haunted by insecurity. The grumpy shopkeeper hovering near Conrad and Karen's table, as well as the awkward stops and starts in their conversation, reflect a strained effort at remaining positive. Once again, Conrad's inner feelings are at odds with his words and behavior. His primary goal in this moment is to maintain a positive mood – and as a result, he finds it hard to relate deeply to someone who was once his close friend.



Conrad quickly changes the subject by recalling a piece of Dr. Crawford's advice: "Go with the things that [make] you laugh." He tells Karen a joke that, for a moment, lightens the mood. But she urges Conrad to be "less intense" about life, which offends him. Conrad insists that he's fine. An awkward silence settles between them; Karen soon excuses herself from the table. As she turns to leave, she warns Conrad to remember that sadness is "contagious." After a while he leaves too, chiding himself for dealing with Karen so crudely.

As we've seen throughout the earliest chapters of the novel, a "sense of humor" is one of Conrad's ways of avoiding negative feelings. But Karen doesn't allow him to ignore the gravity of mental recovery. Karen's departure leaves him feeling isolated, as suggested by the soda shop's NO LOITERING sign (and, of course, the hovering shop owner).



CHAPTER 8

Conrad returns home from his visit with Karen. He finds Cal watching TV in the living room; the two make small talk about the day, the coming week, and Conrad's schoolwork. The conversation is light, but ever-dutiful Cal works to "keep it flowing." He mentions Beth's wish to visit London for vacation. Conrad says he would go along with the plan for Beth's sake. Soon Beth appears in the doorway to the living room. She and Cal are off to a party hosted by the Murrays, a family in the neighborhood with whom the Jarretts are only slightly acquainted.

The conversation between Conrad, Cal, and even Beth is not very strained, but it isn't as free as it could be. And it's not substantive. It's little more than small talk; Conrad's answers disclose very little about the difficulties surrounding his life at school.



Soon Cal and Beth reach the Murrays'. Inside they find the Genthes and the Klimes, other families who live in the neighborhood. The atmosphere is energetic; Cal and Beth are quickly pulled into conversation with other people. Just as quickly, someone mentions Conrad, asking if he had been sick recently. Beth simply replies that he's recovered and doing fine. But before the conversation can move forward, dinner is announced.

After dinner comes more conversation. Cal chats with Mrs. Murray and Mrs. Genthe. The latter asks again how Conrad is doing, noting that her son considers Conrad more distant than he was in the past. Cal slowly opens up about his son's visits with Dr. Berger, which quickly proves to be a mistake – Beth hears the conversation from across the room, and abruptly excuses herself and Cal from the party. She scolds her husband in the car, insistent that saying too much about Conrad was "in the worst possible taste" and "a violation of privacy."

The Jarretts return home. As he heads toward his room, Cal looks in on Conrad (who has fallen asleep studying). He looks around Conrad's room, paying close attention—he notes especially the long scar carved into his son's forearm. Whispering a quick prayer for his son's sake, he slips into bed. He's had too much to drink at the party, though, and is unable to fall asleep. All he can do is "keep watch and continue to listen."

CHAPTER 9

Conrad tries to keep calm as he takes a pop quiz in trigonometry class. Looking around the room, he notices Suzanne Mosely, a girl he'd known since junior high school. She, too, is struggling with the quiz. At the end of the period Conrad sees Suzanne crying in the hallway. He approaches her and tries to ease her worries about the quiz, offering her to help her study. Suzanne is suspicious of his offer and refuses. As she walks away, he hears Stillman's voice calling out to him. Later, Stillman and Van Buren tease him about the encounter at swim practice, asking if Mosely and Conrad plan to go out on a date that weekend.

Courtesy is important at this small gathering of upper-middle-class adults. But the atmosphere at the Murrays' is loose, even liberating. The narration emphasizes the sexual undertones of an environment in which married couples break away from and mingle with one another freely. Beth navigates the conflict between freedom and restraint by sticking with the latter—downplaying Conrad's situation is a matter of keeping up appearances.



Note the narration's attention to the physical intimacy of the characters, as well as the brief flashback to Cal's New Year's Eve encounter with Sara Murray. Cal cannot restrain himself where Beth would consider courtesy a necessity. Though he fumbles with tact, he tries to calm his wife by noting that therapy is something of a status symbol.



Cal lovingly notices details of both Conrad and Beth's physical appearance. He cares deeply for both of them—but this scene, when considered together with the argument before it, offers a glimpse of the difficulty Cal will have in negotiating his love for both of them.



Conrad reacts to the anxiety of others with more tenderness than he does to his own. This attempt to establish a relationship of trust with a peer unfortunately fails. Once again, Stillman and the other swimmers snuff out one of Conrad's rare affectionate moments.



In bed, Conrad rehashes the day's events in his mind. The mild embarrassment of Suzanne's refusal returns, but he remembers something else too—his math teacher, Mr. Simmons, had been watching him intently throughout the quiz. Conrad is suddenly reminded of a hazy string of events from the previous year, just before his suicide attempt: Mr. Simmons noticing Conrad's deepening depression, his homeroom teacher's probing questions, him lying motionless in bed as his family spent Christmas vacation at the beach.

Conrad dreams he is walking alone on a bright moonlit beach. Ahead of him he sees a large metal tunnel, which he enters. As he moves further and further into the tunnel the walls close in, until he is trapped in a tiny space on hands and knees. He tries to escape from the small dark space, but is trapped and thrown into a panic. He screams and is jolted awake.

Conrad discusses the dream with Dr. Berger at his next therapy session. In his typically casual way Berger downplays the dream at first, but eventually admits that he finds it fascinating. He suspects that Conrad is extremely anxious about something. He's right; Conrad confirms that he no longer enjoys swimming. His skills are waning, he's annoyed with his teammates, and he considers Salan insensitive to his mental issues. Berger urges Conrad to solve his problem in a way that feels right, even if it looks ridiculous to everyone around him. True to form, Conrad mocks the doctor's nebulous advice.

CHAPTER 10

Lazenby, Stillman, Truan, Genthe, and Van Buren make plans to see a movie. Lazenby would like to invite Conrad, but Stillman protests loudly. He considers Conrad a "flake" and a burden to the group. Likewise, Genthe complains about the extra time and attention Salan gives Conrad during swim practice. Lazenby tries to defend Conrad as a friend, but the other boys try to dissuade him from spending too much time with Conrad.

From Salan's office, Conrad overhears the conversation coming from the locker room downstairs. His coach is unhappy with him too, since it's implied that Conrad has just asked to leave the swim team. Salan feels slighted, as he's made an extra effort to work around Conrad's therapy sessions. Conrad works to remain calm during the conversation. He tells Salan that his decision is for the best. Disappointed, Salan warns Conrad that he won't let him back onto the team, and dismisses him.

Conrad's mental illness is not just a private issue; it affects his schoolwork and his relationships with others. Yet from the outside, Conrad's teachers and peers cannot recognize what's happening to him on the inside. He withdraws mentally even as he remains present physically.



This is the first of several dreams and flashbacks to appear in the novel. In this and other moments like it, we realize that feelings of helplessness and isolation are what plague Conrad most deeply.



Berger's hands-off approach gives Conrad space to work through his problems. Their relationship is not that of parent and child – one commands, the other obeys. Instead, theirs is a relationship of honest exchange. Berger listens to Conrad's concerns, but does not try to force a solution onto him. But he does urge Conrad to put his feelings before his concern for appearance.



This chapter is marked by constant tension between words and feelings. The members of Conrad's swim team (except Lazenby) only recognize the outer effects of his mental illness. Lazenby's compassion strikes them as odd, because Conrad's behavior is nothing but an inconvenience to them.



Likewise, Salan is callous toward Conrad's decision to quit the team. He cannot be blamed entirely, however, since Conrad doesn't explain that swimming has been his biggest source of stress. A lack of communication and understanding leaves Salan feeling unappreciated. The narration highlights the tension between Conrad's words and feelings.



Conrad clears out his locker, then heads to Lazenby's car for a ride home. Lazenby asks if Conrad would like to go to the movies that night, but despite Lazenby's insistence Conrad declines, claiming that he has to study instead. Lazenby finally reaches Conrad's house and promises to pick him up the next day for swim practice. Conrad awkwardly refuses the offer; he explains that his dad will give him a ride instead. He avoids telling the group that he's quit the team.

Cal makes his routine stop by Conrad's room to check in with him. Conrad flatly claims that he's doing fine—for the time being, he doesn't want to tell his dad about his decision to quit the team. He tries to convince himself it was the right choice; he feels that swimming had lost its thrill long ago. Heeding Karen's advice, he decides that what's most important is not to let this or any other recent event weigh too much on him. To relieve stress, he decides to masturbate.

CHAPTER 11

Cherry is devastated after breaking up with her boyfriend. Ray is annoyed, but Cal feels for her. The normally perky secretary's emotional breakdown catches him off guard, and soon he begins to feel self-conscious; he worries that his sympathy is too obvious. A bit of Arnold Bacon's old advice comes to his mind: "The things which hurt instruct." Cal can't quite bring himself to agree.

At lunchtime Cal runs into Carole Lazenby. Not having seen each other in a while, they go to lunch together to catch up. They discuss their sons, and how much less time they spend together than before. Carole also mentions her admiration for Beth's constant composure. Carole fears she's becoming less and less composed as she moves into middle age.

After lunch Cal considers Carole's remarks about Beth, comparing her seeming composure to what he remembers of the years when Conrad and Buck were both small boys. The demand of raising two children, combined with her desire to keep a perfect house, put Beth under an intense amount of pressure, often driving her to tears or seething anger. In those days, Cal soon realized that the smallest messes "drove her to the point of madness." Yet despite his appreciation for Beth's cleanliness and attention to detail, he realized that her efforts were unable to prevent bad things (like Buck's death, or Conrad's suicide attempt) from making their mark on the family.

Conrad continues to put himself at odds with his peers by speaking differently from how he feels. Lazenby attempts to reach out to him but – like Suzanne did to Conrad – Conrad shuts himself off from help.



Despite his choice to quit the swim team, and thus escape physical strain, Conrad continues to seek physical solutions to his stress.



Cal's fatherly instincts flare up yet again. His problem is the opposite of Conrad's; his overwhelming concern for others (as opposed to Conrad's overwhelming fear for his own well-being) is his biggest weakness. Bacon's shrewdness stays with him, but is directly opposed to what he personally feels.



The Jarretts'—and particularly Beth's—appearance of perfection outweighs the suffering they have experienced (and continue to endure).



Carole's thoughts about Beth are invalidated in two ways. Not only do the Jarretts suffer their own misfortunes, but those mishaps put everyone, even Beth, under intense pressure. We learn that Beth's deep desire for control is only a means of compensating for a lack of emotional control. Such a loss can affect her deeply.



Cal and Beth chat about their day later that evening. Cal reminds Beth about a car they'd been looking at recently; they plan to buy it for Conrad as a Christmas gift. He asks Beth if she'd like to visit the dealership to look at it with him, but she insists on leaving the decision-making process to Cal. The ease of the decision, and of their conversation, soothes Cal – but after a moment he wonders if their relationship is really as easy as it seems.

There's more to Beth's refusal to visit the dealership than meets the eye. She'd rather have as little to do with Conrad as possible, so she avoids having a hand in any choice that might affect him emotionally.



Cal recalls a conversation he'd had with Ray's wife Nancy at a party seven years before. She'd mentioned that she was jealous of Beth, and how she was "lucky...never to have been disillusioned" with marriage. Cal was upset by Nancy's confession, as he'd tried to stay out of the conflict between her and her husband Ray (who was having an affair with Lynn Searles, then secretary at the firm). Despite their troubles, and despite a temporary break-up, Nancy and Ray reunited and moved into a large house in the suburbs. Knowing the truth about the Hanleys' marriage and seeing its outcome urged Cal to be suspicious about happy relationships. The thought stays with him as Conrad comes home from school. The family make small talk and prepare for dinner.

In this flashback, Cal begins to sense one of his family's biggest issues: they might be tempted to confuse the appearance of healthy relationships for their actual existence. Thanks to his experience with Ray and Nancy, he knows that an attractive outer shell can easily conceal a host of problems.



CHAPTER 12

Conrad has gotten used to filling the time once reserved for swim practice. Still having yet to tell his parents that he left the team, he spends his time studying or visiting many different places around town. Lazenby confronts Conrad one morning at school, upset that Salan was the person to let them known about Conrad's decision. Conrad claims that his decision to leave was simply one of boredom, but Lazenby suspects something might be wrong with Conrad. He tries to dig for the answer and only upsets Conrad in the process. Conrad snaps and asks to be left alone. The two bitterly part ways.

Conrad's attempts to relieve his stress have improved, but he's still unwilling to let his friend help him with his problems.



Later, Conrad confesses to Dr. Berger that he hasn't told his parents about his decision to quit swimming. He offers several excuses: the timing isn't right, his father would get too worked up. When Berger asks how Beth would respond, Conrad asserts that Beth wouldn't care at all. His mother, he says, is "a very private person" who's completely out of touch with him. Like Lazenby, Berger senses that something is bothering Conrad despite his claims to the contrary. Eventually Berger advises Conrad to release the pent-up frustration he feels. Conrad admits to fearing the idea, but Berger presses it: "Don't think too much about it. And don't expect it to tickle."

This is a breakthrough moment in Conrad's sessions with Berger. Conrad gets his first glimpse of the connection between his relationships and his personal feelings. Though he remains ambivalent toward Beth, Berger helps him realize that part of his stress comes from maintaining too tight a grip on his feelings.



Conrad encounters Jeannine by chance one day after school. She teasingly compliments him on his singing, and he asks her if she'd like to get a Coke with him; she agrees. They head for a popular soda shop, but a brief shock of anxiety leads Conrad to choose a less-crowded coffee shop instead. He and Jeannine struggle to make conversation at first – she wants to talk about music, but mostly only knows about classical repertoire, while Conrad is more into pop records. Once they acknowledge the awkwardness of the situation, though, their conversation flows freely.

This scene mirrors Conrad's meeting with Karen, but it is much more positive in tone and feeling. Jeannine doesn't try to instruct Conrad like Karen does. Instead, the two eventually become comfortable with one another because they feel equally awkward about being alone together.



On the way home Jeannine asks Conrad if he has any siblings. When he says no, she tells him that he's lucky (not knowing about the sailing accident). Despite her remark the two part ways on good terms. Conrad feels the urge to run joyfully down the street, but in the midst of strangers he suddenly becomes self-conscious. Heading down the street he sees a window advertisement for a ski vacation—without warning, it triggers a memory of him having a minor accident while skiing down a mountain with Buck. The flashback scares him at first, but anxiety soon transforms into pleasure. Conrad composes himself and heads home.

We see a connection between Conrad's relationships and emotional well-being once again. His time with Jeannine prepares him to meet a memory of Buck with more control than was possible before. He doesn't realize it yet, but emotional openness with others enables Conrad to confront his past more peacefully.



CHAPTER 13

Christmas is quickly approaching. Cal and Conrad are at a local tree farm, selecting a fir to display in their living room. Conrad is tireless in his search for the perfect tree, which is a wonderful sight for Cal. Never mind the size of the tree—Conrad's enthusiasm is a far cry from the Conrad he knew just a year ago, so tired and ill he was unable to order food for lunch at a restaurant near the hospital. His son's vitality, combined with the festive feeling in the air, leave Cal "weightless with joy."

Is Conrad making progress, or is this sudden sense of control too good to be true? Maybe both? We might recall the worry Cal has earlier in the novel: the appearance of satisfaction conveyed in this scene seems too good to be true, as suggested by the presence of "canned music" and gaudy Christmas decorations.



Cal and Conrad begin setting up the tree in their living room. Beth returns home from "a meeting," which he elusively describes as "interesting." She explains that she ran into Carole Lazenby earlier that day, and reveals that she felt embarrassed when Carole told her that Conrad had quit the swimming team and she hadn't even known it herself. Immediately Cal is plunged into a bout of guilt. He was so certain that he was doing his job as a dutiful father, and never suspected he could miss something so important.

Beth's detachment from Conrad is on full display in this scene; she never addresses him straightforwardly. Both she and Cal's desire for control are derailed; Beth feels pitied by the people who knew about her son before she did, and Cal's sense of responsibility has failed him.



Beth continues to scold Conrad for keeping this secret for a month. Conrad explodes with anger, he yells that hadn't told his mother because he knew she didn't really care about him. Mother and son loudly blame each other for wanting to hurt the other. Cal tries to step in, but Conrad continues unloading on Beth. He expresses his resentment for her refusal to see him while he was in the hospital, and finally storms off to his room.

Cal tries to comfort Beth, who is shaking and sobbing. He wants the two to make up, but Beth refuses, claiming that Cal only takes Conrad's side in their confrontations. With Beth "refus[ing] to be manipulated," Cal heads up to Conrad's room by himself.

Cal finds Conrad lying face down on his bed. He tries to persuade Conrad to apologize to Beth, but Conrad complains that he's too tired. He also doesn't think his effort would be worthwhile. Cal doesn't understand what he means; Conrad explains that Beth hates him, and doesn't want his apology. His son's claim doesn't make sense to him. Casting for an answer, he asks if his sessions with Berger are helping. Conrad warns Cal not to blame Berger, and the conversation ends abruptly.

CHAPTER 14

The day after his fight with Beth, Conrad is heavy with guilt. Not only does he feel bad about himself, but he also believes that his peers are silently judging his behavior as well. His only sense of refuge comes with **choir practice**; singing in harmony with others soothes him.

Conrad discusses the argument with his mother in the day's session with Berger. He is reluctant to tell the doctor how the outburst makes him feel, but Berger refuses to let him bury his emotions. He reminds Conrad of his advice to drop his emotional burden, asking if Conrad has tried to make amends with his mother by talking through their problems together. Conrad angrily rejects Berger's proposal. To him, reconciliation between him and his mother is unthinkable – his suicide attempt, and the mess it made, turned her against him for good.

A mess of buried emotions explode to the surface. None of the Jarretts have known how best to handle the aftermath of Conrad's breakdown, and their individual desires – for control, for acceptance, for peace – have put them at odds with one another.



This is a rare moment in which Beth's own mental unrest is uncovered. We realize that her coldness toward Conrad is more than a matter of courtesy. To her, his anger represents nothing more than an attempt to manipulate her.



Tellingly, Conrad wants to leave Berger out of the situation. He believes his therapy sessions are designed to deal more with himself than with his place in his family. However much Berger is helping to transform his personal sense of control, Conrad still feels powerless when interacting with others.



Conrad's anxiety leads him to feel both mentally isolated and physically separate from the crowds of people around him. Singing in a choir, though, solves both of those problems. When singing, he is literally in harmony with others.



Berger helps Conrad realize that his unwillingness to discuss painful events is linked to his habit of wallowing in guilt. Because he knows nothing of Beth's perspective, he cannot know what kind of role she plays in their relationship. In turn, Conrad assumes that he is the cause of their strained relationship. Conrad is always blaming himself.



Berger is taken aback by Conrad's passionate refusal. As the mood settles, Berger tries to help Conrad put the argument into perspective. Perhaps Beth's personality prevents her from being more emotionally invested. Conrad remains convinced that he is the main reason his relationship with his parents is so troubled. Yet Berger believes that Conrad's attempted suicide does not mean he cannot forgive Beth. Conrad must learn to forgive his mother, but he must forgive himself first.

Conrad doesn't think his suicide was an act of self-loathing, but when pressed he can't explain his motivation. Berger gives him a piece of advice at the very end of their session: "The body doesn't lie." Keeping in touch with himself will make Conrad understand the way his mind works.

Conrad's admission is accompanied by strong physical sensations. This is one of the first moments in which working through his guilt causes Conrad's mental and physical selves to work together—though in an unpleasant way. Both literally and physically, Conrad learns to "feel" for a brief moment.



Berger's advice is one of the most important statements in the novel. It addresses Conrad's inability to get in touch with his feelings, and it becomes increasingly helpful as his character develops.



CHAPTER 15

Beth's parents Howard and Ellen visit the Jarretts for Christmas. Cal surveys the scene quietly; Ellen's good looks remind him of Beth's, and he finds the dull grayness of winter in Chicago much more of a "reality" than the extreme beauty and always-pleasant weather of Christmas in Florida. Soon Conrad makes his way into the living room and greets his grandparents. Surprisingly, he is decked in a nicer-than-usual outfit, and the mysterious skin rash he'd been worrying about for days before is gone. The pleasant exchange gets the best of Cal – without warning, he thinks of Buck.

A gentle sense of calm settles as the family exchange gifts after dinner. The parents and grandparents have all opened their gifts, and Howard and Cal can barely wait to give Conrad his biggest present. Urging him to look out onto the driveway, everyone crowds around the door as Conrad opens it to find a brand new car sitting in front of the house. Cal beams with pride, but Conrad's expression is blank. Soon Cal worries that his son doesn't like his surprise present. Conrad assures Cal and Howard (somewhat shakily) to the contrary and decides to take the car for a test drive. As Beth and Ellen withdraw into the house, Cal begins to feel disappointed.

Cal's memory of the too-perfect appearance of Florida tempers the scene in his own house. Seeing Conrad by his good-looking, well-dressed, and too-polite family members is a hint that his present situation may, in a way, be just as bad as the scenario he remembers. Cal, however, does not suspect such a thing to be true.



The narration closely follows Cal's thoughts through this scene. Its emotional arc may seem a little jarring—fragile and tense at first, slightly anticlimactic as Conrad sees the car, and melancholy as the family goes back into the house—but that's because Cal insists on giving every aspect of the scene a definite meaning. Conrad's reactions are even described as "blank and unreadable," but Cal's constant need to understand leads him to draw a negative conclusion.



After the day's activities, Beth and Cal linger in the living room. Cal broods quietly, worrying that his family's recent grief has stolen something special from their Christmas. Soon he tries to engage Beth in small talk about Conrad's apparent disappointment, but she retorts that Cal "worr[ies] too much about him." What's more, she complains that Cal asks too much in wanting a perfect family. Cal defends himself. He voices his worry for Conrad and boasts that he, unlike Beth, is invested in his son's well-being. Not taking the accusation well, Beth storms into the kitchen and continues cleaning up. Cal realizes that his family is still deep in the process of grieving, but for the moment he can see no way past it.

Cal's constant worry makes him sensitive to the fact that his family's interactions will always be tainted by Buck's death. It's an important view, but it also means he's unable to take each event as it comes. Beth is annoyed by his big-picture perspective; she considers it too unrealistic.



CHAPTER 16

For Conrad, the start of a new year brings the realization that he needs to organize his life. He runs through his concerns one by one: he resolves to work hard when it comes to schoolwork and exercise; he resolves to find new friends and a job (but isn't sure how to do either). After "guitar" and "books," though, comes "girls"; Karen, Suzanne, and Jeannine all come to mind, but for the moment Conrad decides to focus on himself. He suddenly remembers, though, how Buck used to tease him about the many lists he'd made, and he wonders whether the newest one is a sign of progress or regression.

A romantic relationship is one arena in which Conrad's desire for human contact is most recognizable. Resolving to find a girlfriend (and become a better guitar player) is a step toward greater openness, feeling, and trust. Yet Conrad wonders if this plan will prove as ineffective as the other ways in which he's tried to control his life.



Conrad visits the library to ask about employment opportunities. While there, he encounters a beautiful woman in the stacks at the library. Embarrassment prods him to escape her gaze. He moves throughout the library, but the strange woman continues to watch and follow him. Eventually he makes it out to the parking lot – and by surprise he encounters her again, noticing her **blue skirt** and **blue car**. Nonchalantly, she apologizes for embarrassing him, flirtatiously complements his good looks, and drives away.

The narration builds an intense connection between Conrad's physical and social awareness. Anxiety permeates the entire encounter, as represented by the prominence of the color blue. But being watched, followed, and complimented on his looks make Conrad aware of his worth to himself and others.



Conrad fills Berger in on his encounter with the woman at the library. In spite of Berger's gentle teasing, he admits that the exchange boosted his confidence. He also notes that it contributed to the streak of contentment he's maintained in the days after Christmas, however fragile it seems. But something more important worries Conrad: cautiously, Conrad explains that he has suddenly become obsessed with women's bodies. He notices and thinks about them constantly, and masturbates just as frequently.

Conrad's problem with women is the opposite of his problem with his family: he believes he is too eager to connect with women, that he has too little control of his urges. Berger encourages this feeling, though. As he tells Conrad, it's a sign that he's "waking up."



Berger casually advises Conrad to begin a relationship with Jeannine. Conrad is wary of dating, but the doctor assures him that the process is easy, "just like skiing." The advice softens him a bit, and to his own surprise Conrad confesses his admiration for Berger; he admits that he considers the doctor a friend. Jokingly, Berger returns the compliment.

Conrad's emotional growth is not purely romantic. For the first time we see Conrad affirm someone as his friend. The confession suggests that he's still relatively closed off from the rest of the world, but it's still a step forward.



CHAPTER 17

Conrad spends part of his birthday cleaning the garage with Cal. When the work is done, the two share sandwiches and **beers**. They also discuss memories of cleaning the garage long ago, when Conrad and Buck were children. Cal remembers the two of them writing dirty words in hidden nooks and crannies; Conrad recalls where they are, and is able to show them to Cal. Both of them are pleasantly surprised by the discovery.

The narration describes the beers as "golden," which is a small but significant detail as gold in the novel symbolizes insight or honesty. In this moment, Conrad and Cal are able to be more earnest with each other than they have at any other point in the novel. They are even allowed to reminisce about Buck. For once, Conrad allows himself to experience emotion.



Cal notices his son's unusually good mood. Curious, he asks about Berger and what he and Conrad discuss in their sessions. Cal throws out the idea of going to see Berger himself, which shocks Conrad. However, Cal promises his son that the visit would only be for his personal benefit. Conrad doesn't understand why, as he doesn't consider anything to be wrong with his father. Cal can't point to any particular problem either, but impressions of Beth, Conrad, and even Buck come to mind as he considers making an appointment.

Even though the idea is his own, Cal can't actually figure out why he wants to meet with Berger. For once, his desire for control is dampened. In its place comes an awareness of his role in his family. Cal's confusion, combined with his quick series of thoughts about his family members, suggest that Cal is most in touch with himself when he values personal connections and vulnerability above the need to control fate.



Cal meets with Berger. Like his son, Cal is struck by Berger's crazed appearance and **the "sharp, stinging blue" of his eyes**. His nervous attention to detail runs wild in Berger's office, causing his attention to jump from walls to bookcases to his own feelings and back again. He eventually admits to Berger that despite his efforts, he feels powerless – especially when it comes to managing the relationship between Conrad and Beth's relationship.

During his time with Berger, Cal cycles between "noticing," physical sensation, and flashbacks. Here we see the difficult process of recovery in action; all parts of Cal are working together to reach some deeper realization.



Revealing so much about himself so quickly makes Cal feel self-conscious, but Berger's easy manner encourages him to continue. Jokingly, Cal remembers Conrad's habit of calling the mental hospital "The Zoo"; to his relief, Berger's office is nothing like The Zoo. Slowly but surely, Cal warms up to sharing his problems with Berger.

The small amount of progress Cal makes is snuffed out. For now, he is unwilling to let himself take the process all the way. But Berger's lighthearted observation that he and Conrad have a lot in common encourages Cal to loosen up and continue talking.



CHAPTER 18

It's the first day of exam week for Conrad. In the first moments of his English exam, Conrad notices a handful of details as he glances around the classroom: his peers hard at work, the **blue shadows of trees on the snow outside**, his teacher passing through the aisles of the classroom. The last is the hardest for him to deal with. He finds it difficult to write essays about free will and fate when he's ogling his teacher lustfully as she wanders around the room.

After the exam, Conrad and Jeannine spot one another in the hallway. He is unsure how to approach her; he hasn't spoken to her since Christmas vacation began, and worries that he'll make a misstep. She passes as he rummages through his locker, then after composing himself he runs to catch up with her outside the school. Playing down his nervousness, he coolly offers her a ride home, which she accepts.

Conrad and Jeannine listen to the **radio** in silence during the ride. They eventually reach her house, and with a twinge of embarrassment Jeannine says that she can't invite Conrad inside, beginning to explain something about her mother. However, she quickly interrupts herself to apologize for calling Conrad "lucky" to be an only child during their last conversation. Conrad is also embarrassed; Jeannine suggests that she also knows about his suicide, which makes him regret his failure to let her know before she learned about it from anywhere else. The two part awkwardly, and on the way home Conrad tries to convince himself that there is nothing to be ashamed of.

Several neighborhood women have gathered at the Jarretts' for their bridge club meeting. Conrad slips into the house trying to avoid the group, but Carole Lazenby greets him warmly and introduces him to the rest of the women. Beth sits by but is mostly quiet. As he moves toward his room, Mrs. Lazenby urges Conrad to stop by her house for a visit; she's noticed how little time she and her son have spent together recently. Conrad makes a half-hearted promise and hurries upstairs.

As suggested by the essay questions on his exam, Guest conceives of Conrad as one of many literary figures who struggle with fate and inner turmoil. Perhaps Conrad's assigned reading may have helped him deal with the anxiety and isolation he feels on a daily basis, but his feelings are much stronger than anything he could say about the books.



Asking Jeannine out is a bold step for Conrad. He feels that the task is "harder than any exam," but it brings him one step closer to the contact and relationships he wants and needs. His decision to play it cool in front of Jeannine shows that he isn't yet willing to relinquish control of himself.



Listening to the radio together puts Conrad and Jeannine on the same page. Though Conrad is put in an awkward spot by Jeannine's questions, the moment forces him to be more open and vulnerable than he has been in the past.



Politeness prevents any of the characters in this scene from sharing their true feelings with one another (with the possible exception of Carole). The distance between Conrad, Beth, and the others is directly opposed to the awkward openness of the previous scene.



Alone, Conrad considers Mrs. Lazenby's offer. He eventually concludes that too many distractions have come between him and Lazenby, and that a visit wouldn't be worth the trouble. He does, however, decide to call Jeannine on the spur of the moment – but not before calling Karen, whose number he spots on a notepad near the phone. Her mother picks up the phone, but is extremely wary of Conrad and speaks to him harshly. For a moment he scolds himself, feeling that someone so obsessed with women deserves to be treated poorly. After a while, though, he snaps out of his funk and decides to call Jeannine. He asks her out on a date – and to his surprise and relief, she accepts.

Conrad is caught between the pain of old relationships and the healing potential of new ones. The thought of seeing Lazenby and Jeannine in the hallways at school is not satisfying to Conrad. His phone call to Jeannine is awkward, but the value of one-on-one encounters is made real to him once again.



CHAPTER 19

Cal and Ray have worked late into the night to catch up with work. Productivity has lagged since Cherry left – Ray fired her, and the new secretary doesn't show much promise. After Cal and Ray wrap up for the day they head to a nearby lunch counter for something to eat. Talk of work gives way to Ray's concern for Cal; he's noticed that something seems to be bothering his friend. Cal insists that he's fine, and that he plans to compete in an upcoming lawyers' golf tournament in Dallas. Beth is going with him, and they will stay with her brother and his wife nearby. He wonders if his break would leave Ray with too much work, but Ray urges him to go, and not to worry.

Cal continues to wrestle with his feelings of purposelessness. He isn't able to tell how much his presence is needed at work, or how much to rely on Ray's friendship. To complicate matters, visiting Dallas would put the orphaned Cal right in the middle of Beth's family—which is obviously much bigger than Cal's by comparison.



Ray searches for the root of Cal's disappointment. He tries to console Cal, explaining that Conrad will be off to college in less than a year's time. Cal gets a little defensive; he feels Ray's advice is unsolicited. He swears once again that he isn't worried about Conrad, or Beth for that matter. Ray reveals that his wife Nancy and Beth met each other for coffee last week, and that Beth confessed that she felt Cal was too worried about Conrad. Cal doesn't take the revelation well; he hadn't known how Beth felt.

Similarities between Cal and Conrad begin to emerge once again. This time, Cal shares his son's habit of rejecting the help of others. Cal's need for control will not allow him to take Ray's help.



Ray tries to ease Cal's burden, offering him the idea that life is nothing more than a series of "more-or-less meaningless actions." Cal rejects the idea vigorously; when Ray asks him what he believes instead, Cal answers jokingly that he believes "[he'll] go to Dallas" to play golf. As the conversation subsides both men mull over the loss that has filled their lives: Ray remembers watching his daughter leave home and having his marriage falter, while Cal thinks about the small warning signs that cropped up in the days leading up to Conrad's suicide attempt. Cal concludes that Beth might be right about his lack of focus, but he refuses to believe that life is as meaningless as Ray would have him believe.

Cal doesn't realize how much opening up to Ray would help him. Because the two of them have much more in common than he realizes, Cal could easily turn to his friend to for understanding. In fact, Ray's advice will become more valuable than either he or Cal realize; though it's stated harshly, Cal will come to embrace the idea that he can't control fate.



CHAPTER 20

Conrad stands on the front porch of Jeannine's house eagerly anticipating his first date with her. He is in a good mood; he's made so much progress with Berger that they have reduced their meetings to once a week. He gets so caught up in the memory of their latest appointment that he forgets to ring Jeannine's doorbell. After a while the front door opens, and Jeannine's mother greets him. She invites him into the living room. While waiting for Jeannine, Conrad meets her younger brother Mike and makes small talk with Ms. Pratt.

After a while Ms. Pratt goes to check on Jeannine, leaving Conrad and Mike alone in the living room. Mike chimes in and declares that he'll start **guitar lessons** soon. More small talk follows, when Mike notes that Conrad looks just like a man who'd visited his house the week before. Conrad wants to know the man's name, but Mike can't remember; as he explains, "there's too many." Jeannine suddenly hurries into the room, and soon she and Conrad are off.

In the car Jeannine apologizes for leaving Conrad with her mother for too long. She also warns Conrad that she isn't a great bowler. Conrad asks if she'd rather do something else, but neither of them can think of a better plan. Conrad promises to teach her how to bowl, and at the alley Jeannine catches on quickly; Conrad realizes that Jeannine is attentive and listens well. Afterward the two grab a meal at McDonald's, and they entertain themselves by making up stories about the strangers surrounding them.

Jeannine tells Conrad about her family on the ride home. Her parents are divorced; her father is a salesman in Akron, Ohio, and her mother is a nurse in a nearby town. Jeannine explains her uncle helped her mother find a new job, which required her to move to Illinois, but she doesn't mention any other causes for the relocation. Soon the two pull into Jeannine's driveway, where they agree to see each other again. They kiss for the first time.

Conrad makes small talk with Ms. Pratt the way he sometimes does with his father, but his good mood helps him not be too self-conscious; he doesn't withhold information in order to protect himself from her probing.



Mike plays a role similar to that of many other children in literature: his innocence enables him to access deep ideas that may not be readily obvious to adults. Not only does his interest in music echo Conrad's own, but his comment about the many men who visit Jeannine's house forebodes some unpleasant information about her.



Yet again, we see that awkwardness is the catalyst of Conrad and Jeannine's relationship. Conrad's bowling lesson gives him and Jeannine a taste of how trust and openness function in a relationship. Meanwhile, play-acting in McDonald's provides them an opportunity to confront the reality of their budding relationship head-on.



Because the foundations of trust and honesty were laid during their date, Jeannine can begin sharing secrets about her past. This is a moment of truth for her and Conrad, as represented by the yellow light that surrounds them as they kiss, as well as by Berger's advice that "the body never lies" (which Conrad remembers).



CHAPTER 21

Cal tells Beth about the golf tournament. Since they were unable to travel to Europe for Christmas, he feels that the trip to Dallas is the least he can do for her – especially since she would be able to see her brother Ward and his wife Audrey. Beth accepts Cal's offer. That done, Cal strolls into the family room and puts on **a record** of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony*. It reminds him of all of the places he and Beth have traveled, including the small monastery where they stayed while Conrad was still in the hospital. It gave him the feeling of comfort and safety. At last, Cal can complete the phrase for himself: "I'm the kind of man who believes in safety."

Thoughts of Arnold Bacon cut in. Unlike Cal, the feeling of safety didn't restrain Bacon from making painful choices, including "withdraw[ing] friendship" and cutting ties after Cal decided to marry. Bacon firmly believed that Beth was "not a sharer"; he claimed that she would demand too much of Cal's attention. But Beth felt the same way about Bacon, admonishing Cal that his mentor was too eager to burden Cal with his own wants and needs. Having to choose between Beth and Bacon was a difficult process for him, one which hurt him deeply.

The intense memories bring Cal to the verge of tears (a common occurrence since visiting Dr. Berger). He remembered Beth's assertion that Bacon was only interested in Cal as long as Cal needed him around; when he didn't, Bacon cut him loose. He considers the idea that "[p]eople only use people according to their own needs." Remembering his personal need for safety, he then recalls an opportunity he had to cheat on Beth. He'd told Beth about the encounter afterward (what with Ray and Nancy's recent affair); she tells Cal that the embarrassment of an affair would have driven her away for good. For a moment he thinks he's discovered the key to Beth's mysterious personality – an inability to forgive – but the answer seems too simple and he dismisses it.

CHAPTER 22

Conrad decides to attend a swim meet at school. Unfortunately the team is doing poorly; for a moment he regrets leaving the team. After the meet he tiptoes through **the slushy parking lot** to get to his car, but on the way he hears his friends complaining about the match and about their coach. Truan complains that, to their annoyance, Salan constantly compares the team to Buck, "the all-time great swimmer of the world." Too little too late, someone spots Conrad and cautions the group to be quiet.

Arranging a trip that Beth will appreciate gives Cal a momentary sense of worth. His satisfaction is increased by the music he listens to. Cal believes he's found a fulfilling way to provide for someone he loves—and without a huge amount of risk. In this moment, Cal's sense of purpose comes easily to him.



Cal is no stranger to having to choose between the people he loves (remember his conversation with Berger in Chapter 17). Unfortunately for him, his being an orphan converges with his indecisiveness at points like these. Finding a place in a family always requires him to put the needs of one member above another—which is one of the reasons he associates family with grief.



Though Berger never says the phrase to him, his belief that "the body never lies" begins to have meaning for Cal as well. For once, he begins to feel something other than anxiety. But he also gets a glimpse into Beth's inner being. Her physical and emotional perfection (and seeming perfection) may stem from an unwillingness to compromise herself. Cal isn't willing to trust Berger's advice just yet, though.



Just as he starts to develop his relational skills, Conrad is alone. He has made progress but may not be able to handle an encounter with his friends, who are already a major source of stress for him. The water in the parking lot suggests that his run-in with the guys from the swim team will be difficult to navigate.



Embarrassed, Lazenby and Truan try to make small talk with Conrad. But Stillman emerges and cuts in, mocking Conrad bitterly about his car and relationship with Jeannine. Lazenby tries to calm the brewing conflict, but an insult from Stillman pushes Conrad over the edge. He snaps and hits Stillman in the face. The group scrambles to pry the two apart as they throw punches. After a while they are separated, and Conrad retreats to his car to sit alone.

Once in his car Conrad realizes that he's lost his keys, but Lazenby soon appears with them in hand. He gets into Conrad's car, demanding that the two talk. He is disappointed that Conrad would allow himself to be provoked by Stillman. Conrad doesn't take Lazenby's words well. Lazenby asks Conrad why he insists on dealing with his struggles alone; he doubts whether the two of them are still friends. He also admits that he misses Buck just as much as Conrad does; the confession takes Conrad by surprise. They sit in painful silence for a moment, and then Conrad excuses himself. Driving off, he is determined to keep control of himself and his feelings.

To his relief, Conrad comes home to an empty house. He washes the blood off of his jacket, but notices a stubborn spot on his shirt. Not wanting Beth to ask questions about it, he struggles to scrub it clean. After tidying up he heads to the kitchen to make a TV dinner and some coffee, but all the while flashbacks of the fight swirl around him. The phone rings, and Conrad imagines that Stillman's father has called to explain that his son's nose and jaw are broken. As guilt sets in and the flashbacks continue, Conrad punishes himself by gulping down the still-hot coffee. He takes his clothes out of the dryer and, in spite of his need to move around, decides to sit in the living room in stillness.

CHAPTER 23

Conrad goes for a drive later that night. His slow driving angers a nearby driver, who passes him with a raised middle finger. Soon the sight of angered drivers and **religious billboards** get him thinking about the difficulty of communication: how to know what someone means when they say something? To him it seems hard to communicate without being too forceful or demanding. The problem eventually confuses him, so he gives up on it and heads home.

Conrad takes Berger's advice, but in a radically different way than we might expect. He unleashes his rage in a dramatic physical expression that "makes him whole again." The narrator describes the scene as "bathed in yellow light," a further sign that Conrad's release is a moment of genuine feeling—and Conrad genuinely feels that his "friends" are not actually his friends!



Lazenby is the only member of the group that actually demonstrates concern for Conrad. But like Cal, Conrad refuses to share his grief with one of the few people who can relate to him. The lessons he is beginning to learn with Jeannine have yet to be applied to his other relationships.



Conrad's emotional progress takes a step backward. He seeks isolation after the fight and tries to punish himself for his loss of control. He is still acting on Berger's advice, but in an unhealthy way; he tries to address his turmoil by inflicting physical discomfort on himself.



The sight of crosses and religious slogans strikes Conrad as too heavy-handed. He realizes that communication requires give and take, but he doesn't know how that might work in actual conversation.



Cal comes home around midnight. He sees Conrad on the couch; he'd presumably fallen asleep while waiting for him. Cal nudges his son awake, and Conrad explains that he needs to talk to him about something. Worry sets in as Conrad tells him about the fight with Stillman at school, but talking through the problem helps Cal feel better. He's able to comfort his son, assuring him that fights between friends are nothing new. He also believes that Conrad "owed himself" an opportunity to release his pent-up anger. (Crawford's words come to mind; his son's suicide attempt was spurred by unreleased rage.) He asks Conrad what the fight was about, but Conrad casually explains that Stillman has "no sense of humor."

Cal hears the sound of Beth's breathing as he prepares for bed. In the moment he realizes that he hadn't seen her stop by the living room on her way upstairs, nor had Conrad. He is disturbed by the fact that Beth wouldn't stop to check on Conrad when she came home.

CHAPTER 24

Cal and Beth head off to Dallas. Conrad decides to stay with his grandparents Howard and Ellen, Beth's mother and father – Cal hadn't wanted to leave him alone at home for an entire week. At dinner, Ellen pesters Conrad about his long hair, skinniness, and less-than-stellar grades. All the while, Howard tries to get her to let their grandson eat in peace. Conrad holds his own, though, matching Ellen's constant questions with lighthearted quips. Seeing that Conrad refuses to hear her out, she eventually gives up.

Later, Conrad picks Jeannine up from her job at a nearby bakery. They plan to go see a movie, but first they stop at Jeannine's house. Jeannine grows tense when they arrive to find a car with Ohio license plates sitting in her driveway. Inside is a man named Paul Ferrier, who Jeannine has seen before; he's come to take Ms. Pratt on a date. Mike can't be left alone, which means that Conrad and Jeannine have to cancel their date and stay home. Visibly stressed, Jeannine retreats to make a snack for Mike, leaving him and Conrad alone in the den.

Mike shows off his fledgling **guitar** skills to Conrad. Conrad praises his performance enthusiastically, encouraging him to keep at his lessons. Mike asks Conrad to play, and Conrad tosses off a few pop tunes. After a while Conrad decides to go check on Jeannine in the kitchen. Paul's visit has upset her; at Conrad's questioning, she explains that he is a friend of her father's, and that he began seeing Ms. Pratt while she was still married. The story causes Jeannine to start crying. Conrad holds her close to comfort her. As they kiss, Conrad treasures the feeling of being "so strong, so needed."

Cal and Conrad manage to have a fairly open conversation, though Conrad is still pretty emotionally guarded. He believes that one way to avoid the forcefulness he recognizes above by blaming himself for the fight. However, Cal reaches out to him by recognizing his need to vent every once in a while. The trust and vulnerability they need is in sight, and they slowly begin to grasp for it.



Now Cal turns his "noticing" energies toward Beth. His doubt about her perfection begins to grow.



Conrad interprets Ellen's fussiness as a return to life before his suicide attempt. His jokes are not an attempt to protect himself, but to build a rapport with his grandmother. Unfortunately Ellen seems as though she is truly concerned for Conrad's well-being, so his comebacks have the same distancing effect they had on Cal earlier in the novel.



Mike's statement about strange men begins to make sense, as do Jeannine's earlier revelations about her past. We see how powerless she feels in her family situation.



Playing guitar with Mike helps Conrad build his resolve before going to comfort Jeannine. Taking the time to put his mind and body in touch with one another enables him to provide Jeannine with the care and understanding she needs. He can even encourage her to express her emotions without reservation—an idea that would have seemed strange to him not so long ago. And he revels in feeling like he is giving someone else support, rather than always being the one who needs to be supported.



CHAPTER 25

Cal relaxes at Ward and Audrey's house after a day playing golf. Beth and her brother have gone horseback riding, leaving Cal and Audrey with her two sons Charlie and Kerry. Cal and Audrey chat about their kids. Audrey expresses worry for Beth and Conrad. She notices that Beth's terse letters hardly ever mention her son, and complains that Beth treated questions about her son as "off limits" during a conversation the night before.

Inwardly, Cal sympathizes with Audrey. He, too, has sensed Beth's growing reluctance to discuss certain issues. He recalls how she fussed at him in a conversation during the flight to Dallas; she accused him of being "so sincere...and so pushy." Slowly, he recognizes her habit of making herself emotionally distant. But he knows she is capable of grieving. He recalls a time when Beth broke down in tears. Otherwise, she suppresses her emotions. She and Conrad were the only family members who hadn't cried at Buck's funeral.

Soon Beth and Ward return from horseback riding in high spirits. The four of them make lighthearted conversation, and Ward asks Beth if everything is going well. She hesitates a bit but answers affirmatively. Ward asks a couple of questions about Conrad, but Cal is the one who answers him – Beth drops out, staring silently at her wristwatch until the moment passes.

CHAPTER 26

Ellen scolds Conrad as he comes into the kitchen for breakfast. He hadn't come home from his date with Jeannine until 1:30 am. He answers with a typically jokey comeback. He is in a good mood; his date went well (even after he ran into Truan), and the thought of seeing Jeannine later enhances his happiness. Everything around him looks bright and new, and in the moment Conrad realizes that "he is strong, he is able, because he is."

Later that evening, Conrad is still basking in the glow of his good mood. As he leafs through the newspaper he glances at the **horoscopes**, wondering how to describe his own life and quickly remembering that Berger describes it as "becoming." But an article further down the page thoroughly shocks him: it reports that one Karen Susan Aldrich had committed suicide the day before. Conrad goes numb. A feeling of sickness gradually overtakes him; he excuses himself from the living room and goes up to his room. As he lay stiffly on his bed, garbled memories of his time with Karen in the hospital fill his mind.

At the Butlers' home, Cal is dropped right in the middle of what he lacks: a lively family with two young, eager sons. The new environment mirrors his life before the accident. It also gives him a chance to see how Beth acts in unusual circumstances, and how much she opens up to other loved ones. The stage is set for Cal's eventual confrontation with Beth.



Again, Cal is in the company of someone with whom he can sympathize. Audrey's stories confirm what is suggested by Beth's physical appearance and perfectionism—she will not allow herself to be shaken by external factors—but Cal's memory suggests that Beth's resistance doesn't come naturally to her. She must make a conscious effort to remain emotionally distant.



As Cal expected, a new setting unveils aspects of Beth's personality that he is not used to seeing. We witness her giving and receiving warmth to family members, but we also catch her in the process of avoiding difficult conversation.



Conrad is acutely aware of the sights, sounds, and feelings of the morning after his date. His grandparents' kitchen is filled with golden light, which points to the strength with which Conrad's newfound truths dawn on him. He is most satisfied when he allows himself to feel freely, without worrying about control or embarrassment.



Conrad encounters his biggest struggle just as he sheds the restricting ideas about truth, guilt, and fate that have influenced him throughout the novel. But his intense feelings have prepared him to handle it, even if he doesn't realize it at the time. Conrad is now in touch with his body and is willing to keep in touch with his feelings.



Conrad endures a feverish series of dreams. In the first, he struggles against a crowd of doctors in the hospital as they inject him with an unknown fluid. He is terrified at first, but Dr. Crawford (here called *Leo*) stays with him as he is taken back to his room. Eventually he calms down. Conrad is jolted awake; he looks around and realizes that everything in his room is **blue**. In the next dream, Conrad revisits the moment he slit his wrists.

In his dreams, Conrad comes face-to-face with the ideas and possibilities that frighten him the most. Unlike before, however, he is no longer able to escape them. These dreams are a point at which Conrad honestly begins to process his hang-ups.



The second time he wakes, Conrad jumps out of bed and leaves his grandparents' house. He takes a walk in order to clear his head. Karen's death reminds him of the newspaper article about his own suicide attempt; Crawford had let him read it in the hospital. Suddenly Conrad stops in his tracks as he notices a car approaching him in the darkness. A cop emerges to ask what he's doing out so late, and Conrad answers that he's just out for a walk. He provides his name and his grandparents' address at the cop's urging, and after a while the cop urges him to head home; there are "too many nuts in the world" for it to be safe at night.

Conrad's vulnerability allows him to connect with his deceased friend, but not in the pleasant way it does in his relationship with Jeannine. He glimpses the difficulty of deep relationships. At the same time, he learns that many social relationships are only superficial; they disregard the messiness of emotion. Conrad is surprised that simply looking a certain way can prevent others from noticing his mental troubles.



Back at his grandparents' house, Conrad gets **a glass of water from the faucet and washes his hands**. He soon heads to the living room and settles in an armchair, where he falls asleep. He has a vivid dream: he and Buck are on Lake Michigan, struggling to hoist the sail of a small boat as a storm whips around them. The sail collapses and tips the boat. Buck and Conrad struggle to hold on to one another in the freezing water. They cannot see one another, so they periodically they call out to make sure the other is still there.

We get to relive the novel's defining moment along with Conrad. The symbol of water also returns to its source, as it is connected to Buck's drowning. Seeing the connection suggests a little of what's to come in the climatic breakthrough in the next chapter.



Two voices cut into his dream. First, his brother's, asking him why he'd let go of him in the water. Second, his grandmother's, at the funeral, wailing that Buck was not ready to die. Those thoughts had stayed with Conrad after his brother's death; the intense guilt drove him to punish himself for letting his brother drown. He realizes that nothing he could do would change the outcome of the accident – and for a moment he wishes that Buck had dragged him down with him into the water.

The voices from Conrad's past make him realize that he was not to blame for his brother's death. As Berger noted several times before, Conrad's guilt was self-inflicted, and did nothing to change the outcome of the situation.



Conrad is jolted awake. He turns on the living room TV to keep himself from falling asleep again, and as he stares at the snowy noise on the screen he begins to weep. Soon the sun begins to rise, and Conrad gets up to search for Berger's number in the phone book. He asks to meet with the doctor right away.

Conrad's environment continues to reflect his mental journey. His breakthrough is imminent.



CHAPTER 27

By the time Conrad reaches Berger's office, the doctor is there waiting for him. Almost immediately Conrad begins sobbing. He begins to ask Berger for help, but more voices and memories cut him off. He remembers Robbie, a friend from the mental hospital who'd tried to burn himself to death. Conrad blames himself for ruining the lives of his closest friends – Buck, Robbie, and now Karen. He lashes out at Berger for making him dredge up painful memories. Conrad tries to fight back tears, but they continue to flow. Berger encourages him to let himself cry.

Berger presses Conrad to tell him why he needs help. The truth springs up from deep within him; he blames himself for killing Buck, but isn't able to figure out why he let his brother drown. Berger insists that no one is to blame for Buck's death – his drowning was an accident. Conrad denies the idea; it sounds "too simple" to him. Berger has a theory about Conrad's guilt: he believes that Conrad could not live up to the pressure of filling his brother's shoes after he died, and saw suicide as the best solution. Berger says that Conrad's best hope of escaping guilt is to focus on being himself. Suppressing his feelings does far more harm than good.

Berger takes Conrad to breakfast. Conrad is exhausted, but Berger gently asks if Karen's suicide is what spurred his meltdown. With some hesitation, Conrad engages the topic. Berger helps him realize that, as was true for Buck, there was nothing he could have done to stop Karen's death. He also urges Conrad to value the wave of feeling that had overcome him in so short a time. Pain, as well as joy, is an emotion that is simply part of life. Berger encourages Conrad to head home and get some rest, and to come in for his regularly-scheduled appointment the next day.

Instead of going to Howard and Ellen's house, Conrad returns to his own house to **shower**. The hot water helps him relax and to think. He remembers Berger's words about the difference between guilt and punishment, which spur another memory: Conrad and Buck have a run-in with a drugstore clerk who accuses them of stealing a comic book. Buck was confident that the clerk had made a mistake, but despite his innocence Conrad was racked with guilt.

At this point, Conrad's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are beginning to come together. He is now able to connect his present emotions with his memories of the past. For the time being he still falls prey to the habit of self-blame, but at least he understands himself in connection to others. It's definitely a step beyond the kind of isolation to which he usually subjects himself.



Conrad's objection is the same one his father makes in Chapter 21. Berger wants Conrad to understand that blaming himself—and keeping a tight grip on his emotions—is far more difficult than accepting the accidents of everyday life. Achieving this realization is the last step in his recovery process.



The narrator notes that Conrad's vision "blends everything to gray" in the restaurant, which suggests that any feeling of failure is now a conscious choice on his part. Conrad finally gains control over his emotions, but not the kind he might want; this control has nothing to do with restraint, but with the ability to live free of guilt. All he has to do is put this realization (and Berger's advice) to work.



Here, showering is a symbol with complimentary meanings. Conrad is immersed in water the same way he was during the accident, which allows him to relive the experience fully. But as a symbol of psychological strain, immersion suggests that Conrad is engulfed by difficult feelings. His breakthrough will only come with intense emotional struggle rather than an effort to avoid it.



As the **water** rushes over him, Conrad recalls playing a game with his brother in the garage many years ago. Buck had tied Conrad up with clothesline and gagged him with a handkerchief; as the game escalates Cal enters the garage and is shocked at the scene. He scolds and spansks Buck, who swears that he didn't intend to hurt Conrad. Cal angrily explains that "[p]eople get hurt without meaning it." Again, Conrad remembers feeling guilty about the ordeal, even though he was not to blame.

Not only does Conrad understand Berger's advice, but he discovers its relevance in his own past. As a result of getting in touch with himself, Conrad discovers that the potential for recovery has been part of him all along.



Berger's advice finally makes sense to Conrad. As he cries once more, he finishes showering. He thinks about Karen, still upset that her sudden death was undeserved. But he forces himself to accept the fact; fair or unfair, it simply happened. He slips into his bed and, exhausted, falls asleep.

Conrad is finally clean, both literally and figuratively.



CHAPTER 28

Ward, Audrey, Beth, and Cal spend the evening outdoors, watching Charlie and Kerry swim in the backyard pool. Cal has just finished the golf tournament in third place. Everyone congratulates him, but he gently rejects their praise (secretly, he wishes he'd won). Ward suggests that the group go out to dinner to celebrate, and he and Audrey head into the house to prepare for their night out.

The Butlers' home continues to mirror the Jarretts' life before the accident. Charlie and Kerry's swimming evokes the memory of Conrad and Buck on Lake Michigan—a memory that starts to assert its lingering presence in Cal and Beth's relationship.



Cal and Beth have a pleasant exchange about the tournament. Beth even suggests that she and Cal play together more; she suggests a golf vacation for the coming summer. Cal agrees – and adds that Conrad might like the idea as well. The last comment annoys Beth, who points out Cal's habit of mentioning "him" (she never refers to Conrad by name) when they make plans. After a while Ward returns to the backyard to announce that the night's dinner plans are set.

The habit of easy conversation grinds to a halt. Beth's unwillingness to discuss Conrad openly may have gone unnoticed in the past, but it is foregrounded in this scene—she has to make a concerted effort to avoid using her son's name.



In the Butlers' living room, they and the Jarretts have had a few more rounds of drinks before dinner, during which Cal has allowed himself to get drunk. He and Beth are no longer sitting by one another; their earlier disagreement has grown into a grudge. Soon Ward and Audrey wander into the garage in search of more alcohol. Silence lingers between Beth and Cal, but Cal provokes her into continuing the argument they'd started hours before. Beth finally voices her annoyance with talking about Conrad so frequently – again, she doesn't call him by name. Cal notes that they rarely actually talk about Conrad. He thinks that another, deeper problem persists between them.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, Cal realizes that his thoughts and his feelings are connected. Because he wants to confront his wife, he makes a choice to loosen his grip on his feelings by drinking too much.



Beth rails against Cal's moping. She blames him for wanting to dampen her mood. Cal doesn't understand why Beth is so angry at him, but she states her belief that Cal blames her for Conrad's suicide attempts. The admission shakes her; she bursts into tears. Cal goes over to his wife and tries to comfort her, but she rejects his "false sympathy." She insists that she doesn't need his help. She can help herself.

Ward and Audrey stand by the living room door, not wanting to intrude on the situation, but Beth addresses them. She saw Conrad's attempted suicide as an attempt to manipulate her emotions; it seemed like an elaborate accusation against her. Though Cal tries to persuade Beth that her view of the situation is too selfish, she believes that her perspective is completely honest, however horrible it seems. She adds that she doesn't hate Conrad, as Cal believes. As she puts it, "Mothers don't hate their sons!" She is offended by the idea that Conrad would think she hates him. She also feels that Cal understands Conrad's needs far more than he understands her own.

Ward tries to soothe his sister. He expresses the desire for her, Cal, and Conrad to be happy. The word triggers her; she lashes out at Ward, sarcastically urging him to obsess over his sons' safety. Cal, meanwhile, silently recalls three distinct moments: knocking on his locked bathroom door, begging Conrad to let him in; seeing Conrad lying motionless in bed at the hospital; Conrad standing on the dock shortly after Buck's drowning, apologizing to his parents over and over again. He realizes that Conrad's attempted suicide has changed Beth, but he isn't sure how.

CHAPTER 29

Beth and Cal return home without speaking to one another. Cal has finally realized that trying to help Beth would only push her away, so he resolves to leave her be. Conrad teases Cal when he sees him catching up on work, calling him "the indispensable man." The joke hits home harder than Conrad realizes; it tugs at the sense of pointlessness that has hovered over Cal lately. He recalls a few of Howard's favorite sayings about action and inaction.

Beth, Cal, and Conrad go to dinner. Cal is surprised at Beth's attention to their son; she and Conrad talk comfortably at dinner. He even gives her a hug as he wishes his parents good night. The gesture shocks her – she isn't sure how to respond, so she remains silent and acts as if nothing happened.

Beth finally voices her resentment of Conrad's suicide attempt. The admission lets Cal (and us) realize that Beth has not dealt with her family's difficulties because she has refused to feel. She harbors a lot of intense feelings, but she actually makes an effort to keep them in check.



Despite her desire for restraint, Beth vents her feelings about Conrad. She isn't as self-contained as Cal thought; she is aware of her role as a mother, and she wants to fill that role as best she can. But she isn't willing to experience the vulnerability needed to sustain a loving relationship.



Beth's bitter remarks to Ward call attention to the symbolic role his house has played in her relationship with Cal: Charlie and Kerry are as likely to drown as Buck was. Cal realizes that Beth's unwillingness to forgive Conrad is not a "default" decision on her part. Conrad's failure to apologize to Beth following his suicide attempt made her feel as though the act was malicious.



Cal reaches the painful realization that he cannot control the feelings and actions of others. The collection of sayings provide an answer to Cal's search for a guiding principle.



Cal is confused by Beth's kind behavior toward Conrad. He cannot figure out what's motivating her—nor will he be able to.



CHAPTER 30

At Jeannine's house, Conrad and Jeannine discuss the looming prospect of college. Jeannine laments having to part ways with Conrad, but she is soon distracted by his **guitar playing**. She enthusiastically encourages him to write words for his songs. Conrad wonders how she knew that he'd tried his hand at poetry before, so she lets slip that Lazenby told her. She had approached Conrad's friend in hopes of learning as much about "the mysterious figure" as she could.

Jeannine also admits to having a brief conversation with Suzanne about Conrad. Apparently Suzanne was quite protective of Conrad and warned Jeannine to treat him with care. Jeannine teases Conrad for having such a nice personality – and, again, for writing beautiful songs – but he denies her compliments. She notes that he doesn't accept compliments well, which he tries to laugh off. Jeannine is serious, though. Noticing her "solemn, wide open expression," he feels intensely drawn to her.

Conrad and Jeannine have sex with one another for the first time. Afterward, Jeannine explains that she isn't a virgin. The admission doesn't bother Conrad, but Jeannine feels obligated to explain the circumstances to him. She'd slept with a boy in Akron, Ohio, during her parent's separation. The encounter was part of a streak of rebellious behavior; after her father left home, Jeannine joined a group of teenagers who spent their time getting into trouble. Things escalated until Jeannine was caught and prosecuted for stealing. Her father knew the shopkeeper, however, and after much begging Jeannine was let off the hook.

Jeannine is intensely guilty about her time in Akron. She feels that she acted out in order to hurt herself – not her parents. Conrad is able to open up to her about his own self-abuse. Like Jeannine, he felt that the decision to harm himself seemed right at the time, but was a misguided choice. Jeannine is unsatisfied by Conrad's seemingly empty response, but he assures her that the question has no answer. Conrad admits that **he doesn't believe in God** (she does), but he owns up to believing in Jeannine. Conrad feels in touch not only with himself, but with her as well. As they tenderly embrace, Berger's advice comes to mind: The body doesn't lie.

The fruits of Conrad's recovery are on display in this scene. He is able to handle the thought of losing Jeannine. Once again, guitar playing represents his ability to integrate mind and body.



Now that he's found a way to make his mind and body cooperate in the face of negative feelings, Jeannine's compliments help him do the same for more positive ones. Both are required to forge a healthy relationship with Jeannine.



Jeannine is a combination of the many different ways various characters in the novel have dealt with grief or unwanted situations. Conrad is initially attracted to her because she seems to be completely in control, like Beth, but it turns out that she quells her bad feelings by avoiding them, like Conrad. She, too, suffers the difficulty of feeling out of place in her own family, like Cal.



Jeannine's backstory demonstrates that struggles with guilt and emotional release aren't unique to people who have been diagnosed as "mentally ill." Prescribed ways of thinking about fate—whether they be clinical, religious, or anything else—prove ineffective for Conrad. What matters most to him is the process of meeting each situation as it comes.



CHAPTER 31

Beth packs her things. She decides to leave Cal because she resents his pity for her. He wants to talk to her about the situation, but she refuses to let him worry about her the same way he worries about Conrad. Cal questions how much how much he really knows – or knew – about his wife, realizing that she is deeply secretive and self-controlling in a way he cannot understand. He also considers the shock with which Howard, Ellen, and Ray respond to news of the breakup. All of them believed that Cal and Beth had a perfect relationship. But he, like them, were unsure of how their relationship could falter.

After breakfast, Conrad and Cal go out onto the porch. Cal feels cold, but Conrad is excited about the warmth and the approach of spring. Cal tells Conrad about his plan to sell the house; he feels it's "always been too big," and the money could be put to better use. Clumsily, Cal also mentions that Beth is "taking a trip" for a while. Conrad doesn't understand why his father isn't going with her. He grows increasingly bitter as he probes Cal for answers. Father and son trade harsh words – Conrad accusing Cal of being overprotective, Cal accusing Conrad for not being sensitive enough.

After a stunned silence, Cal apologizes for yelling at Conrad. Conrad responds to the contrary; he appreciates his father's decision to put his foot down. Cal explains that he never wanted to be too hard on Conrad, and that Buck was the one who needed the most discipline. Conrad disagrees. He would have appreciated the extra attention from his father. After laying out their grievances and admitting their misunderstandings, Conrad tells Cal that he loves him. The phrase catches him off guard at first, but as he fights back tears Cal returns the sentiment. Neither is sure whether Beth will return, but they appreciate their newfound connection with one another.

EPILOGUE

Conrad pays a visit to Berger at his house. He thanks him for his help, but of course their exchange is full of jokes and teasing. Conrad urges Berger to pay him a visit every once in a while (their new house will not be too far away from his), and the doctor does the same. Conrad hurries away before his emotions get the best of him.

The distinction between Beth and Cal's views on interpersonal relationships is finally clear. Beth believes that a person bears the responsibility of living with others in a positive way. Cal, meanwhile, is finally forced to admit that he must rely on his friends and family, and be sensitive to their wants and needs.



Cal continues to project his own feelings onto the surrounding situation, as he did in Chapter 15. But Conrad is fully in touch with its reality. His sensitivity enables him to shed light on Cal's pervasive anxiety.



Painful and pleasant feelings are mingled in this dramatic interaction between Cal and Conrad, as are the past and the present. Early on Cal realized that his family is as much a product of the past as of the present, but with Conrad's help he no longer views that fact as one to be dreaded. They have each separately confronted what has been thwarting them and from that found a way to build, tentatively, a stronger bond between each other.



Conrad can joke with Berger in a healthy way; the two of them have been open and honest with one another, and their humor isn't designed to conceal true feeling.



Next, Conrad visits Lazenby's house. Mrs. Lazenby directs Conrad to the backyard, where her son is practicing his golf swing. The two make awkward small talk: Conrad explains that he's moved, and that he's taking classes at a nearby college. He also suggests getting together for a round of golf. Lazenby explains that he's supposed to be busy for the day. Conrad takes that as a refusal, but Lazenby goes to ask his mom for permission to go with Conrad.

At last, Conrad is willing to take on the awkwardness of (re)building a relationship with Lazenby.



As Conrad stands alone in Lazenby's backyard, he remembers a letter Beth had written to Ellen, describing some drawings that he and Buck had made as kids. He realizes that she had saved many of the crafts that he made when young – a sign that Beth must have cared for him more deeply than he realized. He also recognizes the way he'd lied to Beth about how horrible the hospital was, "casual and deliberate lies, to ease his own hurt." He resolves to try and see her again, though he now knows that Beth's love for him isn't easily expressed. As Lazenby calls to him from the window, Conrad goes into the house.

Part of Conrad's recovery includes forgiving not only himself, but Beth.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brannum, Barry. "Ordinary People." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Dec 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brannum, Barry. "Ordinary People." LitCharts LLC, December 15, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/ordinary-people>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Ordinary People* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Guest, Judith. *Ordinary People*. Penguin Books. 1982.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Guest, Judith. *Ordinary People*. New York: Penguin Books. 1982.