

Paper Towns



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN GREEN

John Green was raised primarily in Orlando, Florida. He graduated from Kenyon College, where he completed a double major in English and Religion Studies, in 2000. Following his graduation, Green worked as a chaplain in a children's hospital. He was enrolled in the University of Chicago's Divinity School at the time and intended to become an Episcopal priest, but his chaplaincy experience inspired a change of direction, and he left divinity school to pursue a career as a writer. Green published his first novel, [Looking for Alaska](#), in 2005. He published three subsequent novels — [An Abundance of Katherines](#) (2006), [Paper Towns](#) (2008), and [The Fault in Our Stars](#) (2012)— and co-authored the novel *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* with David Levithan. Green collaborates with his brother, Hank, to produce biweekly videos for their popular YouTube blog. He lives in Indianapolis with his wife, Sarah Urist Green, and their two children.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Green wrote on his website that *Paper Towns* was written partially as a reaction to a trend in young adult romance novels, most notably Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, in which characters seemed consistently to be “imagining their romantic others as more than human.” Other young adult novels published around the same time as Green's novel, such as Sherman Alexie's [The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian](#), Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, and Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* share aspects of *Paper Towns*' raw, often irreverent narrative style and consider some of the same themes. Green also makes reference to a number of works of literature within the text of *Paper Towns* itself. The most noteworthy of these is Walt Whitman's 1855 collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, but characters also refer to and read the poetry of Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot's “Choruses from the Rock,” Sylvia Plath's [The Bell Jar](#), and Kurt Vonnegut's [Slaughterhouse-Five](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Paper Towns*
- **When Published:** October 16, 2008
- **Genre:** Young Adult, Mystery
- **Setting:** Orlando, Florida
- **Climax:** Quentin and his friends arrive in Agloe after a frantic twenty-one hour road trip, and find Margo living in an abandoned barn.

- **Antagonist:** None
- **Point of View:** First Person (Quentin)

EXTRA CREDIT

Myrna Mountweazel. Though the connection is never mentioned in the novel, the name of Margo's beloved dog, Myrna Mountweazel, is an oblique reference to one of the most famous copyright traps (a way of determining if other publications had stolen your content without attribution): Lillian Virginia Mountweazel, a fictional fountain designer and photographer of rural American mailboxes, who was invented by editors of the 1975 New Columbia Encyclopedia. This fictitious woman has become so famous since the publication of the encyclopedia that featured her that “Mountweazel” is often used as a synonym for “copyright trap” — another synonym for which is the term “paper town.”

Controversial Language. In June 2015, John Green used Twitter to respond to a reader who criticized his use of the word “retarded” as an insult in *Paper Towns*. He wrote: “Yeah, I regret it. At the time, I thought an author's responsibility was to reflect language as I found it, but now, eight years later, I don't feel like a book about humanizing the other benefitted from dehumanizing language.” Green wrote his response shortly before the release of the film adaptation of *Paper Towns*, and his apology garnered significant media attention despite the fact that the novel itself was nearly eight years old.



PLOT SUMMARY

Quentin Jacobsen begins his story by speculating that one miracle—one incredible, unlikely thing — will happen to every person during their lifetime. He tells his reader that his miracle was living next door to Margo Roth Spiegelman in Jefferson Park, their subdivision of Orlando, Florida. He goes on to recount an experience he and Margo had when they were nine years old: riding their bicycle together one morning, they discover the body of a man named Robert Joyner, who has committed suicide, lying beneath a tree.

Nine years later, as they prepare to finish their senior year at Winter Park High School, Margo and Quentin's friendship has long since fizzled out. Still, Quentin admires Margo from afar, convinced he is madly in love with her. Margo is glamorous and popular, famous amongst her peers for her incredible adventures and elaborate schemes. Quentin is a mild-mannered nerd, though he has excellent friends, Radar and Ben.

Without warning, one night in the beginning of May, Margo

appears outside Quentin's bedroom window telling him she needs his help. She has discovered that her boyfriend, Jase, has been cheating on her with one of her best friends, Becca, and has resolved to spend the night taking revenge. Quentin sneaks out of the house and spends the night with Margo, driving across Orlando and having adventures. They play elaborate pranks on the people who have done them wrong. Halfway through the night, Margo takes Quentin to the twenty-fifth floor of a downtown office building. Observing Orlando from above, Margo tells Quentin that it is a "paper town," full of superficial people. She seems deeply sad, but Quentin does not have the courage to talk with her honestly about what is wrong. When they leave the SunTrust Building, Margo and Quentin break into SeaWorld. They delight in one another's company, and by the time Margo drops him off at home in the early morning, Quentin is more infatuated with her than he has ever been.

Margo is not at school the next day, but Quentin doesn't worry — she has disappeared before, and always returned. That weekend, however, Margo's parents arrive at the Jacobsen's house accompanied by Detective Otis Warren, a police officer who has been assigned to investigate Margo's disappearance. The Spiegelmans talk resentfully about Margo's habit of leaving vague clues as to her whereabouts whenever she has run away in the past. When Quentin returns to his room, he notices a poster hanging on the shade of Margo's bedroom window, which has never been there before. He decides the poster is one of Margo's clues, this time left for him rather than her parents. With Ben and Radar, Quentin goes into Margo's room and uncovers a string of clues, the last of which is Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poetry Ben discovers among Margo's things.

On Monday, Margo's friend Lacey approaches Quentin and Ben asking what they know about Margo's disappearance. Ben and Lacey begin talking, and Ben convinces Lacey to go to prom with him. Quentin has been puzzling over two lines in Whitman's poem "**Song of Myself**," which urge the reader to remove doors from their hinges, and which he thinks must hold the key to Margo's next clue. In a moment of inspiration, he takes his own bedroom door off its hinges and finds a scrap of paper with an address printed on it in Margo's handwriting. He, Radar, and Ben drive to the address and discover a dilapidated strip mall that has been abandoned for decades. They discover painted-over graffiti that reads: "YOU WILL GO TO THE PAPER TOWNS AND YOU WILL NEVER COME BACK." Quentin begins to fear that Margo has taken her own life, and realizes that the larger-than-life version of Margo he fell in love with bears little resemblance to the real, troubled young woman he is now trying to find.

An online search reveals that the phrase "paper towns" sometimes refers to unfinished subdivisions, which Quentin's mother calls pseudovisions. Quentin compiles a list of all the

pseudovisions in central Florida, and begins traveling to them one by one. Each time he arrives at a new place, he fears he will find Margo dead, but there is never any trace of her presence. Meanwhile, Ben and Radar are progressing through the rituals that come with finishing high school. They go to prom, and each of them begins a serious relationship with a girl — Ben with Lacey, and Radar with his girlfriend Angela. Many people encourage Quentin to let his investigation rest and focus on his own life, but the thought that Margo may be dead makes it impossible for him to move on.

Quentin returns often to the strip mall, and on one of his trips discovers a road map with pinholes in five different places. He begins to think Margo may have intended to travel. All the while, he is reading "Song of Myself" in increasingly greater depth, and thinking about its themes of human connection. He realizes that he has imagined Margo wrongly for many years, and is greatly humbled by that realization.

On the morning of his high school graduation, a series of chance discoveries lead Quentin to realize that Margo has gone to the town of Agloe, New York. He also realizes that she is planning to leave Agloe the next day. He, Radar, Lacey, and Ben skip graduation together and drive twenty-one hours in Quentin's **minivan** to upstate New York. In Agloe, they find Margo living in an abandoned barn. Their reunion is tense, as Margo is mortified at having been discovered. Lacey, Radar, and Ben storm out in anger. Quentin stays, and Margo calms down. They spend the rest of the day together, talking frankly about what they have both experienced in the three weeks since she disappeared. Quentin urges Margo to come back to Orlando with him. Margo urges Quentin to come with her to New York City, where she intends to go next. They realize that they need to follow different paths in life, though they feel bound together by incredible intimacy, understanding and love.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Quentin Jacobsen – The novel's narrator and protagonist, a senior in high school who endeavors to discover the fate of his next-door neighbor, Margo Roth Spiegelman, after her mysterious disappearance. Quentin begins the novel as a mild-mannered nerd with a chronic fear of breaking rules, who has harbored a massive crush on Margo since they were children. As he progresses in his search, Quentin begins to question the way he has conceptualized other people — both those he cares for and those he resents — and learns to recognize the complexity and humanity of every person. Quentin is invested in understanding the ways human beings build connections with one another, and thinks deeply throughout the novel about the limitations of communication and the difficulty of truly understanding another person's mind.

Margo Roth Spiegelman – Quentin’s next-door neighbor since childhood, a free-spirited girl known throughout their high school for her extraordinary adventures and elaborate schemes. Margo has an unhappy relationship with her parents and feels ill at ease in her Orlando community, which she finds stifling and inauthentic. Consequently, she has a long history of running away from home and leaving clues for her family as to her whereabouts – though, until she disappears at the beginning of the novel, she has always returned home within a few days. Margo is largely incomprehensible to Quentin, who first idealizes her as a carefree wild-child living life to its fullest, but finds as he begins searching for her that she was much more troubled and lonesome than he might have guessed.

Ben Starling – Quentin’s best friend. Ben is goofy, frank, and often insensitive, but he is sincerely loyal to his friends and supports Quentin in his search for Margo despite having little personal interest in the mission. Like his friends, Ben begins the novel as an outcast. He wants badly to fit in and be liked, but ends up being the butt of many of his classmates’ jokes. When he begins dating Lacey, however, Ben finds himself included among many of the popular kids who tormented him in school.

Radar – Quentin’s other best friend, whose real name is Marcus. More easygoing than either Quentin or Ben, Radar is exceptionally intelligent and has a particular gift for computer science. He is an obsessive user of a reference website called Omnictionary. Radar is compassionate and perceptive, and often mediates conflict between Quentin and Ben. He is extremely useful to and supportive of Quentin in the search for Margo, and tends to grasp the meaning of Margo’s clues more easily than his friends. Radar falls in love with Angela over the course of the novel. His parents own the world’s largest collection of black Santas.

Lacey Pemberton – Margo’s best friend, who Margo wrongly believes hid Jase’s cheating from her. Lacey begins dating Ben shortly after Margo’s disappearance, and bonds with Quentin as she becomes more involved in his search for Margo. Lacey is kindhearted and sincere, though she struggles with body image issues and craves the acceptance of her peers.

Detective Otis Warren – The police detective assigned to search for Margo after her disappearance. Detective Warren is well-intentioned and inspires Quentin’s trust, but is neither very effective in searching for her nor very helpful when Quentin asks him for guidance in his own search. He encourages Quentin to move on after Margo’s disappearance and trust that Margo will make her own way in the world.

Mr. and Mrs. Spiegelman – Margo’s narcissistic and superficial parents, who are more concerned with the embarrassment Margo causes them by running away than about her safety. The Spiegelmans call the police after Margo disappears, but elect not to look for her themselves. They believe Margo is a blight on their family, and see her as being selfish and undeserving of

help.

Gus – A friend of Margo, who was a senior at Winter Park High School when Margo and Quentin were freshmen. Gus is now a nighttime security guard at the SunTrust Building, and lets Margo and Quentin in after hours. In her freshman year of high school, Gus allowed Margo to come with him and his friends on their urban exploring expeditions.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Connie Jacobsen – Quentin’s mother, a therapist who works with troubled children. Quentin describes her as being occasionally oblivious, but she is highly intelligent and handles other people’s emotions very effectively. Mrs. Jacobsen showers affection on her husband and son.

Tom Jacobsen – Quentin’s father, a therapist like his wife. Given to introspection, he talks with Quentin about the difficulties of communicating and connecting with other people.

Robert Joyner – A middle-aged man who commits suicide in Jefferson Park when Margo and Quentin are nine years old. Margo and Quentin discover Joyner’s body while playing in the park together. Finding Joyner’s body is a formative experience for Margo, and she continues to think about him as she grows up.

Dr. Holden – Quentin’s English teacher, who talks with him about “**Song of Myself**” and helps him understand Walt Whitman’s philosophy of human connectedness.

Ruthie Spiegelman – Margo’s eleven-year-old sister, with whom Margo is very close. After Margo’s disappearance, Ruthie helps Quentin and his friends sneak into her room to look for the clues Margo left as to her whereabouts.

Myrna Mountweazel – The Spiegelman family’s aging dog. Myrna Mountweazel features prominently in the story Margo writes as a young child.

Angela – Radar’s girlfriend, with whom he falls in love shortly before the end of senior year. Angela is charming, beautiful, and level-headed. She does not participate in the search for Margo, but is nevertheless a regular fixture in the lives of Radar’s friends.

Becca Arrington – Margo’s friend, known for her fabulous good looks and horrible personality, who betrays Margo by having sex with Jase behind her back. Becca is cruel and vindictive, and spreads rumors whenever possible.

Jason “Jase” Worthington – Margo’s boyfriend, a baseball player from a wealthy family who she discovers at the beginning of the novel has been cheating on her with Becca. Jase helps Quentin reign in the popular kids’ pranks after Margo disappears.

Chuck Parson – A hulking athlete who has bullied Quentin since they were children.

Ace – A friend of Gus, and fellow urban explorer.

The Carpenter – A friend of Gus, and fellow urban explorer.

Juanita Alvarez – One of Robert Joyner’s neighbors, whom Margo tricks into telling her about the circumstances of Joyner’s death.

Cassie Hiney – A casual friend of Quentin, Radar, and Ben.

Ashley – A casual friend of Quentin, Radar, and Ben.

Frank – A casual friend of Quentin, Radar, and Ben.

Taddy Mac – A baseball player.

Clint Bauer – A baseball player.

Karin – Margo’s friend, who tells Margo that Jase and Becca are sleeping together.

Suzie Chung – Quentin’s ex-girlfriend.

Betty Parson – Chuck’s mother, a casual friend of Connie Jacobsen.

Mr. Arrington – Becca Arrington's father.



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.



PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

Quentin claims, at the beginning of the novel, that he has been in love with Margo since they were children. Though their friendship has fizzled over the years, he is amazed by the rumors he hears about Margo’s adventures: her solo road trip through Mississippi, her three days traveling with the circus, and similar, larger-than-life escapades. He thinks of her as the perfect girl, both beautiful and intriguing. As his investigation of her disappearance develops, however, Quentin comes to understand that Margo is actually a deeply sad and lonely person, who is surrounded by admirers but has no close, trusted friends. As his perception of Margo changes, Quentin stops thinking of her disappearance as an exciting mystery, and begins working to understand her pain. This project helps Quentin to become more compassionate in other aspects of his life, and he grows kinder and more generous toward the people around him as his story develops. Eventually, however, he must confront the possibility that he may never be able to fully understand another person, and that some emotions and motivations must always remain a mystery to him.

His friends and classmates are guilty of similar oversimplifications, not only of Margo, but of one another.

Quentin talks about the different versions of Margo that he and his friends have constructed for themselves. He learns to respect and appreciate Lacey, who he considered stupid and shallow before getting to know her. He watches the popular students like Jase Worthington and Chuck Parson, who tormented Quentin’s friends throughout high school, accept those same friends into their social group, and his mother encourages him to consider the possibility that the “popular kids” have struggled in their own ways, though they seem to lead charmed lives.

Though Quentin concludes that it is misguided and dangerous to reduce the people around him to two-dimensional ideas, it also becomes clear that it can be frightening and difficult for a person to allow themselves to be seen as a complex human being. Margo dedicates enormous thought and energy to cultivating her larger-than-life persona, and she admits to taking pleasure in the knowledge that others see her as a beautiful idea, rather than a human being. Being a “paper girl,” as she calls it, frees her from the need to love and trust other people, and allows her to feel powerful and in control despite her unhappiness and shaky sense of self. Her decision to leave Orlando and make a home for herself in New York is Margo’s attempt to push herself out of that comfortable “paper” life and toward a greater authenticity. The pain Quentin feels when he and Margo part ways is a reminder that authenticity, and the intimacy it creates, can be deeply painful, but are ultimately necessary to living a full, real life.



AUTHENTICITY AND ARTIFICIALITY

Margo struggles to find meaning in the wealthy, suburban environment where she and Quentin have grown up. She disdains the interests and values of her family and friends, whom she believes to be superficial. Her favorite metaphor, which Quentin adopts after her disappearance, is that Orlando is a “paper town” full of “paper people,” where nobody cares about the things in life that truly matter. Quentin finds the idea intriguing, and he uses Margo’s language to justify his own bitter attitude toward his community and classmates. He finds his cynicism challenged on his last day of school, however, when he reflects on the way his adolescent experiences have shaped him and think “[t]he town was paper, but the memories were not.” There is a sense that the world appears artificial because Margo — and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Quentin — chooses to see it that way, and that people are shallow and two-dimensional only when the person observing them does not make the effort to see their humanity.

Both Margo and Quentin have a difficult time being honest and direct about their thoughts and feelings. Each of them deals with this in different ways. Margo plans grand gestures and allows other people to interpret her actions however they wish, which spares her the responsibility of explaining her feelings to

anyone. Quentin accepts the status quo and works to fulfill others' expectations for him, making it easy for him to move through life without questioning himself or being questioned by others. Both rely on words written by other people to express themselves in conversation. Margo is constantly **quoting poetry and novels**, and Quentin learns to do the same as he immerses himself in the poetry she loved. However, in his final conversation with Margo, Quentin designs a metaphor of his own for talking about loneliness and connection—that people are born as perfect vessels that then develop cracks through their lives—and in doing so illustrates a new willingness to make himself vulnerable by speaking what he truly thinks.

Quentin's conversation with Margo about the different metaphors for human experience and connection also illustrates the ways in which his pursuit of her has helped him think more deeply about his own values and desire. His final decision to return home and continue on his chosen path rather than following Margo to New York forces Quentin to recognize how difficult it can be to know one's true self. He believes that returning to Orlando and going to college is what he sincerely wants for himself, but Margo, who hoped that including Quentin in her adventures would liberate him from the confining values of their community, questions whether he is simply afraid to do something unconventional. Though her effect on Quentin is different than the one Margo planned, his ability to make choices for himself rather than following her prescription for him is strong evidence that he has abandoned his "paper" way of living and committed himself to a search for personal happiness.



HUMAN CONNECTION

The events of the novel cause Quentin to consider multiple different philosophies about the ways in which human beings build connections with one another, and about the nature of those connections. Reading Walt Whitman's poem "**Song of Myself**" he becomes interested in Whitman's idea that all human beings are tied together, like blades of grass that share the same root system, and have a limitless ability to understand and empathize with one another. He eventually concludes, however, that Whitman's philosophy is overly optimistic about the extent to which people can get into one another's heads. He decides it is more accurate to think about human beings as vessels that start out perfect, but become cracked and damaged as they experience pain and loss. He believes that people can see one another through the cracks in their vessels, meaning that experiencing pain makes it easier for a person to understand the pain of others, and also makes that person easier for others to understand.

Though *Paper Towns* tells the story of Quentin's effort to understand and empathize with Margo, characters in the novel

often question whether the kind of intimate understanding he desires is even possible. Quentin's parents, both of whom are psychologists, talk with him about the difficulties of understanding other people. His father believes human beings "lack good mirrors," meaning they struggle both to understand themselves and to help other people understand them. His mother adds that people have a hard time seeing one another as complex human beings, and instead idolize them as gods or reduce them to animals. The tendency toward fantasy and oversimplification appears over and over in the novel as a barrier to real human intimacy.



LEAVING HOME AND GROWING UP

Quentin's obsession with Margo shapes his experience of finishing high school, and of the milestones associated with that transition. He misses both prom and graduation so that he can pursue Margo, and when he is forced to attend an after-prom party so he can drive Ben home, he is sullen and cynical, refusing to enjoy himself on principal. He becomes disinterested in the romantic and sexual lives of his friends, each of whom becomes seriously involved with a girl during the last weeks of school. When asked to think or talk about the landmark experiences that mean so much to Ben and Radar, Quentin often makes cynical comments about the triteness and inauthenticity of those experiences, similar to the ones Margo makes at the beginning of the novel. Quentin's refusal to participate in the rituals that come with finishing high school and transitioning to adulthood is partly a result of the unhappiness and isolation Quentin has felt during his adolescence, but it also illustrates how difficult it is for him to confront the necessity of growing up and leaving home. His handling of the situation contrasts with those of his friends, who continue to invest in the people and experiences around them even as the moment of separation approaches: Radar falls in love with Angela despite knowing that they will need to part ways in the fall, and Ben demonstrates a willingness to revise his opinions of others by pursuing a relationship with Lacey and relishes new friendships with his classmates.

On his last day of high school, Quentin reflects on the pleasures of leaving a place where one has put down roots. Throwing away the contents of his locker and walking away from the school building are exhilarating experiences for him, and he is surprised to discover how easy it is to leave that period of his life behind. He also recognizes that leaving may only feel liberating when there is something significant to leave behind, and wonders whether the best thing to do would be to chase that feeling indefinitely, leaving one place after another for his whole life. He confronts that possibility more clearly after he is reunited with Margo. During their day together in **Agloe**, both must make choices about the kind of lives they want to lead as adults. Margo swears off conventional paths to success, which

start with college and end with a career and family, and decides instead to strike out on her own and try to build a life in New York City. Quentin, however, insists that things like education and family can produce to happiness and lead to a meaningful life. He declines Margo's offer to start a new life in New York with her, but he remarks before they part ways that "not following her is the hardest thing I've ever done." Though Quentin does not condemn Margo for her choice, his decision to reject her restless way of life raises questions about the nature of adulthood, and whether it is possible to build a satisfying life if one is afraid of putting down roots.



FRIENDSHIP

Friendships are the central relationships in *Paper Towns*, and are often more intimate than either family relationships or romantic ones. However, both Quentin and Margo fail to appreciate their friends, and both are forced to consider the people they have taken for granted in a new light. Before leaving Orlando, Margo cuts ties with three of her closest friends. This includes Lacey, whom Margo dismisses as spiteful and disloyal. However, Lacey proves herself to be both a good-hearted person and genuinely invested in Margo, and when the two meet again at the end of the novel, Margo is forced to acknowledge her own self-centeredness in leaving her friend behind without a word.

The relationship between Margo and Lacey has parallels with Quentin's relationship with Ben, who is eager to enjoy his final weeks of high school to the fullest and constantly urges Quentin to ease up on his investigation and devote more attention to his friends. Quentin finds the things that interest Ben to be both boring and unimportant, and he makes fun of Ben for devoting so much energy to prom and his girlfriend, but Ben proves his loyalty again and again by indulging Quentin's obsession even when he finds it absurd. Though he is one of the least serious characters in the novel, Ben exemplifies the constancy and sincerity that Quentin and Margo believe are missing in the "paper people" around them. Radar encourages Quentin to be more forgiving of Ben's shortcomings, and to remember the things he likes and appreciates about his friends before dismissing them for their flaws. Quentin put this advice into practice during the twenty-one hour road trip that he takes with Radar, Ben, and Lacey to find Margo, an experience that he realizes is richer because he shares it with people about whom he cares deeply. These developments are part of the novel's larger ethical code, which holds that all people are complex and deserving of compassion, but learning to recognize the value of his friends is also a critical part of Quentin's journey out of the narcissism of adolescence and into a more nuanced and adult relationship with the world around him.



SYMBOLS

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



"SONG OF MYSELF"

Quentin discovers Walt Whitman's "**Song of Myself**" as part of his search for Margo, but as he progresses in his investigation — turning his attention as he does from Margo and her intentions, to himself and the many ways that he has misunderstood and mis-imagined Margo — the poem becomes a platform for Quentin to being formulating a more generous, compassionate, and humble way of relating to others. Whitman is a tremendously empathetic poet, who believes that all people are interconnected, and through their connections can learn, not only to understand one another, but to become one another. When Quentin finally talks to Margo about the poem at the end of the novel, though, he questions the accuracy of Whitman's operative philosophy. He is less optimistic than Whitman, because his experience of searching for Margo has taught him how difficult it can be to really connect with and understand another person, but he does draw from Whitman's optimism in crafting his own philosophy of human connection. Quentin's image of human beings as vessels whose cracks allow others to see them clearly, borrows Whitman's optimism to construct a generous vision for how human beings can come to love one another in spite of and because of their flaws.



MARGO'S NOTEBOOK

Margo's notebook is a figure of her developmental processes, and of the growth she has undergone since childhood. Margo fills the notebook when she is a young girl with a story that reflects her dreams, her desires, and her need to see the world as a kinder and more loving place. As she gets older and becomes increasingly disenchanted with her life and dissatisfied with herself, the notebook becomes a place where she escapes from her reality by throwing herself into the work of planning elaborate adventures and schemes and pranks. The notebook is also the place where Margo begins to imagine an alternative life for herself and an alternative way of being, as she begins to plan her final departure from Orlando. Margo carries the book with her at all times, but nobody knows what she uses it for; in this way, it becomes a symbol for the way she keeps her authentic self hidden from others.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Speak edition of *Paper Towns* published in 2009.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☹☹ It was so pathetically easy to forget about Chuck, to talk about prom even though I didn't give a shit about prom. Such was life that morning: nothing really mattered much, not the good things and not the bad ones. We were in the business of mutual amusement, and we were reasonably prosperous.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Chuck Parson, Ben Starling, Radar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Quentin describes the ordinary day leading up to his adventure with Margo. Before Quentin becomes entangled with Margo, he lives a life almost entirely without extremes. He has few troubles and no great sorrows — but at the same time he has no real sources of joy. Quentin captures the mild emotional power and low stakes of his life when he describes his activities, including his relationships with his best friends, as "amusement." Though he seems successful on paper — he has friends and a social life, good grades, and has been admitted to an elite university — his life is emotionally shallow.

This moment, like a calm before a storm, will provide a contrast with the strong emotions and powerful ideas Quentin will encounter as he delves more deeply into Margo's world. His deepening love for and understanding of Margo will help Quentin better appreciate the relationships and experiences he has always taken for granted, and challenge him to evaluate his life with a more critical eye than ever before, disrupting his contentment and shocking him into a deeper and more intense experience of life.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

☹☹ "Did you know that for pretty much the entire history of the human species, the average life span was less than thirty years? You could count on ten years or so of real adulthood, right? There was no planning for retirement. No planning for a career. There was no planning ... And now life has become the future. Every moment of your life is lived for the future."

Related Characters: Margo Roth Spiegelman (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Margo and Quentin have just begun their night of adventure. They are buying supplies in Wal-Mart when Margo launches, seemingly unprompted, into this speech. Though she uses abstraction and impersonal language to create the illusion of having emotional distance, it is clear that Margo is really expressing her own frustrations about the attitude many people around her — including Quentin himself — seem to have: a focus on the accumulation of material goods and accomplishments at the expense of profound experiences in the present.

Margo hungers for deeper and more intense experiences than are readily available to her, and she longs for a life molded around values and ideals rather than the desire to meet the expectations of others. Her comments begin to shed light on her reasons for planning the epic adventure in which she has enlisted Quentin, as well as her other legendary schemes. Her rash and often dangerous actions allow her to live entirely in the present, and to create some distance, however temporary, from the disappointments of her life.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

☹☹ Even though I could see her there, I felt entirely alone among these big and empty buildings, like I'd survived the apocalypse and the world had been given to me, this whole and amazing and endless world, mine for the exploring.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Driving through downtown Orlando after a series of acts of exhilarating vandalism, Quentin has become swept up in the adventure and drama of his night with Margo. Where before he was preoccupied with anxiety about getting into trouble, he now feels empowered by the events of the night. The world around him, which seemed so ordinary not just in daylight but all through the days of his life before tonight, now seems beautiful — and, just as importantly, Quentin feels as though this beautiful new world is open to him.

Interestingly, Quentin's feeling of ownership and uncharacteristic willingness to embrace life fully comes at Margo's expense. Thrilled and preoccupied by the new

perspective opening up inside him, Quentin ceases to even see Margo. The night has become, from Quentin's point of view, less about following a beautiful girl on an adventure and more about embracing a new vision of himself. The way he fails to see Margo here also hints at the way he (at this point) fails to entirely see the real Margo. She represents a kind of dream or ideal for Quentin, and through the novel Quentin comes to know himself in part by learning how to get to know Margo as a person too.

Quentin is optimistic to the point of being naive. Now that Margo has disrupted the routines of his life, he is eager to see the world around him as being full of beauty and adventure, and he either cannot see the underlying darkness, or refuses to do so. Margo, by contrast, is so cynical that she cannot appreciate beauty at all. Rather than allow herself to see Orlando through Quentin's eyes, she has to counter his positive view of the city with a dark alternative.

☝ “It’s a paper town. I mean, look at it, Q: look at all those cul-de-sacs, those streets that turn in on themselves, all the houses that were built to fall apart. All those paper people living in their paper houses, burning the future to stay warm. All the paper kids drinking beer some bum bought for them at the paper convenience store. Everyone demented with the mania of owning things. All the things paper-thin and paper-frail. And all the people, too. I’ve lived here for eighteen years and I have never once in my life come across anyone who cares about anything that matters.

Related Characters: Margo Roth Spiegelman (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Margo shares these reflections with Quentin while they look at the dark streets of Orlando from the top floor of the SunTrust Building. Her speech is a response to Quentin's claim that he finds the deserted streets of the city "beautiful."

Here Margo adopts the language of "paper" as a metaphor for the emptiness and short-sightedness of the world she comes from. Just as paper can be easily ripped or crumpled, people and communities that organize themselves around poorly chosen values — ideals Margo describes as "paper-thin and paper-frail" — cannot hope to produce anything meaningful and lasting. She disparages the materialism of her society, in which people spend their entire lives accumulating wealth and possessions but sacrifice relationships, beauty, and a sense of responsibility to others in order to do so. She characterizes that materialism as a kind of mental illness, which makes people "demented with the mania of owning things."

The contrast between Quentin's perspective and Margo's highlights the fundamental difference in their personalities.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ “I didn’t need you, you idiot. I **picked** you. And then you picked me back ... And that’s like a promise. At least for tonight. In sickness and in health. In good times and in bad. For richer, for poorer. Till dawn do us part.”

Related Characters: Margo Roth Spiegelman (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Though Quentin feels sure Margo is only using him — that she would never deign to include him in her plans unless she stood to gain something from doing so — the truth is that Margo desperately needs a friend at this tumultuous moment in her life. Margo has concocted this nighttime crusade as a way of incinerating all her most cherished relationships, and she knows she will be leaving her family and community behind in just a few hours when she runs away to start a new life. At this moment of profound uncertainty and loneliness, Margo seeks support from Quentin, with whom she shares a history of friendship. Though their relationship has fizzled over the years, Quentin is now, essentially, the only friend Margo has left.

☝ And I wanted to tell her that the pleasure for me was in planning or doing or leaving: the pleasure was in seeing our strings cross and separate and then come back together.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

After breaking into SeaWorld at the end of their night of adventure, Margo confesses that doing interesting things never feels as good to her as planning them and looking forward to them. The park, for example, is unremarkable at night, when all the animals have been moved to different tanks. To Quentin, though, the only important thing is that he is sharing this experience with Margo: that he is watching the "strings" of their lives, which were interconnected in childhood, come back together after so many years of tepid acquaintanceship. Unlike Margo, who plans her adventures in hopes of finding the clarity and freedom she craves, Quentin relishes what the experience really offers: a moment of human connection, full of promise and possibility.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

☹☹ [M]aybe Margo needed to see my confidence. Maybe this time she **wanted** to be found, and to be found by **me**. Maybe — just as she had chosen me on the longest night, she had chosen be again. And maybe untold riches awaited he who found her.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

This thought occurs to Quentin while he, Radar, and Ben scour Margo's room for clues of her whereabouts shortly after her disappearance.

The fantasy Quentin describes — that Margo has engineered her own disappearance as an elaborate test for him, an opportunity for him to prove that he is worthy of her friendship and love — is impossibly outlandish and self-centered. Here, he reveals the extent to which his perception of Margo has become divorced from reality. Quentin sees Margo as a supporting character in *his* life, or a kind of beautiful, impossible ideal, rather than a three-dimensional person taking control of her own life.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

☹☹ I refused to feel any kind of sadness over the fact that I wasn't **going** to prom, but I had — stupidly, embarrassingly — thought of finding Margo, and getting her to come home with me just in time for prom, like late on Saturday night, and we'd walk into the Hilton ballroom wearing jeans and ratty T-shirts, and we be just in time for the last dance, and we'd dance while everyone pointed at us and marveled at the return of Margo, and then we'd fox-trot the hell out of there and go get ice cream at Friendly's.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

After a phone call with Ben, Quentin reflects on his decision — about which he has been adamant since the first pages of the novel — not to attend prom. Always something of an outsider, Ben describes his hope that the people who ignored or bullied him for so many years will have to revise their idea of him when he arrives at the prom with beautiful, popular Lacey on his arm.

Though Quentin dismisses Ben's fantasies over the phone, it is clear that he feels a similar desire to reinvent himself and break out of the mold of the conventional, obedient suburban kid in which he has been trapped all his life. In his imagination, he and Margo — a girl who represents the independence of mind and spirit he has never been brave enough to claim for himself — reject the shallow, conventional ritual of prom, showing up late in jeans and t-shirts instead of the formal clothes their classmates agonize over. At the same time, they are the stars of the evening, attracting the attention and admiration of all their classmates. Quentin longs both to find acceptance and to transcend the need for acceptance.

Part 2, Chapter 8 Quotes

☹☹ Standing before this building, I learn something about fear. I learn that it is not the idle fantasies of someone who maybe wants something important to happen to him, even if the important thing is horrible ... This fear is bears no analogy to any fear I knew before. This is the basest of all possible emotions, the feeling that was with us before we existed, before this building existed, before the earth existed. This is the fear that made fish crawl onto dry land and evolve lungs, the fear that teaches us to run, the fear that makes us bury our dead.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 140-141

Explanation and Analysis

When Quentin, Radar, and Ben arrive at the address listed on Margo's note, they are met with an overwhelming stench that Quentin immediately understands must be a rotting corpse. The smell jolts Quentin out of his carefree self-centeredness — his belief that Margo's disappearance is just a game, and that he will surely win the "prize" of her friendship and love when he finds her — and forces him to recognize the grave possibility that Margo may have committed suicide, and that the dead body may be hers.

Though the corpse turns out to be that of a raccoon, this experience alters Quentin's entire relationship to Margo and her disappearance. After his experience at the strip mall, he feels a real, human connection with Margo, whereas before this confrontation with the possibility of her death, he had still idealized her from a distance. Quentin now begins to consider Margo's inner life more deeply, acknowledging the pain and loneliness that prompted her to run away and working to understand her empathetically. Like the fear that grips him outside the strip mall, this work is painful and sometimes overwhelming — however, as Quentin begins to humanize Margo in his mind, he becomes a fuller and more compassionate person, better able to care for those he loves.

Part 2, Chapter 9 Quotes

 YOU WILL GO TO THE PAPER TOWNS AND YOU WILL NEVER COME BACK

Related Characters: Margo Roth Spiegelman (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen, Ben Starling

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Quentin, Radar, and Ben find this proclamation spray-painted on the wall of the abandoned strip mall where they expect to meet Margo. Since they discover the message shortly after their encounter with the dead raccoon, it forces them to once again consider the possibility that Margo may have taken her own life (or be planning to do so).

The assertion that she will "never come back" is frightening for Quentin and his friends.

Later, in Agloe, Margo explains to Quentin that her escape to the "paper town" — the imaginary place that became real — was intended as the symbolic first step in transforming herself from a "paper girl," who lacks substance and self-definition, to a real person who can live with purpose and conviction. Though Margo never intends to commit suicide, as Quentin fears she might, she believes that the part of herself that hungers after praise and popularity and the good opinion of other people must die before she can live an authentic life. With her spray-painted proclamation, Margo commits to the destruction of that part of herself.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

 "Let me give you some advice: let her come home. I mean, at some point, you gotta stop looking up at the sky, or one of these days you'll look back down and see that you floated away, too."

Related Characters: Detective Otis Warren (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen, Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Detective Otis Warren offers Quentin this warning when Quentin calls him to discuss some new information he believes he has found about Margo's disappearance. Warren, who in his first meeting with Quentin compared runaway children to tied-down balloons that finally break free and float away, calls on that metaphor again to caution Quentin about losing himself in the search for Margo. Warren isn't the first person to worry that Quentin's obsession with finding Margo is hindering his ability to live a full life — Quentin's parents and Ben both express similar concerns at different points in the novel — but it is not until his near-death experience during his road trip to Agloe that Quentin truly begins to see the consequences of his obsession and to recapture his desire to live a full life on his own terms.

Though the novel focuses primarily on Quentin's journey to develop greater humanity and compassion for others, his experience searching for Margo also teaches him greater loyalty to and understanding of himself. After dismissing his fantastic ideas about the ways in which his life might change if Margo were to love him, and working hard to transcend

the boundaries of his own, self-centered perspective, he also has to recognize that his life is his alone to live. He must live responsibly, with regard and care for other human beings, but he also must make his own decisions and set his own priorities, rather than blindly following another person's vision for him.

Part 2, Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ “You know your problem, Quentin? You keep expecting people not to be themselves. I mean, I could hate you for being massively unpunctual and for never being interested in anything other than Margo Roth Spiegelman, and for, like, never asking me about how it’s going with my girlfriend — but I don’t give a shit, man, because you’re you.”

Related Characters: Radar (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen, Ben Starling

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

When Quentin, frustrated when Ben refuses to discuss new information about Margo's disappearance, declares Ben an "asshole" during a conversation with Radar, Radar chastises him for refusing to accept that Ben is a person with his own values and priorities, which may not always align with Quentin's. He encourages Quentin to focus on the things that make Ben a worthwhile person and a good friend, rather than on his shortcomings, and suggests implicitly that this is the only way relationships can be successful: that everyone has flaws which might make them unbearable to be around if those were their only characteristics, but that no person is defined entirely by their flaws.

This conversation with Radar is part of Quentin's long journey to become a more compassionate and humane person — not just with regard to Margo, but with regard to people who seem much more ordinary and less deserving than Margo. Ben is not the exciting, complex, intellectual person Margo is. He cracks immature jokes and craves the acceptance of his peers. These qualities make him easy to dismiss, but Radar urges Quentin to extend his compassion to Ben rather than reserving it for people who seem "special" and therefore worthy.

Part 2, Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ “I know it’s impossible for you to see peers this way, but when you’re older, you’ll start to see them — the bad kids and the good kids and all kids — as people. They’re just people, who deserve to be cared for. Varying degrees of sick, varying degrees of neurotic, varying degrees of self-actualized.”

Related Characters: Connie Jacobsen (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen, Tom Jacobsen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

During a dinner conversation about Quentin's longtime rival, Chuck Parson, Connie Jacobsen draws on her experience as a psychologist to counter her son's tendency to reduce other people to tropes and stereotypes: the bullheaded jock in the case of Chuck, the cold-hearted popular girl in the case of Becca Arrington, the beautiful mystery in the case of Margo.

Her profession gives Mrs. Jacobsen unique insight into the complexities of the human mind, but the wisdom she offers Quentin has less to do with her background in psychology than with her compassion and maturity: two qualities Quentin is still lacking, though he has made progress toward developing them. In his journey toward developing greater empathy, Quentin has focused largely on learning to understand and appreciate Margo — a person he already admired and cared for, even if his reasons for doing so were flawed. In order to develop true empathy, though, Quentin must recognize that every person, regardless of how difficult or unpleasant they might seem to him personally, has a deep and significant inner life and struggles in his or her own way.

☞ “The longer I do my job ... the more I realize that humans lack good mirrors. It’s so hard for anyone to show us how we look, and so hard for us to show anyone who we feel.”

Related Characters: Tom Jacobsen (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen, Connie Jacobsen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

After Quentin dismisses their sympathetic comments about Chuck Parson during a dinner conversation, Mr. and Mrs. Jacobsen speculate about the reasons people have such a difficult time empathizing with others. Mr. Jacobsen's hypothesis — that most people simply do not know how to express their emotions in ways other people can understand — captures the essential loneliness and frustration of being human. Through Quentin's experience searching for Margo, which forces him to think critically about his perception of others and brings both his best and worst qualities to the surface, Quentin comes to understand that every person — from goofy and childish Ben to actively vicious Chuck Parson — acts mostly out of a need for patience, acceptance, and love.

☞ The fundamental mistake I had always made — and that she had, in fairness, always led me to make — was this: Margo was not a miracle. She was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Quentin constantly discovers and rediscovers Margo's humanity. In this moment, during an illuminating dinner conversation with his parents, he perceives both Margo's complexity and the tremendous ordinariness of that complexity. Though he has already confronted the fact that Margo's inner life may have been much darker than he realized — that she may have planned to take her own life, for instance — he still has not been able to think about her as an ordinary person.

Even at the darkest and most frightening extremes of his imagination, Quentin has always related to Margo as a character in a story, someone larger than life whose mind and experience bore no resemblance to his own. Now, imagining the possibility that Margo may have suffered from something as ordinary as loneliness and a sense of isolation — that she may have fled Orlando, not because she was living in a grand and dramatic narrative, but because she felt trapped and had no idea what else to do — Quentin begins a new stage in the development of his empathetic imagination.

Part 2, Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ I couldn't help but think about school and everything else ending. I liked standing just outside the couches and watching them — it was a kind of sad I didn't mind, and so I just listened, letting all the happiness and the sadness of this ending swirl around in me, each sharpening the other. For the longest time, it felt kind of like my chest was cracking open, but not precisely in an unpleasant way.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Ben Starling, Radar, Lacey Pemberton

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Since the beginning of the novel, Quentin has maintained a cool, critical distance from the experience of finishing high school: he refuses to go to prom, balks at the sentimentality of his parents and peers, and takes a laissez-faire attitude toward the graduation ceremony itself, ultimately skipping it to drive to Agloe in search of Margo. In this scene, attending a laid-back party with his friends and acquaintances from the school band, he allows himself to feel emotional about the coming transition for the first time. The fact that Quentin allows himself this moment of authentic feeling—after months, or possibly years, of acting aloof and disinterested in order to maintain some semblance of being "cool"—is a sign that he is developing a more mature understanding of himself and the people around him. After working so hard to understand Margo and break down the barrier of her larger-than-life persona, Quentin is coming to a greater appreciation of the power of sincere emotion in an anxious, inauthentic world.

Part 2, Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ "I know you want to find her. I know she is the most important thing to you. And that's cool. But we graduate in, like, a week. I'm not asking you to abandon the search. I'm asking you to come to a party with your two best friends who you have known for half your life."

Related Characters: Ben Starling (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen, Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

When Quentin declines Ben's invitation to a casual party at Radar's house, Ben offers this firm but uncharacteristically gentle argument to convince him to attend. Ben never really becomes emotionally involved with the search for Margo, and on more than one occasion refuses outright to help Quentin chase down new clues. In light of this, his sympathetic recognition of the fact that Margo is "the most important thing" to Quentin becomes a gesture of solidarity and understanding.

Though Ben is not always the kind of friend Quentin wants him to be, this conversation shows that Ben is trying to be the kind of friend Quentin needs: understanding and compassionate, not jealous or resentful of the fact that Quentin spends more time searching for a girl he barely knows than relishing his last weeks with his best friends, but also protective of Quentin's happiness and psychological wellbeing. Ben wants Quentin to have a normal end-of-high-school experience, and to take the time to reminisce and appreciate what he has gone through.

In some ways, this is also an effort to ensure that Quentin keeps moving forward: that he goes through the normal process of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, because otherwise he risks becoming trapped in this moment, too obsessed with Margo's disappearance to go on with his own life. Despite all the ways in which he fails to meet Quentin's expectations, Ben shows himself here to be a genuine friend.

●● It is so hard to leave — until you leave. And then it is the easiest goddamned thing in the world.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

This thought occurs to Quentin on his last day of high school, after he dumps the contents of his locker into the garbage and drives away for the last time. Though he feels sentimental wandering through the halls, he feels suddenly free and deeply content as he leaves this period of his life behind, knowing he'll never return.

Quentin's exhilaration shines some light on Margo's decision to cut all ties in Orlando and leave her home, friends, and family behind. The feeling of independence is

thrilling, but even more importantly, cutting all ties and escaping into a new life eliminates the need to really confront the loss and the feelings that come with it. Though Quentin seems very brave and bold as he drives away, he is really avoiding the hard work of acknowledging and coping with his emotions: his resentment for all the bullying and injustice, his dissatisfaction at the shallowness and superficiality, and also the deep gratitude and love he feels for some of the people and experiences he had in high school. Cutting ties without a second thought is, as Quentin realizes at this moment, "the easiest goddam thing in the world" — but living life fully sometimes necessitates doing the more difficult thing. When Quentin attends a graduation party with his friends soon after this moment, he will face the complicated emotions that come with graduation in a more genuine way; this experience, rather than the heady escape in this scene, will better help prepare him to move on.

●● I blame her for this ridiculous, fatal chase — for putting us at risk, for making me into the kind of jackass who would stay up all night and drive too fast. I would not be dying were it not for her. I would have stayed home, and I have always stayed home, and I would have been safe, and I would have done the one thing I have always wanted to do, which is grow up.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

In the final stretch of their road trip to Agloe, an exhausted Quentin fails to notice a massive cow blocking the road. As the car barrels toward the cow, Quentin — recognizing that he and his friends will almost certainly die in the resulting collision — suddenly sees his single-minded fixation on Margo in a harsh new light. He sees his friends' loyalty, and his failure to appreciate them. He also sees what others have been warning him about since he began his search for Margo: that, in his obsession with finding her, he lost his sense of having a self independent from her, with goals and dreams for his own life that existed before Margo's disappearance and had nothing to do with her.

The anger and resentment Quentin feels at this moment does not last. Still, this brush with disaster awakens Quentin to the world outside his search for Margo. After weeks of feeling like his identity is inextricably intertwined with hers,

he recaptures his appreciation for a life that has, for years, had almost nothing to do with her. This moment of self-recognition is the first step toward his eventual decision to return to Orlando and go to college as planned, rather than following Margo to New York.

“Oh bullshit. You didn’t come here to make sure I was okay. You came here because you wanted to save poor little Margo from her troubled little self, so that I would be oh-so-thankful to my knight in shining armor that I would strip my clothes off and beg you to ravage my body.”

Related Characters: Margo Roth Spiegelman (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

Margo's cynical interpretation of Quentin's actions might have been accurate (though exaggerated) at the beginning of the novel, when Quentin felt sure her disappearance was only an elaborate game. But Quentin has grown and changed a great deal since Margo first disappeared, and her presumptuous criticism shows that her failures of compassion and imagination have been just as deep as Quentin's.

At the same time, Margo's rage at being found — and the shock that rage inspires in Quentin — reveals all the ways in which Quentin, for all his growth, still expected their relationship to follow the patterns of a neat-and-tidy fairy tale story. Quentin has assumed since the beginning that Margo wanted to be found, and though he has released many of his fantastic ideas about what might happen after their reunion, he certainly seems to have expected some kind of gratitude from her. Though Quentin has spent weeks learning about Margo and working to better understand her, this moment is a reminder of the fact that he and Margo still know next to nothing about each other. No amount of imagination can allow one person to understand another as intimately as a real, human interaction can.

“People love the idea of a paper girl. They always have. and the worst thing is that I loved it, too. I cultivated it, you know ... Because it’s kind of great, being an idea that everybody likes. But I could never be the idea to myself, not all the way.”

Related Characters: Margo Roth Spiegelman (speaker), Quentin Jacobsen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 293-294

Explanation and Analysis

In her conversation with Quentin in Agloe, Margo acknowledges that she was complicit in her own objectification — that she encouraged other people to see her as a beautiful idea rather than a human being, because it was easier to fulfill their expectations than to make herself vulnerable to rejection by exposing her flaws and the messiness of her inner life. It is important for both Margo and Quentin to recognize that being "paper" is something a person can actively choose when they do not feel brave enough or safe enough to show their true selves to others.

Authenticity takes courage, but it is also a necessary step before a person can find real happiness and connection. Margo tried to live as a "paper girl" in Orlando, but found she could never ignore the things that made her complex and human. She runs away because she can no longer abide her own cool, aloof persona — to be fulfilled in life, she needs to form relationships based on honesty and sincerity, and gain a deeper understanding of her real self.

“She can see it in my face — I understand now that I can’t be her and she can’t be me. Maybe Whitman had a gift I don’t have. But as for me: I must ask the wounded man where he is hurt, because I cannot become the wounded man. The only wounded man I can be is me.”

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

After Quentin hears Margo's explanation of her disappearance, he tells her that he understands her reasons for leaving Orlando, but that he believes she can come back with him and resume her life on her own terms. When Margo immediately rejects this idea, Quentin is forced finally to release his dreams of a neat and tidy ending to

their story. As much as he wants Margo to come home with him and continue building the relationship that has only just started between them, he has to recognize that her needs are different from his own. She is not able to give him what he wants — a stable, sure relationship — while still being true to herself. Their relationship is insufficient to draw her back into a life she does not want, or to protect her from falling back into her old ways. Likewise, Quentin cannot do what Margo will soon ask of him — run away to New York and start a new life with her — while still being true to himself. Quentin sees this truth through Whitman's "Song of Myself," of course, and here recognizes that he isn't as fundamentally optimistic about human connection as Whitman is — Quentin believes in empathy and connection, but not in the kind of perfect union Whitman describes (in which a person can *become* another). Margo and Quentin have achieved remarkable understanding of and love for one another, but this does not resolve all the problems and complications in their lives, and it does not guarantee that their relationship will be an easy or successful one.

☝ Imagining isn't perfect. You can't get all the way inside someone else. I could never have imagined Margo's anger at being found, or the story she was writing over. But imagining being someone else, or the world being something else, is the only way in.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

During their day together in Agloe, Quentin hears Margo's version of their shared story: the death of Robert Joyner, their years of tepid friendship throughout high school, their night of adventures, and her disappearance. He realizes that, as hard as he has tried to understand Margo, he can never presume to know her fully. This is an important addendum to all the lessons Quentin has learned about compassion and empathy; before he can truly humanize others, he has to recognize and accept that there will always be parts of them that he cannot access. To proceed through life without this understanding would be arrogant, and would ultimately be just as dehumanizing as never trying to empathize with others at all.

At the same time as he acknowledges the limits of

empathetic imagination, Quentin recognizes that his efforts to see Margo more clearly have been powerful and necessary. Though he will never know everything about her, he has to make the effort of imagining himself into her heart and mind, if only because that effort shows his willingness to see her in all her complexity.

☝ When did we see each other face-to-face? Not until you saw into my cracks and I saw into yours. Before that, we were just looking at ideas of each other, like looking at your window shade but never seeing inside. But once the vessel cracks, the light can get in. The light can get out.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

In Agloe, Quentin searches for a metaphor that can capture his new understanding of the complex way in which human beings relate to one another: the impossibility of ever really knowing another person, as Whitman's metaphor of the interconnected roots of grass suggests, and the desperate hunger for love and compassion that he has come to understand during his search for Margo. He conceives of the metaphor of human beings as watertight vessels that become cracked and imperfect over time, until they eventually split open to reveal their contents. Like those vessels, whose contents are invisible to begin with, human beings keep their deepest and truest selves hidden from others as long as they can. As life goes on, however, pain and other profound experiences "crack" people open, making it impossible for them to hide their true selves.

Margo's disappearance exposes Quentin to the most difficult and frightening experiences of his life, and forces him to recognize the deep pain that was always part of Margo, but which he was never willing or able to see. When he finally reaches Margo, he perceives his own fragility and vulnerability in how deeply he has come to care for her. In crafting his metaphor of cracked vessels, Quentin recognizes that love and intimacy are the products of compassion. People must allow one another to see their weakness and pain before they can experience deep connection — but in exposing those darker parts of themselves, they open themselves up to the healing forces of love and friendship, and allow the best and most worthy

parts of themselves to shine through to others.

●● After we kiss, our foreheads touch as we stare at each other. Yes, I can see her almost perfectly in this cracked darkness.

Related Characters: Quentin Jacobsen (speaker), Margo Roth Spiegelman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

It is important that this final line of the novel, after Margo drops Quentin off at his motel and they prepare to part ways, ends not with a kiss but with Margo and Quentin

looking directly into one another's faces. While a kiss represents a fairy tale ending — the thing Quentin wanted and expected when he first began searching for Margo — this moment of eye contact represents a new willingness on both their parts to see each other for who they really are.

It is also worth noting that the novel ends where it began: in the middle of the night, the period when one day transitions into the next. Just as they were on their first night of adventure, Margo and Quentin are here on the brink of a major transition, both in their personal lives and in their relationship to one another. Both are preparing to start new lives — Quentin at college, and Margo in New York — and it is unclear whether they will ever see each other again. Unlike the fairy tale, which ends with all conflicts solved and questions answered, this final line acknowledges that life is a series of transitions, and that real life is never truly finished.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PROLOGUE

Quentin Jacobsen, reflecting on his childhood, considers the possibility that every person will experience one incredible and unlikely event in their life: one “miracle.” Some people win Nobel Prizes or survive months at sea, but Quentin believes his “miracle” was living next door to Margo Roth Spiegelman. Margo and Quentin grew up together in Jefferson Park, one of the many subdivisions in Orlando, Florida. Jefferson Park is named after the rich and powerful orange juice salesman who once owned the land, Dr. Jefferson Jefferson. Quentin found Margo beautiful even when they were children, and remembers getting nervous every time they played together.

Quentin remembers an experience he shared with Margo when they were nine years old. In the memory he describes, he and Margo bike to a park at the center of their subdivision. Upon arriving at the park, they discover a dead man lying under an oak tree, covered in blood. Margo, fascinated, approaches the man and examines his body, wondering aloud about the circumstances of his death. Quentin is terrified and urges her to come home with him. Biking home behind her, Quentin notices the man’s blood on her sneakers.

That night, after Quentin has gone to bed following a comforting conversation with his therapist mother, Margo appears at his bedroom window. Through the screen, she tells him she has done an investigation about the dead man, whose name was Robert Joyner. She talks about her conversation with Juanita Alvarez, Joyner’s neighbor, to whom Margo gained access by claiming she needed to borrow a cup of sugar. Alvarez told Margo that Joyner shot himself because he was getting divorced. Quentin reminds Margo that many people get divorced without committing suicide, and Margo suggests that Joyner may actually have died because “all the strings inside him broke.”

Quentin, at a loss for words, removes the window screen. He seems to assume Margo will come into his bedroom, but Margo does not move and tells him to shut the window. He does, and she remains outside, staring at him. He waves and smiles at her, but notices that her gaze is fixed on something behind him, and that she looks afraid. They stand in silence, looking at each other. Quentin claims that he does not remember how the encounter ended, and says that in his memory, they continue to look at each other through the window forever.

Quentin’s first lines illustrate his dehumanizing idealization of Margo. He thinks of Margo as an event or force in his life — a “miracle” that happens to him — rather than as a person whose existence is separate from his. The detail with which he describes Jefferson Park’s history, including the eccentric Dr. Jefferson Jefferson, gives the sense that Jefferson Park is unique and specific, despite the fact that it is one of countless subdivisions in Orlando and seems unremarkable on its surface.



For Quentin, the discovery of the dead man is an intrusion on innocence, shattering the peace of two children as they play. However, Margo’s fascination with the body and apparent comfort in the presence of death suggests she is not so pure and childlike as Quentin is himself, or as he remembers her. Her bloody shoes forebode the way this experience will follow her into adulthood.



Margo and Quentin’s radically different responses to finding Joyner anticipate the different approaches to living they will adopt as teenager. Quentin allows his mother to comfort him, which is evidence of their trusting relationship and of his desire to be comforted. Margo does not share her experience with her parents, highlighting her isolation from them. She shows a powerful need to understand what happened to Joyner and seems to feel kinship with him, believing she can understand his decision.



Quentin does not respond to the news of Joyner’s suicide as strongly as Margo does, and this creates emotional as well as literal separation between them. By removing the screen, he invites Margo into his home and life; by insisting he close the window, Margo creates a barrier between them. They are stuck staring at each other, both unable to move closer through the barrier and unwilling to separate. They are both connected and utterly apart.



Quentin concludes, narrating once again from the present, that Margo always loved mysteries, and he wonders whether she loved mysteries so much that she eventually became one.

That Quentin refers to Margo as a mystery emphasizes the difficulty of comprehending her mind. His reference to her love of mysteries, her desire to be a mystery, also suggests that Margo has an active desire to evade others' understanding—to have that glass window always between her and the rest of the world.



PART 1, CHAPTER 1

Quentin, now a senior at Winter Park High School in Orlando, arrives at school on a Wednesday morning. He learns from his best friend Ben Starling that another of their friends, Radar, has made plans to go to prom with a girl named Angela, whom neither of them has ever met. Quentin is disinterested in prom, but Ben is fixated on the idea of going. He updates Quentin on his efforts to find a prom date, which have been unsuccessful since nearly every girl in school has heard “the Bloody Ben story,” a nasty rumor started by Margo’s friend Becca Arrington when they were in the tenth grade. When Ben was hospitalized for a kidney infection, Becca told their classmates that the blood in his urine was actually a symptom of his chronic masturbation. The story has continued to haunt him ever since.

This section offers a snapshot of Quentin’s life as a teenager, and emphasizes how ordinary his interests and experiences are. His unremarkable life as a teenager contrasts with the dramatic childhood experience he narrates in the prologue. He occupies himself with the day-to-day problems and triumphs of friends who are as ordinary as himself. This section also emphasizes Quentin’s status as a social outcast. His friendship with Ben, who is romantically unsuccessful and has been a target for a popular girl’s joke, casts Quentin as an outsider in the same way Ben is. That Becca is Margo’s friend also establishes that Margo is not a social outcast: she is one of the popular girls.



Quentin becomes distracted from the conversation when he sees Margo in the hall. She is standing with her boyfriend, the baseball player Jase Worthington, and appears to be laughing hysterically. He thinks of the escapades and adventures for which Margo is famous: the time she ran away to Mississippi, her brief career traveling with a circus, and her behind-the-scenes encounter with a famous band in St. Louis. Stories of these adventures circulate through the entire school, and though no one can believe they are real, they always prove true.

It becomes clear in this passage that Margo’s status as a legend extends far beyond Quentin — everyone at Winter Park High School thinks of her in a similar way. Her presence immediately draws Quentin’s attention, illustrating the extent of his fascination with her, and the posture in which he sees her — laughing with her athlete boyfriend — supports his presumption that Margo leads a glamorous life.



Ben and Quentin meet Radar in the hall. Radar deflects conversation about his relationship with Angela by talking about Omnictionary, a reference website he loves. Quentin and Radar joke about Ben’s prom prospects. Chuck Parson, an enormous and popular athlete, approaches Quentin and starts to harass him, asking what he knows about Margo and Jase. Quentin knows nothing of interest, since his friendship with Margo has stagnated over the years. Quentin and Radar leave for calculus. In his narration, Quentin remarks about how easy it was for him to amuse himself by talking about prom with his friends, and to feel as though nothing happening around him mattered much.

That Quentin has nothing substantial to say when Chuck asks him what he knows about Margo illustrates the extent to which they grown apart since they were children. It also serves as a reminder of the superficial nature of Quentin’s admiration of Margo. Though he thinks and writes about her constantly, he knows very little about her life.



During lunch, Ben admits he wants to go to prom even though Quentin thinks the idea is stupid. He tells Quentin he has already been rejected by one potential date. A girl with dreadlocks approaches them, and Quentin realizes that this is Angela. Angela tells the boys that Radar — who has a different lunch period, and so is not with them — hasn't invited her to his house, even though they've been dating for five weeks. She asks whether Radar is embarrassed of her, or whether his parents are weird. Quentin rushes to assure her that Radar's parents are just overprotective. She leaves, apparently satisfied, and the boys wonder how long it will be until she learns the real reason that Radar hasn't invited her to his house.

Their conversation with Angela establishes how well Ben and Quentin know Radar, and how loyal they are to him. While both know the reason Radar is not inviting Angela to his house, they have no qualms about lying to cover for their friend.



Talking with Radar after lunch, Quentin and Ben tell him about their conversation with Angela. They tease Radar about the real reason his for reluctance to bring his girlfriend home: his parents own the world's largest collection of black Santas, and every surface in his house is covered with black Santa paraphernalia.

Though the reason for Radar's embarrassment is absurd and comical, the fact that he is not integrating Angela into his life because of that embarrassment shows on a micro level how insecurities keep people from connecting with one another.



After school, Quentin follows the same unremarkable routine he follows every day, watching television and eating dinner with his parents. His days are boring, he thinks, but there is something pleasant about being bored. A little before midnight, however, the routine of the day is disrupted. Margo appears at his bedroom window and opens it, something she hasn't done since the night after Robert Joyner died, nine years earlier. The window still has no screen.

Quentin is comforted by the boring predictability of his life, and does not seem to have any particular thirst for adventure. However, his apparent failure to replace the window screen, which he removed on the night Joyner died to let Margo into his room, suggests he has been waiting subconsciously for her to re-enter his life.



PART 1, CHAPTER 2

Margo is dressed in black and wearing black face paint. Standing outside his window, she tells Quentin that she needs to use his mother's minivan. When Quentin reminds her that she has a car of her own, Margo tells him that her parents have locked the keys to her car in a safe under their bed, and that her dog, Myrna Mountweazel, will bark and give her away if she tries to steal the keys back. She also tells Quentin that she needs him to drive, because she has "eleven things to do tonight, and at least five of them involve a getaway man." Quentin resists, telling Margo she should get Lacey or Becca to help her, but Margo tells him that Lacey and Becca are part of the problem.

Margo's flair for the dramatic is evident in all aspects of her arrival at Quentin's window. Her face paint, the suddenness of her appearance, and her quip about her agenda for the night give this moment an air of performance, and make it clear that she wants to make a certain impression on Quentin. The sudden reconfiguration of her relationships — her belief that her friends have become a "problem" and her decision to enlist Quentin as a companion though they are practically strangers — hints at her actual isolation even within her popularity.



Margo and Quentin's conversation comes to a sudden close when Margo's father appears outside and orders her back into the house. Margo tries to deflect her father with jokes, but eventually she disappears out the window with a promise to Quentin that she will be back in a minute.

Margo's father disrupts her cool persona when he appears unexpectedly and exercises his authority to order her inside. His hostility and her disregard for him are early signs of the strained relationship between Margo and her parents.



Waiting for Margo to return, Quentin collects his car keys. He remembers his disappointment when, on his sixteenth birthday, his parents gave him a key to his mother's minivan instead of a car of his own. When Margo returns, Quentin is still hesitant to go with her. She appeals to their friendship, and when he insists that they are neighbors, not friends, she gets frustrated and reveals that she has been subtly looking out for him throughout high school, ordering other popular students not to bully Quentin and his friends. Finally, she tells him that they have to go, and he follows her.

Quentin's access only to his mother's minivan (as opposed to his own car) is a symbol of his continued dependence on his parents — a reminder that he is not an adult. Though she seems exasperated when Quentin insists they are not friends, Margo's strong reaction to that statement suggests she is more vulnerable than she would have Quentin believe. She seems genuinely to want and need his companionship. At the same time, while secretly "protecting" someone can be considered a nice thing to do, it is also condescending and not actual friendship. Margo's relationship to Quentin is unequal: she expects him to do what she wants, and he does.



Driving through Jefferson Park, Margo tells Quentin that her parents don't care about her sneaking out, but are only worried about being embarrassed in front of their friends and neighbors. She describes the extreme measures they have taken to prevent her from leaving the house at night, putting a baby monitor in her room so they can hear her sleep breathing. She was only able to sneak out because she paid her little sister, Ruthie, to sleep in her bed.

Margo tries to seem unaffected when she talks with Quentin about her relationship with her parents, but she betrays her frustration and disappointment with their superficial fear of embarrassment. Their efforts to control her trap Margo in a state of extended childhood, sleeping with a baby monitor and sneaking out like a cliché rebellious teenager.



Quentin asks Margo where they are going. She tells him that their first stop is the grocery store Publix, and that their next stop will be Wal-Mart. She tells him that they are going to spend the night righting wrongs, and pulls out several hundred dollars in cash, which she claims is money from her bat mitzvah. As they pull into the empty Publix parking lot, she tells Quentin, "[T]his is going to be the best night of your life."

As their adventure begins in earnest, Margo resumes use of dramatic words and gestures — such as pulling out a stack of hundred-dollar bills — to reassert herself as a confident ringleader. However, it also seems like she's playing a role she might have watched on TV. That her money is leftover from her bat mitzvah, a rite of passage for young teenagers, is a reminder that Margo, for all her posturing, is not actually the self-sufficient adult she seems to be.



PART 1, CHAPTER 3

In the parking lot at Publix, Margo gives Quentin a list of items to buy and a hundred-dollar bill with which to pay for them. The list includes, among other things, three catfish, a dozen tulips, a can of blue spray paint, and hair-removal cream. Reading the list, he comments on her unusual capitalization style: she capitalizes words at random, in the middle of sentences rather than at the beginning. Margo tells him that she finds conventional rules of capitalization unfair to words in the middle. Quentin goes inside alone to buy the items, while Margo waits for him in the parking lot.

The odd combination of items Margo asks Quentin to buy herald a strange night ahead, and also emphasizes the odd and unpredictable nature of her mind. Her list provides no insight into her plans for the evening, and so heightens the sense of mystery surrounding her, while her unconventional capitalization creates an aura of studied quirkiness. Though she seems nonchalant, there is a sense that everything Margo does is intended to create a certain impression.



When he returns to the car, Quentin worries aloud that Duke University, where he plans to attend college, will revoke his admission if he gets arrested. Margo expresses amazement at the fact that Quentin can be interested in things like college, school, or the future. Quentin begins to protest with a comment about Margo's academic success — her good grades and her admission to the University of Florida — but Margo urges him on toward their next stop, Wal-Mart.

At Wal-Mart, Margo and Quentin buy a device called The Club, which is designed to lock a car's steering wheel into place. Quentin asks Margo's reason for buying The Club, but Margo ignores him. She goes on an unprompted diatribe about her belief that, as the average human life span has lengthened, people have begun to spend more and more of their lives planning for the future. She claims that this pattern has reached a point where every moment of life is lived for the future.

Quentin suspects Margo is rambling to avoid his question, and he asks her again why she needs The Club. She promises that everything will become clear before the night ends, and changes the subject by taking an air horn from the shelf. Quentin orders her not to blow it, but she blows it anyway.

A Wal-Mart employee appears and tells Margo she needs to stop blowing the air horn. The employee is visibly interested in and attracted to Margo, and invites her to come with him to a bar after he gets off work. The employee assumes Quentin is Margo's younger brother. When Quentin, clearly embarrassed, tells the employee that he is not Margo's brother, Margo puts her arm around his waist and announces that Quentin is both her cousin and her lover.

As the employee walks away, Quentin enjoys the feeling of Margo's hand and takes the opportunity to put his arm around her. He tells her that she is his favorite cousin, and she answers, "Don't I know it?" She smiles and shimmies out of his embrace.

Margo's condescending answer to Quentin's anxiety reveals both her disregard for his feelings and her general disenchantment with the values and conventions that guide her peers. Her academic success may be evidence of hypocrisy—that she's only pretending not to care—or may simply show how hard it can be to disregard others' expectations.



Margo has now become very open and eager to talk about her personal philosophy. Her distaste for the idea of living for the future— planning for a career and an adult life, as the people who surround her tend to — suggests dissatisfaction with the life she is living and path she is on, and her desire to do something more fulfilling in the present rather than wait and hope to be happy later on.



While Margo is happy to talk about her abstract ideas, she keeps Quentin ignorant of the basic facts. This allows her to maintain control of both him and their situation, but is also evidence of her desire to talk about things that bother her —something Quentin does not notice or respond to.



The Wal-Mart employee's mistake in referring to Quentin as Margo's little brother plays to Quentin's insecurities about being less adult — and, though it is never said outright, less sexy —than Margo. When she brings Quentin back into the conversation with her joke, Margo "chooses" him again, dismissing the employee who ignored him and bolstering Quentin's confidence. This is a gesture of sincere friendship.



Quentin presumes an intimacy with Margo at this moment that he has not shown before, touching her and joking with her. Margo's playful response shows that she is not unhappy with this intimacy, but she deflects it nevertheless by moving away.



PART 1, CHAPTER 4

Admiring the streetlights as they drive on the highway, Quentin quotes T.S. Eliot, calling them “the visible reminder of Invisible Light.” Margo thinks the words are beautiful, and though she is disappointed to learn that the line is a quotation, she asks Quentin to say it again.

As their conversation continues, Margo reveals that Jase has been cheating on her with Becca. Quentin is dumbfounded, and tells Margo he saw her laughing with Jase at school that morning. He realizes that he misinterpreted the scene in the hall: Margo had only just found out about Jase’s cheating when Quentin saw her, and she was not laughing but screaming at Jase and Becca.

Quentin wonders aloud why Jase would have sex with Becca. Margo suggests that, since there is nothing pleasant about Becca’s personality, it must be because Becca is hot. Quentin answers without thinking that Becca is not as hot as Margo, but Margo responds that she isn’t pretty up close, and that people tend to find her less hot as they get closer to her. When Quentin tries to argue, she immediately shuts him down.

As he and Margo continue driving, Quentin meditates on the injustice of the fact that someone as unpleasant as Jase should get to have sex with both Margo and Becca, while he, who is perfectly likeable, doesn’t get to have sex with anyone. He tries to engage Margo in conversation with a comment about how Becca “does sort of suck,” but Margo barely answers. Looking to the passenger seat, Quentin thinks she might be crying — however, Margo immediately pulls up the hood of her sweatshirt and begins giving Quentin directions for the next phase of the evening.

Quentin and Margo reach Becca’s neighborhood and drive around looking for Jase’s Lexus. When they find it, Margo uses The Club to lock Jase’s steering wheel into place. She instructs Quentin to drive to Becca’s house, and while they drive she explains the next phase of her plan. Quentin concedes that her ideas are brilliant, but is silently nervous about what lies ahead.

In order to appreciate something fully, Margo needs to respect its source and context. She is moved by Eliot’s words, but the fact that they do not come from Quentin directly diminishes their power and authenticity.



Quentin’s mistake illustrates the extent to which he has both idealized and dehumanized Margo. He believes her life is totally glamorous and without problems, and is convinced of that to the point where he cannot differentiate between laughing and screaming.



Though Margo talks about physical beauty and ugliness, her comment about not being “hot” up close also speaks to her fear of being discovered to be less than she appears when someone gets to know her too well — becomes too “close” emotionally to believe the image she projects.



Margo has given Quentin a lot of substantial information by this point: she has shared her ideas about life and adulthood, talked about her family, and now revealed the painful fact of Jase’s cheating. Despite all these openings, and Margo’s obvious pain at this moment, Quentin says nothing. He has no idea how to talk seriously with Margo, or how to comfort her as a friend.



Margo tells Quentin what she has been keeping from him, but the reader does not learn these details. The reader’s exclusion heightens the sense that Margo has brought Quentin into a special conspiratorial intimacy — literally nobody knows her plans but the two of them.



Outside Becca's house, Margo and Quentin use a pair of binoculars — which Margo stashed in the car early in the day, before asking for Quentin's help — to look into the basement. Quentin uses his cell phone to call Becca's father. When Mr. Arrington answers, Quentin tells him that Becca and Jase are having sex in their basement. He and Margo hide behind a hedge with a digital camera and soon see Jase crawling out the window of Becca's basement in his underwear. Quentin snaps a picture, and Jase stares at him briefly before running away.

Margo tells Quentin they have to get into the basement while Becca is upstairs getting a lecture from her parents. She brings a catfish and the can of blue spray paint. Quentin collects Jase's clothes and baseball cap and writes a note for Becca that says her friendship with Margo "sleeps with the fishes." Margo hides the catfish in Becca's drawer, and sprays a blue letter "M" on Becca's wall. As they flee the Arrington's house, Becca's father appears in the front yard with a shotgun. Margo and Quentin make it to their minivan and speed away.

When they encounter Jase running blindly through the streets near Becca's house, Quentin takes pity on him and throws Jase's shirt out the car window. Margo is furious, and yells at Quentin for helping someone who has wronged her. She punches the dashboard and tells Quentin that she'd thought, after hearing about Jase's cheating from her friend Karin, that it might not be true. Quentin tells her that he's sorry, and Margo says she can't believe she cares.

Quentin's heart is still pounding from the stress and fear of being chased by Mr. Arrington. Though Margo insists the pounding heart is evidence that Quentin is having fun, he pulls into the parking lot of a 7-Eleven to calm down. Margo calls his anxieties childish, and paints her nails while she waits for Quentin. Quentin thinks of her arm around him in Wal-Mart, and tries to tell himself that there is nothing to be afraid of.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

When they begin driving again, Margo directs Quentin to her friend Karin's house, telling him how she verbally abused Karin after hearing her news about Jase. She leaves a bouquet of tulips and an apologetic note for Karin, and tells Quentin that their next task is to leave a fish for Jase. Since Jase's family has an extremely sophisticated security system, Margo says she will handle things at his house. She remarks that she and Quentin "bring the fucking rain down on our enemies." Quentin reminds her that they are punishing *her* enemies, not his. Margo answers this with a cryptic, "We'll see."

Margo's plan has an elegant choreography — each part is perfectly timed to lead into the next. She has clearly put great effort into planning this night, but it is hard to know whether her commitment comes from her penchant for larger-than-life performances and thrills, or from a genuine anger and hurt that she does not know how to deal with in any other way.



Margo uses exaggerated gestures to express what are ultimately simple sentiments: she is angry with Becca and uninterested in continuing their friendship. By retaliating with dead fish and spray paint and cliché lines from gangster movies, Margo turns the dissolution of this relationship into a game. Whatever feelings of anger or pain she has about the situation — if she has any — become invisible amidst the absurdity of her revenge plot.



Quentin here reveals both an instinct toward kindness and a lack of loyalty toward Margo — though he has no reason to be sympathetic toward Jase, he is not emotionally invested in her project. Margo's outburst shows her emotions slipping out of her control. Though she does not want to care about Jase — intellectually, she does not think this is important — she cannot force herself to stop feeling hurt from his betrayal.



Quentin and Margo seem to be totally incompatible at this moment: he has no stomach for the escapades that thrill her, and she has no sympathy for his timid behavior. Their partnership seems especially remarkable at this moment, since it is clear that they are not naturally suited to one another.



Margo is clearly an extremely impulsive person, who has no reservations about burning bridges with people she cares about; her harsh and unfair response to Karin illustrates this. She encourages Quentin to feel personally invested in their mission when she refers to "our" enemies. This is a hint that she might be planning something bigger than strict revenge. It also suggests she is invested in Quentin as an individual rather than simply a companion, and wants him to feel like an active participant in this adventure.



Quentin remarks that Jase's subdivision, Casavilla, is full of "big, ugly homes for big, ugly people." Parked outside Jase's house, Margo writes Jase a note saying her love for him "sleeps with the fishes." She tells Quentin to keep the car on and ready to drive. Wearing Jase's baseball cap, Margo runs across the Worthington's front lawn. The house lights up and sirens begin blaring. Quentin sits panicking in the car while Margo throws the fish through a window and sprays an "M" next to the shattered glass. Margo runs back to the car and they flee the scene, Margo cursing at Quentin when he slows for a stop sign.

Margo admits that the escapade was intense even for her, but assures Quentin that the eighth part of their adventure will be easier. She explains that their next target is Lacey, who has been her friend since Kindergarten, but didn't tell her about Jase and Becca. She goes on to claim that Lacey has been a terrible friend. Attempting to offer an example, Margo asks Quentin whether he thinks she's fat, and says that Lacey often uses backhanded compliments to imply that this is the case.

Quentin rushes to assure Margo that she shouldn't lose any weight. He thinks at length about her unusual beauty, which seems to be inextricably intertwined with her personality. He claims that a statement about whether Margo was fat or skinny would be as absurd and meaningless as a statement about whether the Eiffel Tower was or was not lonely.

When they arrive at Lacey's car, Margo jimmies the lock open. Quentin helps her hide a fish — which, like the other two, is accompanied by a "sleeps with the fishes" note — under the backseat, and doesn't hesitate to spray an "M" on the car's roof when she asks him to.

Back in the minivan, Quentin notices that using the spray paint can has left a blue spot on his finger. He shows Margo, who raises her own blue finger and touches it to Quentin's. After a long time spent sitting that way, she tells Quentin to head downtown.

Quentin reveals his own subtle distaste for the subdivisions of Orlando in his remark about Casavilla. He hasn't expressed this kind of opinion before, and it seems as though Margo's disdain for their world might be inspiring similar feelings in him. That Margo recycles the same note she used to disown Becca — the "sleeps with the fishes" message — makes her attack on Jase's house seem less personal and emotional than her outburst in front of Becca's house might suggest.



Here, Margo shows herself to be vulnerable to bullying and insecure in much the same way that less socially successful people can be. Her popularity and good looks do not protect her from feeling victimized by other people. In fact, her position is even more painful than Quentin's, since the people making her feel badly about herself are supposed to be her closest friends.



While Quentin's comparison between Margo and the Eiffel Tower is supposed to be a flattering one—the tower is a tremendous work of art, after all —his professed inability to separate Margo's personality from her body shows how his admiration of her originates in what is essentially a shallow crush. Quentin romanticizes the fact that he is physically attracted to Margo, and this makes it possible for him to convince himself that being attracted to her is the same as knowing and loving her on an essential level.



In agreeing without hesitation to paint Lacey's car, Quentin throws himself more boldly into Margo's plan than he has at any other point during the night. This task is less intense than the others, but his calm is nevertheless a sign that these experiences have helped ease some of his "childish" anxiety about breaking rules.



Agreeing to paint Lacey's car is Quentin's gesture of loyalty to Margo and solidarity with her, and also a sign that he is coming to understand her in a deeper way. Margo and Quentin are united at this moment as they have not been before.



PART 1, CHAPTER 6

Downtown Orlando, which consists mostly of office buildings in skyscrapers, is deserted when Margo and Quentin arrive. Though he is aware of Margo sitting next to him, Quentin feels completely alone among the buildings, as though he has survived the apocalypse and now has an amazing, endless world to explore on his own.

Margo directs Quentin to a towering green sculpture, known to teenagers in town as The Asparagus. As he parks near The Asparagus, Quentin notices Margo staring into the distance and thinks for the first time that something might be seriously wrong. Not knowing what to say, though, he ignores her troubled expression and asks what they've come for.

Margo tells Quentin that they are going to the top of the SunTrust Building to check their progress. Quentin resists, but Margo reveals that she knows the security guard, Gus, who was a senior at Winter Park High School when she and Quentin were freshmen. When they walk in the front door, Gus invites them to take the stairs to the top of the building.

In a conference room on the twenty-fifth floor, Margo surveys the city through one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Leaning against the glass, she points out their houses and Jase's, then pulls Quentin up next to her. He leans his forehead on the glass despite being worried about breaking it with their combined weight.

Quentin remarks that Orlando is beautiful, and Margo scoffs. He scrambles to justify himself, points out that it is impossible to see the city's imperfections from such a great height — that instead, they see Orlando as someone once imagined it. Margo says everything is uglier close up. Quentin says that isn't true of her, and Margo smiles and tells him he's cute when he's confident.

By this point in the night, Quentin feels liberated and sees the world around him as being full of possibility. Margo has made this happen for him, but in pushing Quentin to be confident and courageous, she has made herself less essential to his satisfaction.



Though Quentin has spent the entire night helping Margo terminate her most important friendships, he has been too caught up in the thrill of the evening, and too absorbed by his own thoughts and feelings, to consider her seriously. He freezes when confronted with her emotions, as he has also done at other points in the night. This is a reminder that he is still emotionally immature, though he seems bolder and more adult than he has at other points in the night.



Margo's friendship with Gus places her in a different world from the one in which Quentin is used to seeing her. Besides being older, Gus is a working-class man who exists outside the shelter of subdivisions. It is clear that Margo has made an effort to expand her experience and connect with people whose lives are different from hers.



The symbolic image of Quentin and Margo leaning against the glass reflects the fragility of this intimate moment. They are vulnerable in the literal sense — Quentin worries the glass will break under their weight — and their bond is similarly precarious, since their night is drawing to a close and it is not clear what will happen next.



Quentin is eager for Margo's approval, and willing to alter his opinions to align with hers, which shows the weak sense of self that is still integral to his character. Margo praises his confidence when he flirts with her, but it is clear Quentin still lacks the confidence to defend his beliefs and ideas.



Still staring at the city below, Margo tells Quentin that Orlando is a “paper town.” She claims that everything about the town is fake, and that the “paper people” who live there are obsessed with material possessions. She tells Quentin that, in the eighteen years she has lived there, she has never met anyone who cared about anything really important.

Quentin tells Margo that he won’t take her comments about “paper people” personally. Margo apologizes, saying her experience might have been different if she had spent her time with Quentin and his friends instead of Jase, Becca, and Lacey. She goes on to say that she isn’t even terribly upset about Jase’s cheating, but simply that it is the last “string.”

Quentin tells Margo she would be welcome to eat lunch with him and Ben tomorrow. She smiles, and he spends the rest of their time in the SunTrust Building trying to make her laugh by racing her down the stairs and leaping around clicking his heels. In his narration, he claims that he thought he was cheering her up, but recognizes in hindsight that he was wrong.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7

Back in the minivan, Margo tells Quentin that it is his turn to choose a victim, whose punishment she has already planned. Quentin is at a loss, and claims there is no one he feels the need to punish. Margo suggests Chuck Parson, and reminds Quentin of a humiliating prank Chuck played on him in middle school, when he convinced all the girls in their ballroom dance class (including Margo) to reject Quentin when he asked them to dance. She apologizes for going along with Chuck’s prank. Quentin tells her things are “all good” between them, but the memory of that embarrassment riles him. He agrees that Chuck should be their next victim, and speeds toward Chuck’s house.

Margo directs Quentin through Chuck’s subdivision, College Park. She does not remember his address, but points out a house that she is “ninety-seven point two percent sure” is the right one. Quentin remarks that entering a house randomly could get them into trouble, but doesn’t hesitate to follow Margo with the spray paint, Vaseline, and hair removal cream in hand. Margo explains that they will be covering the doorknobs in the house with Vaseline, to prevent Chuck and his family from chasing them if they need to leave in a hurry. Walking toward the open window that she claims leads to Chuck’s bedroom, Margo takes Quentin’s hand and squeezes it.

Margo has made comments throughout the entire night about what is not important — rules, friendships, college, material possessions. However, she never speaks about what she thinks actually is important. Margo knows what she does not value or want for her life, but doesn’t know what a satisfying life would look like.



Margo uses the same language to talk about herself that she once used to explain Robert Joyner’s suicide: the metaphor of “strings.” While this doesn’t necessarily suggest that Margo is considering suicide herself, it does convey her feeling of being lost. Strings keep things connected, and the loss of valued relationships that gave her life structure and purpose has left Margo without that stability.



Quentin’s attempts to make Margo feel better are naïve, but kind and well-intentioned. The more mature voice he uses to reflect on his actions creates distance between the person Quentin is at this moment and the person he will become in the wake of these experiences.



Appointing Quentin to choose a victim seems to be Margo’s attempt at empowering him — forcing him to stand up to one of his bullies. However, Margo maintains total control of this situation. She chooses Chuck when Quentin hesitates to give her a name, and in mentioning her guilty memory of having helped humiliate Quentin, she reveals her personal interest in punishing Chuck. She seems to want to redeem herself for mistreating Quentin by taking his side against his bullies.



Quentin displays remarkable confidence in Margo, agreeing to follow her into a strange house when she admits she is not sure whether it is even the right place. Though their night has been full of close calls, Quentin has clearly learned to trust Margo, to the point where he is not even seriously afraid of entering a stranger’s house. Margo shows trust herself when she squeezes Quentin’s hand, a gesture of encouragement and camaraderie.



Margo and Quentin climb through the bedroom window and discover, not Chuck, but an old man they have never seen sleeping in the bed. They flee the house and drive to the other side of the subdivision to regroup. Quentin remembers that Radar has the log-in information for the school directory. Radar doesn't pick up his phone, so Quentin calls Ben — who knows all of Radar's passwords and is groggy, but cooperative — and gets Chuck's address.

Quentin and Margo successfully break into Chuck's house. Margo spreads hair removal cream on Chuck's right eyebrow, then she and Quentin spread Vaseline on the doorknobs. Back in Chuck's bedroom, Quentin wipes the hair removal cream from Chuck's face, taking Chuck's entire right eyebrow with him. Chuck wakes up suddenly, screaming to his parents that there is a robbery in progress.

Speeding away in the minivan, Margo relishes their success and Chuck's impending humiliation. Quentin asks why Margo hates Chuck, remarking that she was always "kind of friends" with him. Margo brushes the question off, saying she was always "kind of friends" with a lot of people. Then she reveals the final stage of their adventure: breaking into SeaWorld.

PART 1, CHAPTER 8

Quentin flatly refuses to follow Margo to SeaWorld. He worries about getting caught, and though Margo agrees that they probably will, she insists that nothing bad will come of it. She tells Quentin that, after everything she has done for him over the course of the night, the least he can do is stop being so terrified and enjoy this last adventure. Quentin is furious at the implication that Margo has been helping him, rather than the other way around. He reminds her that everything they've done over the course of the night has been for her benefit. He yells that she didn't choose him as an accomplice because he was important to her, but rather because his living next door made him a convenient choice.

Margo is repulsed by the idea that she needed Quentin to accomplish her plans. She tells Quentin that it would have been easy for her to steal the safe from under her parents' bed, or to climb through window and take his keys while he was asleep. She insists that she didn't need Quentin — she picked him, she says, and he picked her back when he agreed to help her. She tells him that their picking one another is a "promise," and that they have to stand by each other at least until the night is over.

When Margo's information fails, Quentin assumes a new role as an active, resourceful leader for their team. It is the first moment he has real control of the adventure, since he has a choice of whether to search for Chuck's address or let the plan fizzle out. He has obviously invested in this particular mission's success, though it is not clear whether his primary objective is to punish Chuck, impress Margo, or enjoy the thrill of executing the plan.



All of Margo's earlier stunts demonstrate sincere anger, but the "punishment" she plans for Chuck is fairly lighthearted, and seems meant to involve and empower Quentin rather than to send Chuck a message. Margo is not just campaigning for justice; she is trying to help Quentin, too.



Quentin's question about the friendship between Margo and Chuck — and Margo's jaded answer — highlights the ways in which Margo, like Quentin, has been a social outcast. She is popular, but the people who admire and include her are only "kind of" her friends. She lacks a sense of real belonging.



Margo's condescension when Quentin refuses to participate in this last stage of her plan is characteristic of her behavior throughout the night, but Quentin's aggressive reaction to her remarks is not. He challenges Margo's narrative of their night and resists her evaluation of his character in ways he would never have done at an earlier point in the novel. Though his experiences have not transformed him into the daring adventurer Margo is, Quentin has clearly become more confident in himself. This confidence allows him to have a more honest and equal conversation with Margo than has been possible at any other point during the night.



Here, Margo allows herself to be more vulnerable to Quentin than she has been at any point during the night. She makes it clear, through her comments about their picking each other, that she values the connection they share and needs him to stay with her. Margo has been let down by people she trusted, and Quentin's "promise" is obviously precious to her.



Quentin grudgingly agrees to break into SeaWorld with Margo, but tells Margo that his parents and Duke University will both be mad when they find out what he has done. Margo assures Quentin that he is going to be very successful for as long as he lives. She predicts that at the end of his life he is going to think that everything he ever did was a waste, except the night he broke into SeaWorld with her.

Driving to SeaWorld, Quentin thinks about Robert Joyner. He notices that the metaphor Margo once used to explain why Joyner killed himself — that all the strings inside him broke — is similar to the one she used when explaining that her friends' disloyalty was "the last string." He points out this connection to Margo, worried that the connection may imply that she is considering suicide, but Margo assures him that she is "too vain" to allow herself to die the way Joyner did, and to have children who don't know her discover her body the way they discovered Joyner's.

When they reach SeaWorld, Margo reveals her plan to sneak in by wading through a drainage ditch that runs along one side of the park. Quentin is concerned there might be alligators in the ditch — a reasonable fear, since alligators are common in central Florida — but Margo inspires his confidence by telling him that they are ninjas. Quentin wades fearlessly into the disgusting water, and Margo follows.

While crossing the moat, Margo is bitten by a snake. Fearing the snake is a water moccasin, Quentin tries to suck the poison out of the bite. Margo soon realizes the snake is a harmless garter snake. She and Quentin laugh about the incident, and they climb over the fence into SeaWorld.

Margo and Quentin wander past a row of tanks, but do not see any animals. They encounter a security guard, who considers arresting them but eventually accepts a one-hundred dollar bribe from Margo and leaves them alone. Quentin's relief at having avoided trouble so narrowly gives him intense, unexpected pleasure.

Yelling at one another, Margo and Quentin share an intimacy and honesty that is totally new in their relationship. Now that their fight has calmed, Margo undermines that intimacy with flippancy comments that seem intended to insult Quentin. She pushes back on their closeness by emphasizing her anger instead of the trust that made her "pick" Quentin.



Quentin has noticed troubling things about Margo on many occasions during the night, but has never said anything about them. Now, reaching out to her about the possibility that she may be suicidal, he invites Margo to change the dynamic between them — where she is the inspiring and beautiful heroine and he is the bumbling sidekick — and enter into a more equal, adult relationship in which they can talk about serious things.



In this moment, Quentin begins to see the limited usefulness of fear. There are many valid reasons to be fearful of going into the drainage ditch — it is really possible that alligators might be lurking in the water — but the risks are not nearly so high as Quentin fears, and when he dares to jump in the water, everything is fine.



Quentin leaps at the chance to play the hero in this moment, saving the damsel in distress from danger. The revelation that the snake is not poisonous puts a damper on his heroism, but also confirms that the ditch is not a dangerous place.



Quentin's pleasure at escaping arrest may be understood as an exhilarating sense of freedom from fear. Like the drainage ditch that did not actually harbor dangers, the world of rule-breaking — of failure to live the values that have been taught to him — is not nearly as perilous as he imagined it would be.



Margo and Quentin continue walking through the park past the animals' empty tanks. Margo talks about the anticlimax of breaking into theme parks: the things that make them spectacular during the day are closed down at night. She tells Quentin that the pleasure is in planning rather than being inside, and speculates that nothing ever feels as good as the person planning it hopes. Quentin answers that he feels great, despite the fact that there is nothing much to see.

Margo and Quentin stop in front of the empty seal tank. Quentin imagines spending the night with her on the grass, and wants to tell her that the real pleasure of the adventure is being with her — “watching our strings cross and separate and come back together” — but thinks the sentiment is too cheesy to share. He and Margo dance to the jazz music playing on the park's speakers.

PART 1, CHAPTER 9

As they drive home in the early morning, Quentin wonders what will change now that he and Margo have shared this experience: whether they will eat lunch together and be friends in a public way. They rid the minivan of garbage and other muck, and fill up the gas tank to exactly where it was at the start of the night. Standing in Quentin's driveway as their adventure comes to a close, Margo gives Quentin the camera with the picture of Jase, and tells him to use the picture's powers wisely. She avoids answering when Quentin tells her he will return the camera at school.

When Margo and Quentin return home, Margo gives Quentin a hug and tells him she will miss hanging out with him. Quentin insists they can hang out together, but Margo answers that it isn't possible. She smiles and walks away, climbing back through her bedroom window. Quentin, reflecting as the narrator, says he “believed the smile” — the he thought Margo was happy, and that everything was fine. Quentin goes to bed, anticipating eagerly the things he will say to Margo at school the next day.

It is easy for Quentin to have an amazing experience of an inactive theme park, because he is more enchanted with the aesthetics of having broken in — with the knowledge that he has lived a story worth telling — than with the actual place. Margo, by contrast, is looking for something more fulfilling. Though she is famous for the stories she has lived, they are not enough to satisfy her.



Quentin uses the metaphor of the strings here, but changes it to assert a positive vision of human connection rather than the negative one Margo tends to perceive. While Margo sees strings break — connections and relationships come apart — Quentin sees them entwine. In his version of the metaphor, people can separate and grow close again without breaking the relationship; connections are not fragile, but constantly developing.



Quentin keeps no tokens from his night with Margo except for the embarrassing picture; their last task together is to erase all the evidence of what they have done by cleaning the minivan thoroughly. Though Quentin wants to believe this shared experience will change his relationship with Margo, this is a period of erasure, in which Margo prepares him to go back to ordinary life.



Though Margo makes it very clear that Quentin's vision for their friendship is not going to happen, Quentin feels totally positive and continues to believe things will be different when he arrives at school the next day — that he will say all kinds of things to Margo that will solidify their relationship. He is too caught up in wishful thinking to hear what she is telling him, or investigate the meaning of her comments.



PART 2, CHAPTER 1

Quentin sleeps briefly, then wakes up to get ready for school. He considers skipping school to sleep, but decides not to sacrifice his perfect attendance record. His parents do not notice his exhaustion or the smell of algae from the ditch outside SeaWorld. Instead, they spend breakfast talking about his father's recurring dream of taking a college Hebrew class where students speak and read gibberish rather than Hebrew. Quentin's mother believes the dream is a metaphor for young adulthood, when people struggle to understand the rules of mature social interaction.

At school, Quentin notices that Margo's car is missing from the parking lot, but is not troubled. He and Radar talk about prom, until Ben arrives and asks Quentin's reason for calling him the night before. Quentin points out Chuck's missing eyebrow and tells Ben and Radar that he was with Margo the night before. Ben and Radar make a series of crude jokes about Quentin having sex with Margo. As he heads to class, Quentin realizes with disappointment that his world has not changed as much as he had expected it would in the wake of his adventure.

Quentin is exhausted, and falls asleep in his first period class. During lunch, he and Ben sit together in Ben's car, RHAPAW, a clunky hand-me-down whose name is short for "Rode Hard and Put Away Wet." Quentin gives Ben a detailed account of his night with Margo, but soon finds himself too tired to talk more. He falls asleep in the passenger seat of RHAPAW. When he wakes up, he finds a hamburger and a note from Ben, explaining that he had to return to class.

After school, Ben drops Quentin off at home. Quentin notices that Margo's car is not in her driveway, and concludes that she missed school to have another adventure — this time without him. He realizes that Margo would never have invited him on a daytime adventure, because she would have known that he cared too much about missing school. He wonders what stories she will come back with this time.

That night, Ben calls Quentin to report the rumors that have begun circulating about Margo's absence: that she has moved into a storage room at Disney World, or that she met a man online. Quentin laughs at these rumors, saying Margo would never do such things, and assures Ben that Margo is off having fun and creating new stories.

It seems as though Quentin's psychologist parents should be extremely sensitive to changes in their son, and that a major experience like the one he has just had would register right away. Their obliviousness is a testament to the difficulty of perceiving change in people one knows well: the Jacobsens trust that Quentin will be the same person from one day to the next, and this monumental event is invisible even to their well-trained eyes.



Quentin is eagerly looking for the effects of what he considers a major life event. He wants the people around him to think about him differently, as he now thinks about himself differently, and to recognize the same fundamental changes to the order of the world that he perceives. His frustration is specific, but it also represents the larger frustrations of young adulthood, when people feel their lives and minds changing radically and struggle to have those changes respected.



The friendship Quentin shares with Ben is the center of this scene. That Quentin both trusts Ben with his story of the night before and has no reservations about falling asleep in Ben's car shows how comfortable they are with each other. Leaving a burger for Quentin is a considerate, and even somewhat protective, gesture on Ben's part.



It is unlikely that Quentin's perfect attendance record was a factor in Margo's decision to leave without him, but Quentin reveals his new understanding of the ways perfectionism limits him when he makes this assumption. He knows his need to follow the rules has stopped him from enjoying life before, and now sees evidence of perfection's limiting influence everywhere.



Though Quentin had only had one meaningful encounter with Margo in nine years, he acts like an expert on her mind by making statements about what she would or wouldn't do. He feels ownership over Margo, and presumes deep knowledge that he doesn't have.



As he falls asleep, Quentin stares out his bedroom window. He cannot help but hope that Margo will come back to sweep him away on another adventure.

Quentin's fascination with Margo is entirely self-centered. He thinks not of her, but of the effect she has on him.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2

At the beginning of the chapter, Quentin writes that Margo was the “queen” of Winter Park High School, and that after she disappeared, there was nobody to stop the other popular kids from creating chaos. The day after Margo disappears, Quentin arrives at school to find that Chuck and two other popular boys — Taddy Mac and Clint Bauer — have used Clint’s truck to destroy twelve underclassmen’s bicycles. One girl also claims that someone has posted her phone number in the boys’ bathroom. A few minutes after arriving at school, a boy wearing a ski mask and carrying a squirt gun runs past the band room where Quentin and his friends gather every morning. The boy in the ski mask knocks Quentin down and drenches two freshmen boys with his squirt gun. The drenched boys shout that the squirt gun was filled with urine, not water.

The lawlessness and cruelty that reign in Margo’s absence, and the speed with which the atmosphere changes after she disappears, are so overblown as to feel unbelievable. Just as Margo constructed a persona to fulfill the archetype of the thrill-seeking cool girl, the students at Winter Park seem determined to style themselves as stereotypes: the thuggish, popular athletes torment the sniveling band geeks, although they have no clear reason for doing so. They are paper people, as Margo says: everyone is playing their role, but nobody questions whether the animosities are necessary, or even sincerely felt.



Quentin assures the students who have been wronged that he will handle the situation. When he gets home in the afternoon, he uses a fake email address to write an anonymous message to Jase. In the email, Quentin threatens to release the naked photo of Jase unless the underclassmen are paid for their destroyed bikes and the general treatment of the “less socially fortunate” improves. In his response, Jase tells Quentin that he knows who he is, and tries to shirk responsibility for the destroyed bikes, harassment, and squirt guns filled with urine. Quentin stands his ground, however, and he ends the email exchange certain that Jase and the other popular students will not cause any more trouble in the future.

Though Jase seems like a daunting opponent, with his money and social capital, he gives in quickly when Quentin confronts him. Although tormenting their peers may seem like a way for the popular kids to solidify their dominance, it seems here that their basic desire is to be led, rather than to lead. Jase is willing to take orders from Quentin, now that Quentin feels assertive enough to make them, and the other popular kids will listen to Jase when he orders them to rein in their pranks.



Later that night, while Quentin and Ben are playing a video game called “Resurrection” in Quentin’s room, Jase and Chuck arrive at the Jacobsen’s front door. Chuck apologizes for crushing the bikes and ordering the urine squirt gun attack on the freshmen. Ben, pretends to offer Chuck a conciliatory hug, then punches Chuck in the stomach. The punch hurts weakling Ben more than Chuck, but Jase compliments Ben on his “guts” and shakes his hand.

This exchange upends the social hierarchy that Quentin has accepted for years, putting tough jocks at the mercy of nerds. This disruption inspires Ben to behave with startling boldness, and forces Jase to acknowledge that boldness with respect. The disruption in the accepted social order has made it possible for people to behave in unexpected ways, and to make visible new possibilities for respect and relationships.



After Jase and Chuck leave, Ben and Quentin go back to playing “Resurrection.” Ben soon falls asleep, and Quentin is left meditating on his satisfaction at having kept the popular kids in line during Margo’s absence. Though he figures Margo will be back by Monday, he is proud of having stood up for his friends.

Though standing up to Jase is an uncharacteristically courageous undertaking that seems to suggest that Quentin is seriously changed after his night with Margo, he seems to feel that the change is entirely temporary, and that he will cease to be so bold once Margo returns home. Quentin has trouble perceiving and respecting developments in himself in much the same way his parents and friends have a hard time recognizing changes in him.



PART 2, CHAPTER 3

The next morning is a Saturday, and Quentin comes downstairs to find his parents sitting in the dining room with Margo’s parents and a man he doesn’t recognize, who introduces himself as Detective Otis Warren. Margo’s parents tell Quentin that Margo has run away again; Detective Warren claims this is the fifth time that the Spiegelmans have reported her missing. Margo’s mother announces that she and her husband are changing the locks to their house and washing their hands of Margo. Quentin’s mother tries to calm Mrs. Spiegelman down, saying that Margo will need her parents’ love when she comes home, but Mrs. Spiegelman insists that they have allowed Margo to control them for too long.

The gathering of tense adults in his dining room introduces the possibility that Margo is not simply a girl who has gone on an adventure –which is the way Quentin has been thinking of her –but rather a girl who has run away from home. That change emphasizes the basic unhappiness at the center of Margo’s life, and connects her to a network of real, complex relationships that Quentin has never thought about. The seriously unhappy Margo itching to escape dysfunctional parents is a much less enticing and mysterious version of the girl Quentin knew.



Detective Warren mentions that Margo tends to leave clues before she runs away. Margo’s father lists some of the clues she has left them in the past – alphabet soup with only the letters M, I, S and P when she ran away to Mississippi, and Minnie Mouse ears when she spent the night at Disney World – and he insists that they never lead anywhere useful. He mentions that Margo was disappointed when nobody solved her clue about Mississippi, and remarks that there was no way they could have found her with so little information, since Mississippi is “a big state.” Margo’s mother tells the Jacobsens that Margo was “a sickness in this family”

Margo has always left clues as messages to her family, but her parents have always refused to do the work of deciphering the messages, giving up instantly rather than working to see her logic and follow the clues to their end. Margo is unable or unwilling to communicate with her parents in a language they find acceptable, and her parents refuse to indulge her when she attempts to speak to them in unconventional ways. The result is that Margo and her parents cannot talk to one another at all.



Detective Warren pulls Quentin aside, where the others cannot hear them. He tells Quentin that he does not approve of the Spiegelmans’ parenting, or care whether they are reunited with Margo, but that he does want to know whatever information Quentin has about her. He asks whether Margo had a partner who helped plan her various schemes, implying that Quentin might be that partner. Quentin swears he does not know what has happened to Margo, but he trusts Detective Warren enough to tell him about his adventure with Margo two nights earlier.

Detective Warren believes that Quentin and Margo may have had a special relationship, and though Quentin’s conduct over the past few days suggests that he also believes this to some extent – at least, he believes their experience together made them real friends with real understanding of each other – his total inability to guess what Margo may have planned for herself highlights all the ways in which he still doesn’t know her.



Detective Warren describes Margo as a tied-down balloon that has been straining against her strings and now has finally broken them and begun to float away. He tells Quentin that his desk is littered with the files of missing people, and says that the only thing worse than worrying about all those people is having only one, specific person to worry about — in other words, that it will be harder emotionally for Quentin to think about Margo than for Detective Warren to think about dozens of missing people at once. He tells Quentin that “once that string gets cut ... you can’t uncut it.” Quentin is not sure he understands the detective’s advice, but he feels confident that Margo will return to Jefferson Park soon, just as she always has in the past.

Quentin and Detective Warren return downstairs, and Detective Warren leaves with Margo’s parents to look through Margo’s room. Quentin talks with his parents about the Spiegelmans. All three of them agree that the Spiegelmans have not been good parents to Margo, and Quentin suggests that Margo might live with them after she returns home, until she graduates high school and begins college. Mrs. Jacobsen tells him that Margo would be welcome, and that they will be happy to help her however they can when she returns.

Ben, who has been sleeping upstairs since the night before, emerges from Quentin’s room. Quentin tells Ben about the visit from Detective Warren and the Spiegelmans, and Ben suggests they discuss the issue further over a game of “Resurrection.” Radar arrives and he and Ben play the video game while Quentin speculates aloud about Margo’s plans.

Glancing out the window, Quentin notices that someone has pulled down the shade in Margo’s room, which her parents raised shortly after she left. He sees a poster hanging on the back of the shade that hasn’t been there before. The poster is a photograph of a man holding a guitar, which is painted with the words: “This Machine Kills Fascists.” Radar searches for the phrase on Omnictionary and tells Quentin that the man is Woody Guthrie, a folk singer from the early twentieth century. He suggests that Margo may have left the poster for Quentin to find. Quentin says that he thinks, by the look of the photograph, that Guthrie wants them to come into Margo’s room.

Detective Warren’s balloon metaphor makes an important claim about Margo’s reasons for leaving. Balloons have the energy to travel, but cannot control what happens to them or where they go. Warren considers Margo’s decision to run away to be an expression of her unhappiness and of her desire for freedom, sources of courage and energy that made it possible for her to take the risk of leaving home, but does not believe — as Quentin does — that she has total control of the situation. His comment about uncut string seems to be an attempt to warn Quentin that there is nothing he can do to bring Margo home — she will have to return on her own, when the moment is right.



Though their failure to recognize Quentin’s shocked and altered state the morning after his escapade with Margo made the Jacobsens seem a bit distant and self-involved, they reveal themselves in this exchange to be compassionate and invested in helping others. Occasional cluelessness is not a sign of bad intentions, but a natural part of being human.



Though Ben and Radar are curious about Margo, neither one of them shows the same passionate interest as Quentin. They would rather talk about the mystery while playing video games than immerse themselves in a serious conversation, and they are not invested in Margo personally.



The slogan painted on Woody Guthrie’s guitar is a comment about the power of art to create radical change. Music, the slogan implies, can inspire common people and empower them to resist oppression. Though fascism, a system of government characterized by intensely oppressive and often violent dictatorships, is not a major political force in the world Quentin and Margo inhabit, her evocation of that suffocating government reflects Margo’s feelings of being stifled in conformist Orlando.



PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Quentin and Radar sit in the Jacobsen's living room and wait for the Spiegelmans and Detective Warren to leave the house. When all the adults are finally gone, the boys collect Ben — who has been upstairs playing “Resurrection” while Quentin and Radar keep watch — and go next door. Margo's little sister, Ruthie, is reluctant to let them in because Margo doesn't typically let her friends into her room. Radar pays Ruthie five dollars, and they head upstairs into Margo's room.

In Margo's room, Quentin is stunned to find hundreds of vinyl records lining the bookshelves. She is apparently obsessed with music, but Quentin has never seen evidence of her passion until this moment. He cannot even remember seeing Margo listen to music, except occasionally while running in the park. She has no Woody Guthrie records, but Quentin finds an album of Woody Guthrie covers. The album has the same photograph from the poster printed on its sleeve.

Quentin shows the album to Radar and Ben. They take the album from its sleeve and are disappointed to find that there is nothing inside except the record — no note from Margo, for example. Ben notices that one of the songs listed on the back cover of the album has been circled in black pen. The song is called “Walt Whitman's Niece.”

Quentin knows that Walt Whitman is a nineteenth-century American poet. Radar searches Whitman's name on Omnictionary, but finds no information about any of the poet's nieces. He begins searching for a book of Whitman's poetry among Margo's things. He finds nothing useful, but Ben notices a copy of Whitman's book *Leaves of Grass* on the bookshelf. Radar is sure another clue is waiting for Quentin in the book.

Radar wonders aloud why Margo would leave clues for Quentin this time, when she has always left them for her parents in the past. Quentin will not admit it, but he quietly hopes that Margo has chosen him again, the way she chose him as a partner for her night of adventures. He hopes that Margo wants to be found this time, and specifically wants to be found by him.

Ruthie's revelation — that Margo does not allow friends to come into her room — is surprising, given that her first clue for Quentin invites him to do precisely that. If keeping her friends out of her room is a sign that Margo did not trust them entirely, her invitation to Quentin is a sign that she feels a special connection with him.



The contents of Margo's room reveal a side of her personality that she has carefully hidden from everyone around her. A passionate interest in music is an odd thing to keep secret, since there is nothing shameful about that interest. Hiding the records may not be a sign of her embarrassment, but rather of a need to keep her authentic self totally private.



The boys tackle the project of unraveling Margo's clues with the expectation that there will be a clear, easy solution to the puzzle — that Margo will leave a convenient note with all the information they need. This is their first sign that the mystery will not be so easy to solve.



Margo sends her message as a series of small, breadcrumb-like clues rather than one big, clear sign. Since the clues are relatively straightforward, it seems as though her goal is not to confuse Quentin, but to test his loyalty and ensure that he won't give up searching for her, the way her parents did.



While addressing her clues to Quentin is an expression of Margo's confidence in him, it is also evidence that she has given up on her parents. Her attempts to communicate with them this way have failed in the past, and she has given up on trying to reach them.



The three boys return to Quentin's house, and after paging through *Leaves of Grass* without finding any obvious clues, Ben and Radar go home. Quentin spends the rest of the afternoon reading the longest poem in the book, called **"Song of Myself."** He notices that Margo has highlighted many lines in blue, but that two are highlighted in green: "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" He doesn't know what to make, either of these lines or the ones highlighted in blue, but he feels certain Margo wants him to "play out the string," to follow her trail until he finds her.

Annotating a book is a way of recording the thoughts and feelings one had while reading. Margo seems to have buried a clue in Whitman's poem, but she has also offered Quentin access to her mind by allowing him to see the lines that meant the most to her. Her clues are superficial, but the places where she hides them – among her records, in her books – offer more personal information about her



PART 2, CHAPTER 5

On Monday morning, Quentin arrives at school to find Lacey waiting for him outside the band room. She has heard that Quentin and Margo were together the night before Margo disappeared, and wants to know whether Margo was angry with her. Quentin admits that Margo was upset at Lacey for not telling her about Jase and Becca. Lacey insists she knew nothing, and tells Ben and Quentin that she has just broken up with her boyfriend because he was hiding Jase's cheating from her. She refers offhand to Margo having gone to New York. Quentin asks why she thinks Margo would be there, and Lacey tells him that Margo has made comments in the past about New York being "the only place in America where a person could live a halfway livable life." Quentin leaves the discussion there, seeing that Ben wants to turn the conversation toward prom since newly-single Lacey no longer has a date.

While Quentin feels he has a special connection with Margo for having shared a unique experience with her, Lacey's intimate knowledge of the life Margo led from day-to-day reveals an equally substantial – though perhaps less well-maintained or appreciated – bond between the two of them. In fact, Lacey's ability to guess where Margo might have gone based on things she has said in the past highlights the extent to which Quentin's experience of Margo is actually solipsistic and centered around himself, rather than around closeness with her. He knows how Margo made him feel, but he does not know what Margo might have wanted or thought, as Lacey does.



As Quentin walks through the hallways, two freshmen whose bikes were destroyed stop to thank him for the money they've received from Jase. He tells one to thank Margo rather than him, knowing Margo gave him the tools he needed to confront Jase. Quentin relishes a sudden feeling of ownership and control. The school seems to belong to him in a way it never has before. He reads *Leaves of Grass* during calculus, looking for references to New York, but finds nothing of interest. A few minutes into class, he sees Ben doing a victory dance outside the classroom door – Lacey has agreed to go to prom with him.

Quentin has developed a new confidence and boldness that makes him seem completely different. However, when he deflects the freshman's thanks onto Margo, it becomes clear that he doesn't feel ownership of the person he has suddenly become. Quentin sees himself as using Margo's tools and filling Margo's role – not as acting or creating for or by himself.



At lunch, Quentin finds Ben and Lacey waiting at his locker. Lacey tells Quentin that Margo never allowed people into her room, and that she had no idea Margo owned such a massive collection of records, or had any particular interest in music. She goes on to say that Walt Whitman was from New York, and tells Quentin that she has sent missing person fliers to her cousin who lives in the city, asking her to put them up in record stores. As they walk toward the cafeteria, Ben turns the conversation back to prom.

Lacey is the first person Quentin has encountered who seems to share his investment in finding Margo; Radar and Ben have been helping mostly out of loyalty to him, and no one else, including Margo's family, has made an effort to look into her disappearance. Lacey is proof that, despite her feelings of aloneness, Margo had friends who sincerely cared about her.



In his last period of the day, Quentin reads *Leaves of Grass* while his teacher, Dr. Holden, lectures the class on *Moby Dick*. After class ends, he sits in RHAPAW waiting for Ben and Radar to finish band practice and wondering what Margo might be doing in New York. When Ben and Radar emerge from band practice, Ben is still celebrating his good luck in getting Lacey as a prom date, and is full of ecstatic energy. Quentin is happy for Ben, but directs the conversation toward Margo and *Leaves of Grass*.

Radar is certain that the two lines in “**Song of Myself**” that Margo highlighted in green — about removing doors from their jambs — contain Margo’s next clue. He wonders whether Margo was trying to make a comment about close-mindedness. Ben says Radar is overestimating the complexity of Margo’s clue, and that the highlighted lines are not a metaphor, but a set of instructions: they need to go into Margo’s room and unscrew the doors from their jambs.

PART 2, CHAPTER 6

Quentin, Radar, and Ben return to Jefferson Park. Ruthie lets them into Margo’s room, and they remove the lock from her door and the door from its hinges, just as Whitman’s poem instructs. There is nothing, so the boys reattach the door and leave.

Quentin and Radar follow Ben back to his house. They play video games and discuss Margo. Ben insists that Margo has to be in New York. He urges Quentin to go looking for her, and offers a grandiose vision of what might happen if he does. Ben suggests that Margo may have faked her fight with Lacey, and instructed Lacey to ingratiate herself with the boys and pass on information about Quentin in her absence. As soon as he leaves for New York, Ben imagines, Lacey will tell Margo what he has done. When Quentin gets off the plane, he is sure to find Margo waiting for him at the airport.

Quentin knows Ben’s idea is ludicrous, but he finds it oddly compelling. Still, he cannot stomach the idea of missing two days of school, or provoking his parents’ anger by charging a plane ticket to his credit card. He lets the idea drop and goes home.

Though Ben, who has been excited about prom for weeks, is clearly thrilled to have a glamorous girl like Lacey as a date, Quentin is too focused on Margo to celebrate with him. While his dedication to Margo and her clues may seem like a mark of a good friend, his new fixation has made Quentin less considerate and more self-centered — a worse friend, at least to Ben.



Quentin and Radar have been so preoccupied with trying to coordinate this clue with their preconceived notions of what was important to Margo — her frustration with close-minded people in Orlando, for instance — that they failed to see her obvious message. Since Ben is less invested in Margo, he can see the situation more clearly, without projection.



Ben’s revelation seemed like a turning point, but proves to be frustrating and anticlimactic. They are forced to recognize that they are not heroes in an adventure story, and answers will not fall easily into place.



In addition to being absurd, the elaborate scheme that Ben imagines assumes Margo’s entire world revolves around Quentin, and that everything she has done has been crafted to get his attention. This is the narcissism of adolescent boys, who have difficulty imagining that the people around them have complex inner lives, and imagine themselves to be at the center of everyone else’s consciousness, just as they are at the center of their own.



Quentin has had some success inhabiting a cool, confident persona among his peers, but he is still a rule-follower, afraid of doing wrong and getting in trouble.



Quentin remembers a former patient his mother once told him about: a nine-year-old boy who, after the death of his father, began drawing circles obsessively on every surface he could find. Mrs. Jacobsen told Quentin that the boy had created a routine to cope with the loss of his father, and that the routine became destructive. Quentin says he understands the circles kid, because he has always found routine and boredom comforting. As he goes about his routine after leaving Ben's house, however, he cannot help thinking about his refusal to go to New York in search of Margo. The ordinariness of that night and the next day make him feel far away from her.

Though Quentin knows Ben's ideas about Margo are wrong, and that going to New York would not resolve everything as neatly as Ben assumes (or, in fact, resolve anything at all). He is not disappointed at having passed up a chance to reunite with Margo, but rather at having failed to live up to the example she set for him. Doing what he thinks Margo would want him to do is a way of feeling close to her and protected by her. The comfort is no longer in his safe routine, but in the intimate and caring relationship he imagines they could have.



PART 2, CHAPTER 7

Six days after Margo's disappearance, Quentin tells his parents about her clues. His father suspects that Margo will be coming home soon, and his mother warns his father not to speculate, presumably because she doesn't want to give Quentin false hope. They encourage Quentin to focus on his own life and trust that Margo can take care of herself. Later, Quentin hears them talking in worried tones.

The adults in Quentin's life encourage him to prioritize his own wellbeing over Margo's. This was the message of Detective Warren's balloon metaphor as well. Unromantic pragmatism is in conflict here with the intensity that often accompanies deep feelings of connection. Quentin does not consider their advice seriously, and it seems as though caring for Margo is more satisfying to him than caring for himself.



Later that evening, Ben calls Quentin. He is preparing to go shopping with Lacey, to help her pick shoes for prom. Quentin scoffs at this. Ben confesses that he is nervous, that he really likes Lacey, and that he hopes his showing up to prom with her will force their peers to see him in a different light. Quentin brushes all this off and ends the conversation as soon as he can. He thinks of his own prom fantasy, in which he brings Margo home just in time for the last dance and their peers marvel while they do the fox-trot. This is a silly dream, but he takes pride in the fact that that — unlike undignified Ben — he doesn't talk out loud about it.

Ben is completely honest and unpretentious. He talks about his happiness, anxiety, and hope without worrying about how Quentin will perceive him, and he continues to do so even when Quentin ridicules him outright. Though nothing he says is particularly deep, it is strange that Quentin should resent Ben's honesty, which sets him apart in their image-obsessed world, and that he should pride himself on being less forthcoming than Ben.



Thinking about Ben, Quentin's mind wanders to their earlier attempt to remove the doors in Margo's room. Suddenly, a new idea occurs to him: that the doors he was meant to remove were not Margo's, but his own. He sneaks into the garage and smuggles a screwdriver into his room. When he wrestles his bedroom door from its hinges, he finds a sliver of newspaper with an address — 8328 Bartlesville Avenue — printed on it in Margo's handwriting.

Before this moment, Margo's clues have never seemed like a direct message from her. She has used objects and images to communicate, but not her own words. Finding her note brings Quentin closer to Margo than he has been since she ran away, and the fact that she hid it in his room rather than her own, presuming access to his personal space, amplifies the sense of a bond between them.



Quentin searches the address online and discovers that the place to which it refers is 34.6 miles away. He calls Ben and announces a plan to drive to Bartlesville Avenue that night. Ben tells Quentin that he will not let him drive alone to a strange address in the middle of the night, and Quentin agrees to skip school and go in the morning, saying he is tired of having perfect attendance. Ben and Radar, whom Quentin calls after hanging up with Ben, both make plans to fake illness so they can accompany Quentin the next morning.

Quentin's decision to abandon his perfect attendance record, which he has mentioned again and again before this moment, marks a reorganization of his priorities. His earlier remorse about having refused to go to New York seems to have soured his attitude toward the world of rules and routine. His friends' immediate willingness to accompany him shows their loyalty.



PART 2, CHAPTER 8

In the morning, Quentin forces himself to vomit and tells his mother that he has a stomach bug. She leaves for work, telling him to call if he needs anything. Ben and Radar arrive shortly after she leaves. They are blasting music, and the three of them drive toward the Bartlesville address with the windows rolled down, enchanted with their freedom.

The day begins as a classic adventure: three friends on a road trip. Quentin, Radar, and Ben have all embraced the trappings of that adventure. They are living out their idea of what carefree kids do and feel, inhabiting this cliché as they have so many others. The fact that it is cliché, though, doesn't diminish the pleasure.



On the outskirts of Orlando, the land becomes dry and desolate. Quentin notices a patch of undeveloped land with an unfinished blacktop road. A sign refers to the place as "Grovepoint Acres," and he thinks it must be what his mother refers to as a "pseudovision" — a subdivision abandoned before it could be completed. A few miles past Grovepoint Acres, Radar announces that they are getting close to their destination. Quentin finds his excitement has faded before the depressingly barren landscape.

Here, the grim reality lurking beneath the thrill and mystery of Margo's disappearance is becoming visible to Quentin for the first time. The unfinished subdivision is an eerie figure for other things that have been cut short, such as Margo's experience in high school and the life of Robert Joyner, among other things. It forebodes a sudden and painful end to the boys' adventure.



The address in Margo's note turns out to be that of an abandoned strip mall with boarded-up windows, water damage, and cracked paint. The sight shocks Quentin. It occurs to him that this is the kind of place where a person comes to die, rather than to live. The rancid smell that meets him when he steps out of the car seems to confirm his fear that someone has died in this place. He is terrified of what he might find inside.

Margo understands the human mind's subconscious power to recognize and interpret symbolism, and she uses that understanding to communicate feelings through symbols when words are insufficient. Quentin understands her pain better by looking at this building than he could when she spoke to him.



Quentin remembers Margo saying she did not want to be found dead in Jefferson Park, the way Robert Joyner was. It occurs to him that she might still have wanted to die. The smell of rot is overpowering. Radar calls Margo's name, but there is no answer. Quentin is afraid with a visceral intensity unlike anything he has experienced. He is totally unprepared for this moment.

Quentin's mature fear marks the beginning of a mature love for Margo. Until this point, he has been interested in her for selfish reasons: she made him feel brave, she made his life interesting. At this moment, he is invested in her wellbeing rather than his ego.



Ben tells Quentin they should leave and bring the police. Radar insists they cannot leave until they have gotten into the building and found whatever Margo intended Quentin to discover. Quentin looks at his friends, and their presence makes his fear bearable. He agrees that they have to go into the mall, realizing that he has to find Margo even though he no longer knows who she is or was.

Ben does in this moment what Quentin did on the day he and Margo discovered Robert Joyner: urges his companions to leave and bring in someone who knows how to handle the situation. Quentin's decision to go into the building revises his past cowardice. He refuses to run from painful truths.



PART 2, CHAPTER 9

Quentin, Radar, and Ben walk around the back of the building and discover the bloated corpse of a raccoon. They are relieved to know that the stench has not been coming from Margo. Still, Quentin can't help thinking about **"Song of Myself,"** with its many lines about the beauty of death, and wondering whether it might have been Margo's suicide note.

Confronting the notion that Margo may have been suicidal completely changes Quentin's perspective on the things he has shared with her. Though he thought he was learning to understand her by following her clues, he now fears that he has misunderstood everything.



Radar attempts to open a door, but has no success. Ben decides he is going to break through the particleboard covering the windows, and though Quentin urges him not to, he takes a running start and slams his body into the board, cracking it. The boys pull the board away from the window and climb into the building.

The struggle to get into the building is unglamorous and frustrating, but it is ultimately successful. The mechanics of this search, like the emotions, have become messier as they have become more important.



The room inside is filled with empty shelves, and the floor is littered with torn-off pages from old day-by-day calendars. The boys find a tunnel cut into a wall, with the words "Troll Hole" painted in orange beside it. In the room beyond, there is another hole. Quentin, Ben, and Radar climb through both holes and emerge into what Ben recognizes as an abandoned souvenir store. They crawl through a third hole and find an out-of-use office. On every desk is a calendar turned to February 1986.

Moving through the Troll Holes, the boys encounter the detritus of peoples' past lives: things they saw and used every day but will never use again. The human activity that once filled the building and has now come to a permanent stop is, like Grovepoint Acres, a figure of the many things that people uproot and abandon as they go through their lives.



Poking around the room, it becomes clear that Margo is not there. Ben notices a patch of wall that seems to have been recently painted. Under the paint, Quentin can make out faint red graffiti. Radar drops the small flashlight they have been using, and the indirect light illuminates the graffitied letters clearly. They read, in what Quentin recognizes as Margo's handwriting, the words: "YOU WILL GO TO THE PAPER TOWNS AND YOU WILL NEVER COME BACK." Ben panics and urges his friends to get out of the building. All three boys hurry back through the Troll Holes.

Margo's cryptic message represents a union of the many memories, assumptions, and fears about her that Quentin has cultivated. The message may be a way of urging herself to escape Orlando before she becomes trapped; it may be a farewell, confirming that she will "never come back"; or it may be a warning to Quentin, pushing him to save himself from their paper town just as Margo has saved herself.



PART 2, CHAPTER 10

At home, Quentin reads “**Song of Myself**” and tries to determine whether it is “a suicide-note kind of poem.” He soon becomes anxious, and calls Detective Warren to tell him about Margo’s clues and their findings in the strip mall. He admits his fear that Margo may have killed herself, but Warren deems that an unlikely possibility. Warren urges Quentin to stop searching for Margo, lest he lose himself in the process.

Frustrated by his conversation with Warren, Quentin begins search for the phrase “paper town” online. He finds a comment in a discussion forum about Kansas real estate that refers to an abandoned subdivision—a pseudovision — as a “paper town.” He concludes that Margo has decided to take her life in one of the city’s pseudovisions, and has designated Quentin to find her body. He decides she has chosen him because they shared the experience of finding Robert Joyner when they were children, and she believes this has prepared him to find her as well.

Quentin sends an instant message to Radar, telling him his theory. Radar tells Quentin to calm down, though he admits that the evidence doesn’t look good. Ben, whom Quentin calls after finishing his conversation with Radar, is dismissive. He believes Margo is alive and well, and assumes her clues are bids for attention. Quentin resents Ben’s cavalier attitude. They hang up, and Quentin spends the rest of the evening searching for pseudovisions near Orlando. He finds five possible places, then prints out a map of central Florida and hangs it on his wall, using thumbtacks to mark each pseudovision. He resolves to travel to all of them.

The next day, Quentin borrows RHAPAW and drives to Grovepoint Acres. He finds himself talking aloud to Margo, promising he will not betray her trust. He finds this one-sided conversation comforting. In Grovepoint Acres, Quentin finds neither Margo’s body nor any sign that someone has been there. He leaves to explore another pseudovision, called Holly Meadows, and finds it similarly desolate.

Quentin reaches out to Warren in search of an adult who can ease his fears and manage the situation now that Quentin feels overwhelmed by it. When Warren proves unhelpful, it is the end of Quentin’s childhood — he can no longer stand back and let adults manage difficult things for him. He has to face this awful possibility alone.



Quentin assumes that “paper town” — like Whitman’s poem — is a borrowed term, rather than a metaphor Margo came up with on her own. While her puzzles are supposed to bring him greater understanding of her mind, they also obscure her by directing Quentin to the ideas and words of others, and away from her own. It is worth noting how certain Quentin is that Margo has taken her life. He seems afraid to entertain any other possibility, perhaps because he believes losing false hope will be more painful than accepting reality.



While Ben’s blasé reaction to Quentin’s theory is insensitive, it also highlights the fact that Quentin has invested in an unnecessarily melodramatic version of events. As Detective Warren pointed out, no strong evidence exists to suggest that Margo has committed suicide, or plans to do so. Quentin perceives a tragedy where he once saw a romance, but this interpretation is in many ways just as baseless as the first.



Until this point, Quentin and Margo have been in a kind of dialogue with one another, her clues and his responses fitting together in a coherent way. Now, Quentin is literally and figuratively talking to nobody. Margo has stopped leaving clues, and is more completely vanished than ever before.



In Holly Meadows, Quentin sees an oak tree similar to the one under which Robert Joyner's body was lying when he and Margo discovered it. He is certain Margo will be dead beneath the tree, and finds himself for the first time picturing what her body will look like. She is not beneath the tree, but the mental image upsets Quentin so much that he begins punching the dirt with his fists. He thinks that Margo was wrong to assume finding Robert Joyner would prepare him to find her, because he didn't love Robert Joyner.

Quentin has made references to being in love with Margo before, but those have never been more than exaggerated statements about his crush on her. Facing the idea of losing Margo forever, Quentin reveals a sadder and more adult understanding of love. He is forced to recognize how love and loss are intertwined, and to feel how love can make a person vulnerable.



PART 2, CHAPTER 11

The next day at school, Quentin tells his friends about his trip to the pseudovisions, though he realizes there isn't much to say. He finds he can no longer bear to listen to their conversations about prom and other ordinary things. Lacey cries at the thought of Margo committing suicide, but Quentin keeps pushing her to think of places Margo might have gone until Ben tells him to leave Lacey alone.

Quentin's frustration has left him jaded, not only about the normal pleasures and troubles of high school, but about the serious needs and feelings of the people around him. While losing Margo initially seemed to make him more thoughtful and compassionate, his anger and frustration has reversed those developments, leaving him more selfish than ever.



That afternoon, listening to Dr. Holden lecture about Moby-Dick during English, it occurs to Quentin that she might have helpful insights about **"Song of Myself."** After class, he brings Dr. Holden the poem and points out the morbid trend in Margo's annotations, explaining his fear that she may have intended it to be a suicide note. Dr. Holden is saddened to see such a pessimistic reading of the poem, which she assures Quentin is fundamentally an optimistic celebration of human interconnectedness. She believes the only logical conclusion of the poem is that all life is sacred and valuable. However, she admits that people project their own feelings onto the poetry they read, and that Margo may not have seen the same life-affirming message she does.

As the world around Quentin becomes increasingly bleak and lonely, Dr. Holden offers him an alternative way of seeing the world, one defined by compassion and optimism. Whitman's belief that all people are connected to one another eradicates the possibility that anyone could ever be totally alone, or that anyone could be lost forever. According to Whitman, Margo and Quentin are tied together by the human experience, which also ties them to every other person in the world — including the "paper people" they disparage.



Dr. Holden asks Quentin what he thinks of the poem. Quentin admits that he has mostly been reading the lines Margo highlighted, and that he is less interested in understanding Whitman than he is in understanding Margo. Dr. Holden tells Quentin that Whitman would have been pleased to see his poem used as a means for one person to understand another, but she encourages him to read **"Song of Myself"** all the way through, saying a poem cannot "do its work" unless it's read in its entirety. Quentin leaves, feeling no better.

Dr. Holden, like other adults in Quentin's life, is pushing him to move past the unhappiness his obsession with Margo is causing him. She wants Quentin to be receptive to the joy Whitman communicates, and to develop a more grateful and generous attitude toward the world than the one he has learned by reading the poem through Margo.



Quentin hangs out with Ben and Radar after school, but he declines their invitation to come along to a pre-prom party, and instead spends the night trying to read Whitman. The next morning, Quentin invites Ben over to play “Resurrection,” and is furious when he learns that Ben has planned to devote the entire day to preparing for prom that evening. He complains to Radar, but finds that Radar is also focused on prom. Radar tells Quentin that he will be happy to help hunt for Margo at any point in the future, but that he wants to enjoy this one night with Angela, and doesn’t intend to let Margo stop him from having a nice time.

Quentin borrows his mother’s minivan, telling her that he has decided to go to prom after all, and that he and Ben will be going stag together. Instead of going to pick out a tuxedo, as he told his mother he was going to, Quentin drives to the next pseudovision on his list: Quail Hollow. The place is better maintained than the other pseudovisions he has visited, surrounded by finished subdivisions that have been populated with families — but Margo is nowhere to be seen. Quentin considers the possibility that he might never find her, and wonders whether he will be better off that way. Then, he leaves Quail Hollow and drives west toward the strip mall.

PART 2, CHAPTER 12

Quentin arrives at the strip mall to find that someone has been there since his last visit; the particleboard window-covering has been repaired where he and his friends broke it. He realizes that the back doors have no hinges, and enters the building. Wandering among the desks in the abandoned office, he notices that one of the calendars is different from the others. While all the other calendars are turned to February, this one is turned to June. Quentin inspects the desk more closely and discovers a bottle of red nail polish. The color is immediately recognizable to him — this is the polish Margo used to paint her nails during their adventure. Examining the bottle, he finds a smudge of blue spray paint that he is sure came from Margo’s fingers.

Quentin is convinced that Margo has been staying in the mall, and resolves to stay there until she returns. The idea of sleeping in the rat-infested building disgusts him, and he is a scared by the creaking and darkness of the building, but he is thrilled by the knowledge that Margo has been alive in these rooms.

The frustration and resentment Quentin has developed around prom seems to be less about the event itself and more about the endings and separations it symbolizes. Both Radar and Ben are planning to spend the evening with girls they care about, and have focused lots of attention on making those girls happy — an early sign that they are both changing, and that their friendship with Quentin will soon be changing as well.



The contrast between the story Quentin tells his mother and the reality he lives illuminates how isolated he has become since Margo’s disappearance. While his friends enjoy one another’s company and revel in the rituals and celebrations that mark the end of their time in high school, Quentin is completely alone. His question — whether it would be better for him never to find Margo — introduces the frightening possibility that he might find himself stuck in this search forever, either literally or figuratively.



When Quentin visited the strip mall for the first time, he fully expected to find Margo dead, and was unable to see any of the telling signs of her presence that catch his eye this time: the changed calendar, the nail polish. Now, entering the building with different expectations — thinking, from the appearance of the tape on the window, that someone else has been there — he is able to see things that confirm those expectations. Quentin sees what he is expecting to see in every situation, rather than seeing clearly what is in front of him.



Quentin is ruled by fear, and time and again has allowed his fear to prevent him from taking action. His decision to wait for Margo despite his disgust and fear is a sign of his loyalty to her, and of her impact on him.



Quentin pokes through the different rooms, and finds only one that seems as though someone has been living in it, an empty room with a rolled-up carpet in the corner. He notices thumbtack holes in the wall and finds an empty box that once contained nutrition bars. The thought of Margo, sitting alone on the rolled-up carpet and eating a nutrition bar, makes Quentin sad in how lonely and unlike Margo it seems. He finds a blanket rolled in the carpet that still smells of Margo's lotion and shampoo.

Quentin realizes he cannot know why Margo chose to come to this place, or why she chose to leave. He sees that he cannot know these things, because he does not know who Margo really is— he only knows how she acted in front of other people.

Quentin checks in with his father, telling him that he will be spending the night at Ben's house after prom. He lays on the floor, looking at the sky through cracks in the ceiling, and thinks how strange it is that Margo, who seemed to hate being bored, should choose to be in a place where there was no internet, television, or music. His boredom ultimately leads Quentin back to **"Song of Myself,"** which he has brought with him. For the first time, he finds that he can read the poem and make sense of it.

Quentin lingers over one part of **"Song of Myself"** in which a child asks the poet what grass is. Whitman gives many answers: that the grass is an image of his own hopefulness, of the greatness of God, of the essential equality and connectedness of people, and of death. Quentin cannot figure out which of these ideas is most important to Whitman's message, and the multiplicity of the metaphor leads him to think about the different ways he has imagined and mis-imagined Margo.

Quentin realizes that the most important question is not what happened to Margo, but who she was. He commits himself to correcting his misperceptions about Margo, and begins hunting more carefully through the rooms around him to discover things he might have missed on his first visit. He finds a stack of travel books with dog-eared pages, and it occurs to him that Margo may have been planning to travel. He spends the night reading these books. Though he has no idea where Margo might have gone, the presence of these books makes Quentin believe she is alive. This gives him comfort and a sense of purpose.

The image of Margo staying alone in an empty room strikes Quentin as sad because it does not fit with his idea of her. He cannot imagine a happy scene of Margo in that room, but his failure to imagine it does not mean Margo was never happy there. Though he is developing a more complex understanding of her, Quentin still cannot dissolve his assumptions about who Margo was.



Though Quentin still cannot understand Margo, he is more humble about his limitations than ever before. Recognizing that he does not know her is the first step to knowing her.



For Quentin, boredom creates an opportunity for him to think deeply about something that the stress and distractions of ordinary life have prevented him from really understanding. The constant stimulation and entertainment provided by things like television have kept him from concentration and reflection. Getting away from the paper world Margo talks about requires a willingness to confront the serious thoughts that come with boredom.



All of Whitman's ideas about grass have some truth to them; it is possible for the grass to represent childhood, God, and death all at the same time. In the same way, it is possible for Margo to be many things at once — some of which Quentin perceives, some of which he misses, all of which have some truth and some falsity in them.



Quentin has grown entangled with Margo to the point where his emotional wellbeing is totally dependent on his sense of connection with her and his confidence in her safety. Quentin's identity has become totally fused with his search for Margo, just as the adults who urged him to move on from hunting for her feared would happen.



PART 2, CHAPTER 13

Quentin falls asleep, but wakes up around 3 o'clock in the morning to the sound of his phone ringing. Ben is calling from an after-prom party at Becca's house. He is extremely drunk, and tells Quentin that they need him to act as a designated driver. Grudgingly, Quentin agrees.

Quentin arrives at Becca's house and finds Ben doing a keg stand while Jase holds him up. The scene seems trivial and embarrassing. He commiserates with sober, annoyed Angela, and learns from a very drunk Radar that he and his friends have become "like folk heroes" to the popular kids, who have taken a particular liking to Ben.

Chuck approaches Quentin, looking intimidating, and asks whether Quentin was the person who shaved his eyebrow. He laughs when Quentin admits that he was, and applauds Quentin for his chutzpah. The sudden warmth and camaraderie feels painfully disingenuous to Quentin, and he imagines Margo suffering through countless parties like this during her time in school.

Quentin wanders downstairs, looking to get away from the noise and crowd. He sees Becca and Jase hooking up, and hears Jase accidentally call Becca by Margo's name. He goes into the nearby bathroom and finds Lacey sitting in the empty bathtub. She invites him to sit with her. She tells Quentin that Becca humiliated her earlier in the evening by interrupting the party to announce that Lacey had an STD. Quentin suggests that Becca may be jealous of Lacey because people genuinely like Lacey, but only appreciate Becca for her looks. Lacey asks Quentin whether he thinks she is superficial. Quentin admits that he does, but assures her that everyone, including him, is superficial.

Lacey asks Quentin to take her to the strip mall, and Quentin tells her about discovering Margo's blanket and nail polish. Lacey is certain that Margo is dead, and disgusted by the idea that everyone is celebrating prom as though nothing has happened. Quentin wonders whether Margo would have wanted for their lives to go on in her absence, and Lacey says that does not sound like the Margo she knew. Quentin thinks about all the different versions of Margo that exist in the minds of different people. Lacey falls asleep in the tub.

The relationship between Ben and Quentin has been strained since Margo's disappearance, but Quentin still answers when Ben asks him for help. Though their friendship is changing, he is still loyal to Ben.



At Becca's party, conventional social expectations have been erased, and the long-suffering nerds like Ben have a chance for acceptance. Quentin, who has learned to see his outsider status as a mark of superior authenticity, refuses to see the positive side of this change.



Chuck has bullied Quentin for years, and this moment offers them both a chance to make amends and move forward to the next stage of their lives with clean slates. Chuck is too clumsy, though, and Quentin is too bitter to take advantage of that chance for reconciliation.



It becomes clear here that everyone Quentin knows, even the most loathsome of the popular kids, is struggling in their own way. Jase reveals that he is missing and thinking about Margo when he says her name. Becca reveals her ugly insecurities when she turns against Lacey. All people may be superficial, as Quentin suggests, but alongside that superficiality there is always serious and sincere human pain.



Lacey obviously cares about Margo a great deal, and it becomes clear here that the fact that she has been paying attention to prom doesn't mean she is not feeling Margo's absence. Quentin's pessimism about his peers' superficiality is confounded by Lacey, whose interest in things Quentin finds stupid does not stop her from being a deep-thinking person or a good friend.



Around 5 o'clock, Quentin wakes Lacey. They go upstairs and find Ben carrying a sword made of empty beer cans that have been glued together. Ben tells Quentin that he and Radar have made a pact to be naked under their robes at graduation, and Quentin agrees to do the same. As they leave, Quentin and Lacey discover that Ben has super-glued his sword to his hand.

Driving home with Ben sleeping in the backseat, Lacey admits to Quentin that Ben “tries too hard” — that he wants badly and obviously for other people to like him — but says she does not necessarily think that trying hard is a bad thing. Quentin drops her off at home, then wakes Ben and takes him home as well.

PART 2, CHAPTER 14

The next day, Quentin calls Ben. He wants to tell Ben about his discoveries in the strip mall the night before, but Ben is extremely hung over and hangs up on him. Quentin is furious. He tells himself Ben never cared about their friendship, and that in all the years they have known each other, Ben has always been biding his time waiting for someone cooler to come along. He leaves Ben a message on his cell phone, calling him a “shitbag.”

After leaving his message to Ben, Quentin calls Radar. Radar arrives at Quentin's house a few minutes later, and Quentin describes the things he found in the strip mall. Radar examines one of the travel books Quentin has brought back, and notes that the reader marked locations in Nebraska, Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, and California. Radar uses an online map-making program to plot the locations and the possible routes a person could drive that would pass through all of them. He prints out a map of the United States for Quentin, who hangs it on the wall and plots the different points with thumbtacks.

Radar mentions he been monitoring Omnicountry for activity from Margo's account and tracking the IP addresses of people who search for the phrase “paper towns.” Quentin is surprised to learn that Radar has been working so hard to find Margo.

Quentin still values his camaraderie with Radar and Ben, and agreeing to go along with their prank — rather than condescending to them, as he has so often in the past weeks — shows some desire to restore their friendship back to the way it was before Margo.



Lacey introduces the idea that caring deeply about something that is supposedly superficial can be a form of authenticity. Ben does not play cool or hide his desire for acceptance, and for that reason is more honest than many people.



Quentin is not only frustrated with Ben's lack of interest in Margo — or his unwillingness to return the kindness Quentin showed in picking him up from the after-prom party. He also feels hurt by the idea that Ben would prefer the friendship of the popular kids to his. As they face changes in their lives and in their friendship, Quentin is becoming defensive.



The cities marked in the travel book are unconventional road trip destinations, and Margo's motivation for visiting them is unclear — in fact, Quentin cannot even be sure the book belonged to her. Once again, Quentin has information about Margo, but does not know her well enough to understand it. A cross-country road trip fits his old image of Margo as a free-spirited adventurer — but that is only one of many possible versions of her.



Quentin's investigation has been seeming more and more like a solo effort: he drives to pseudovisions alone and stays alone in the strip mall. Radar reminds him here that he has not been alone at all, and that he has failed to notice or understand the many subtle ways his friends are supporting him.



Radar suggests inviting Ben to brainstorm and play video games. When Quentin refuses, Radar suggests he should be more accepting of other people. Quentin is as flawed as Ben, Radar reminds him: he is always late for things, he is never interested in anything but Margo, and he never asks Radar how things are going with Angela. Still, he is a worthwhile friend. Radar insists Quentin and Ben both need to stop expecting the other to think and feel the same way they do. Quentin agrees to call Ben, who agrees to come over.

Waiting for Ben to arrive, Quentin asks Radar about Angela. Radar says things are good between them, that they did not have sex on prom night, and that they had their first fight that morning over breakfast at the Waffle House — Angela thinks his parents' black Santa collection is fantastic, and Radar was indignant. Ben arrives, and thanks Quentin for driving him home the night before.

PART 2, CHAPTER 15

Quentin spends Monday afternoon reading Whitman. He begins listening to the same album of Woody Guthrie covers he discovered in Margo's room, and spends the rest of the evening listening to her favorite music.

During dinner, Quentin's mother tells him about meeting Chuck's mother, Betty Parson, the previous day. She tells Quentin that Chuck is going to the University of Georgia on a football scholarship. Quentin answers that Chuck is an asshole, and Mrs. Jacobsen tells him that he will eventually learn to see his peers as human beings who struggle and need to be cared for, just as he does. She tells Quentin that Chuck has learning difficulties, and that his going to college is a positive thing. Quentin insists he doesn't care about Chuck.

Quentin's father says working as a therapist has taught him that human beings "lack good mirrors," meaning they have a hard time knowing how their behavior makes them appear to other people, and so can't know what changes to that behavior will make their feelings easier for others to understand. Mrs. Jacobsen agrees, and adds that it can be difficult for a person to conceive of others as being human beings. It is easier to "idealize them as god or dismiss them as animals" than to acknowledge their complexity.

Radar advocates not only for greater understanding when a person reveals their flaws, but for greater appreciation of the positive things a person offers despite their flaws. Everyone can seem unworthy if the person perceiving them is not willing to be compassionate with them; Radar encourages Quentin to choose compassion. In this respect, he challenges Margo's "paper people" idea, suggesting that people should be given the benefit of the doubt rather than dismissed, that no one is in fact two-dimensional.



Quentin has largely refused to participate in conversation about ordinary things (such as Radar's love life) because they did not seem as important as the problems he was facing. In asking Radar about Angela, he shows greater humility and a desire to be a better friend.



Quentin wants to experience the world the way Margo did. Immersing himself in the music that was important to her is a way of accessing her mind.



Quentin has been learning how to be compassionate with his friends, but his mother challenges him, here, to expand that compassion to people who don't seem sympathetic to him. Chuck has always seemed to Quentin like a caricature of a crude and stupid bully, but Mrs. Jacobsen promises Quentin that he will become more generous as he matures and learns how difficult life is for everybody.



Quentin has spent weeks working to understand Margo, but his parents' conversation raises the question of whether understanding is possible even in the best of circumstances. Mr. Jacobsen imagines people trying and failing to make themselves comprehensible to those around them. It seems possible that, even if Margo wanted Quentin to understand her, wouldn't have known how to communicate with him in an effective way.



Listening to his parents' conversation, it occurs to Quentin that he has never thought about Margo as a person — all his attempts to imagine her have failed to recognize that basic fact. He suddenly realizes how empty Margo must have felt, surrounded by people who admired her but who never acknowledged her as a human being with an inner life separate from the front everyone could see. He recognizes that Margo had a hand in her own dehumanization — that she not only allowed him to see her as a miracle rather than a girl, but encouraged him to do so.

Quentin's revelation is the final blow to his false idea of Margo, and it also highlights the crucial importance of openness and honesty in life and relationships. Margo did not open herself to anyone in a way that would have allowed them to see her as human, and others were able to idealize her because they discouraged her from being honest with them. Fear of honesty made mutual recognition and human connection impossible.



PART 2, CHAPTER 16

After school on Tuesday, Quentin and Lacey wait together for Ben and Radar to finish band practice. The four of them have made plans to visit the strip mall. Quentin admits he is no longer sure that looking for Margo in pseudovisions is the right approach. He and Lacey agree that the thought of her living with the rats and dust in the strip mall sounds wrong, given the elegance and flair for which she was known.

Quentin and Lacey spending time together alone shows a growing closeness between them. Though both of them know how incomplete their understanding of Margo has always been, they both hold onto certain convictions about who she is — they can't forget what she symbolized for them.



In the car, heading toward the strip mall, Radar states his belief that Margo has gone on a tour of America's strangest roadside attractions, like the world's largest ball of twine in Minnesota. Ben repeats his conviction that Margo is in Orlando, watching them look for her. Lacey defends the possibility of New York. Quentin thinks about how each of them have formed their own private version of Margo, each of which reflects more about the person who constructed it than about Margo herself.

Quentin has invented countless theories about Margo and her intentions, from deciding to pursue her through Orlando's pseudovisions to assuming her disappearance was designed as an opportunity for him to prove his romantic worth. At this moment, however, he does not add to his friends' list of theories. Quentin has become more suspicious of his version of Margo.



Inside the strip mall, Quentin and his friends encounter another group of people exploring the building. Lacey recognizes Gus, the security guard from the SunTrust Building, among them. Gus confirms that Margo used to spend a lot of time in the strip mall, and his friend Ace tells Lacey that they visited the building shortly after Margo ran away to look for her.

Gus makes it clear that the strip mall was not only a haven for Margo after she ran away, but was an important fixture in her life for years before. The parts of her life almost nobody knew about keep multiplying, and every new detail creates mystery as much as it does understanding.



Gus explains that he and his friends are explorers, who break into abandoned buildings and photograph them as a hobby. Ace tells them Margo used to explore with them while she was in school, but Gus says she never had much interest in looking around — she wanted to get into the buildings and then stay there. Another of Gus's friends, the Carpenter, remembers how Margo would sit in corners and write in a black **notebook** while the rest of them explored.

Margo was famous for her adventures, but the explorers' stories suggest that adventure itself was not what she sought out in those experiences. Her reasons for sitting with her notebook instead of exploring are not yet clear, but Margo seems to have been looking for something besides excitement in these abandoned buildings.



Gus remarks that Margo “seemed pretty depressed.” This makes Lacey furious, and she screams at him, cursing him for never asking Margo why she seemed so depressed. In response, the Carpenter insults Lacey, and Ben gets involved, tackling and punching the Carpenter. Gus and his friends leave quickly.

With the explorers gone, Quentin and his friends look around the rooms. Lacey says she remembers Margo’s black **notebook**, though she never saw Margo writing in it. She feels terrible for never asking Margo about it, or about anything else that now seems important. Ben speculates that the holes in the wall must be places where Margo hung up postcards or pictures. After an hour of exploring, Quentin happens upon a pile of brochures advertising subdivisions. Grovepoint Acres is among them, and Quentin, thrilled by this new development, writes down the names of the others. He recognizes the name Collier Farms on one of the brochures; it is one of the pseudovisions from his list that he has not yet visited. Quentin does not tell his friends about his discovery. He still hopes to be alone when he finds Margo.

PART 2, CHAPTER 17

On Friday evening, Quentin drives to Collier Farms. The land is swampy and overgrown. Though he is full of hope after finding the subdivision’s brochure in the strip mall, he finds no sign that Margo has been there.

Driving to the last pseudovision on his list, Logan Pines, Quentin gets a call from Ben. Radar’s parents have left town — a black Santa collector in Pittsburgh has died suddenly, and they are flying to Pennsylvania to buy his Santas — and Radar is planning a party in their absence. Quentin declines to attend. Ben tells him that they are not asking him to abandon the search for Margo, and that they only want one evening of his time before graduation later that week. It bothers Quentin that Ben never seems to care about Margo unless searching for her involves an interesting adventure, but he thinks of Radar’s lecture about accepting people, and agrees to come to the party as soon as he searches Logan Pines.

There is nothing in Logan Pines to suggest anyone has been there. Quentin finds the concrete foundation of a house that was never built. He cannot understand why Margo would have wanted him to see these places. He has now exhausted his list of pseudovisions in Central Florida, but knows nothing more than when he began.

That Gus never asked Margo what was troubling her shows how easy it is for people to overlook the signals other are giving them when they try to communicate their feelings. Lacey’s fury at the explorers may in fact reflect her anger at herself for never asking Margo these questions.



The interior of the strip mall is constantly yielding new clues, but these clues emerge slowly and in tiny pieces — no great mysteries are solved all at once. This frustrating process mimics the difficult work of trying to understand another person, or to become close to them. Quentin’s desire to find Margo alone shows that he is still hoping that something monumental will happen when they are reunited — perhaps that they will share some special moment of connection.



Quentin is trapped in a cycle, visiting pseudovisions and leaving disappointed. He is not ready to give up on Margo, but his search now seems hopeless.



Ben and Quentin are more compassionate with each other here than they have been at other points, and they are also better at communicating their thoughts. Ben is understanding of Quentin’s need to search for Margo, and he makes his request gently, letting Quentin know that he values this party because it is one of the rituals that will make finishing high school easier. Though he still does not see things from Ben’s point of view, Quentin accepts that Ben has different priorities than him and agrees to be the friend Ben needs him to be.



Quentin has been confident in his theory that “paper towns” referred to pseudovisions, but he is forced to accept that his hypothesis was wrong. Just when the truth of a situation seems completely obvious, he realizes he has misunderstood once again.



Quentin drives back to Jefferson Park. He arrives at Radar's house to find Radar putting away the nicest of the black Santas to keep them from breaking during the party. Quentin is thinking that the Santas are more beautiful and interesting than Radar gives them credit for, when Ben appears in the bedroom. He tells them that Lacey has just kissed him, and that he's afraid he isn't very good at kissing. Quentin advises him to use his tongue sparingly and avoid biting. Lacey comes into the room at that inopportune moment, and begins affectionately teasing the boys.

The party is relaxed, with little drinking and lots of storytelling. Ben, Radar, and Quentin reaffirm their commitment to being naked under their robes at graduation, and some of their friends agree to join them. Quentin thinks that moments like this are what he likes most about his friend. The party is bittersweet and leaves Quentin feeling acutely both the happiness and sadness of the transition that awaits him. When he gets home that night, he finds his mother dozing on the couch. She wakes up to hug him and tells him that she really likes being his mom.

In bed, Quentin pages through **"Song of Myself."** He looks at the map pinned to his wall, and thinks of how fruitless it is to attempt to understand Margo through a map. The enormous amount of space represented in the map only reminds him of how small Margo is, and how difficult it will be to find her when he has the entire world to search. He gets out of bed and pulls the map off the wall, along with the thumbtacks he used to mark locations of interest. Lying down again, he stares at the pattern of small holes in the wall left by the thumbtacks. The pattern reminds him of the one he saw on the wall of the strip mall. He realizes suddenly that the thing Margo hung up must have been a map with plotted points.

PART 2, CHAPTER 18

Early the next morning, Quentin tells Radar about his new hypothesis — that the holes in the wall at the strip mall show the place where a map had been hung and a route plotted with thumbtacks — and they agree to go over. Quentin picks Radar up a few hours later, but they fail to convince Ben to get out of bed and join them. Driving to the strip mall, Radar talks about Angela and how strange it feels to fall in love with her so soon before leaving for different colleges.

Quentin and his friends often act more serious and adult than their classmates, but in this moment they are just teenagers. They worry about kissing and breaking their parents' things, and they joke as though they don't have big adult problems to think about. They have paused the rapid process of growing up and are using this opportunity to enjoy being teenagers while they still can.



Because Quentin has skipped so many of the normal end-of-high-school rituals, like prom and parties before this one, he has not had the opportunity to reflect on the transition he is about to make, or really even acknowledge that this transition is going to happen. Here, he appreciates the people who have shared his childhood with him and begins to remember the positive parts of an experience he tends to think of as being unhappy.



Quentin's breakthrough comes at precisely the moment when he acknowledges, through the symbolic gesture of ripping down his map, that Margo is not someone who can be understood through logic and puzzles. That realization, in some ways, produces his new idea. This illustrates how a person can become trapped in their tired, outdated ways of thinking about other people, and how seeing someone clearly often requires the total abandonment of preexisting ideas about them.



Radar's relationship with Angela highlights some of the strangest parts about the shift from adolescence to adulthood (or high school to college). Their maturity allows them to bond with each other in a deep way, but is also the thing that motivates them to strike out into world on their own, which will force them to be apart. Maturation both creates great experiences and ends them.



Searching through a box of maps and brochures in the strip mall, Quentin and Radar discover a map called “Five Thousand American Cities.” Quentin sees pinholes in the corners and know they have found the right map. There are rips in the map as though it has been torn off the wall, and Quentin knows Margo did not intend for them to use this as a clue. They hang it on the wall and match holes in the paper with holes in the wall. There are so many cities listed on the map, however, that most of the pins touch more than one location, making it hard to know exactly which places Margo meant to mark. They find holes near Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and Washington D.C., and in a small cluster of towns in upstate New York, near the Catskill Mountains. They cannot determine any precise location.

At home, Quentin studies for his Latin final and talks with Lacey over instant messenger about Margo’s black **notebook**. They agree that Margo must have used it to plan her schemes and dramatic gestures. Radar and Ben sign on, and Radar announces his new theory: that Margo will return in time for graduation day, and will show up at the ceremony sitting in the audience. The four of them discuss their new and old theories about Margo while Quentin uses the map-making program Radar showed him to plot different routes between the places marked on Margo’s map.

PART 2, CHAPTER 19

At school the next day, Radar tells Quentin that he has built a new program for Omnictionary, which allows users to search a broad category, such as a geographic location, and then view the first sentences of up to one hundred Omnictionary articles related to the category. Ben arrives, saying that he and Lacey spent the night plotting different possible routes Margo could have taken between the five points on her map. He tells them that every version of the trip lasts almost exactly twenty-three days —the amount of time between the day Margo disappeared and graduation. Ben is now convinced that Radar’s theory is right: Margo will be in the audience at graduation. Quentin is skeptical of the idea. He knows enough about Margo to trust that she has not been playing a prank all this time.

Reading “**Song of Myself**” that night, Quentin pauses over one line: “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels ... I myself become the wounded person.” He sees that all his efforts to connect with Margo, he has never been able to become her — to experience the world as she experienced it, exactly.

Quentin and Radar do a thorough and accurate job of recreating Margo’s marks on the map, but things beyond their control— like rips in the paper and the density of the city names — make it impossible for them to know exactly what Margo was thinking when she plotted her points. This is an image of all Quentin has learned from his search for Margo: that even patient, thoughtful efforts to access another person’s mind are sometimes met with failure.



The search for Margo was creating great tension between Quentin and his friends just a few days earlier, but now they are united in the search; they collaborate harmoniously. As Quentin has become more grounded and compassionate, the people around him have become better allies.



This moment represents a convergence of information. Radar’s program makes it possible to parse an enormous database of information in a short period of time, and the map-making program Ben and Lacey use to plot routes for Margo inundates them with information about the huge number of places she could be or road she could be traveling. Everyone is trying to harness the information available to them to solve their problems, but more knowledge only serves to emphasize how much remains to be known. Reality—and Margo—has become increasingly hard to grasp.



Whitman champions radical empathy and connection between people, but Quentin’s ongoing struggle to access Margo raises questions as to whether such enormous empathy is even possible — whether one can ever fully understand another person.



Quentin struggles through the rest of his final exams, and arrives at his last-ever day of school. He is filled with surprising nostalgia as he thinks about how many things he will never do again: loiter outside the band room, eat pizza in the cafeteria. He thinks that Margo must have felt some sadness leaving, just as he does, because she made a life for herself at Winter Park High School just as he did. It occurs to him that these memories are authentic and meaningful, though the school itself has often felt artificial and dissatisfying.

After school, Quentin decides to clean out his locker while Radar and Ben attend band practice to rehearse the graduation concert. He soon grows overwhelmed by the thought of everything he will never do again, and throws away everything in his locker without looking at it, except one photograph of himself, Radar, and Ben. He walks out of the building, leaving his now-empty locker open behind him.

Walking home, Quentin discovers that though the process of leaving is difficult, the actual act of leaving feels wonderful. He realizes that Margo is never going to come back to Orlando, that she wouldn't want to, because leaving feels so good. He is unsure of what to do with his own exhilaration, whether he must keep leaving place and place for the rest of his life in order to recreate this feeling.

PART 2, CHAPTER 20

Quentin spends that afternoon and the next day trying to uncover some new insight into Margo's plan. On the morning of graduation, his parents present him with a gift: a car of his own. Quentin is ecstatic, although some of his excitement fades when he learns that the new car is a minivan. (His parents incorrectly assumed that Quentin loved his mother's minivan.) His parents leave for the high school, intending to meet him at the graduation ceremony.

Quentin has begun to realize that places and people are never intrinsically "paper," as Margo's blanket dismissal of her town and her peers might have suggested. Rather, it is the task of each individual person to create an authentic experience for themselves, reaching out to others to form connections and memories that give meaning to life.



Quentin has been cavalier about finishing high school, but it seems here that he does not actually feel prepared to leave. He allows himself one souvenir — the photograph — but throws out everything else because he does not know how to cope with the sadness and nostalgia it creates.



It occurs to Quentin earlier while reading Whitman that he has never really become Margo, but here, he empathizes with her so perfectly that he does seem to become her. Quentin finally understands some part of Margo on a visceral, rather than an intellectual, level. And yet it is ironic that the fundamental and almost universal human experience of leaving home, and by extension leaving each other, brings them closer than ever.



Having his own car represents independence for Quentin, and his enthusiasm shows how he has craved that independence. That his parents would choose to give Quentin a minivan is a comic example of the kind of benevolent misunderstandings that Quentin has dealt with time and again throughout his journey to find Margo. While many such misunderstandings are serious and dehumanizing, the Jacobsens' flop shows that they can also be a natural part of life, and should be accepted.



Quentin tells Radar about the minivan. He agrees to let Radar store a cooler full of beer in the trunk, so they can take it to Lacey's graduation party that night. In the shower, it occurs to him that he can go looking for Margo now, tracking her to the cities on her map. He thinks that she cannot have left to wander from place to place forever, because the exhilaration of leaving is partly a product of attachment — he knows now that the thing that makes leaving feel good is the sadness of leaving behind precious connections and memories.

After getting out of the shower, Quentin turns on the program Radar created a few days earlier, that collects the first sentences of all the articles related to a broad topic. He searches an area code near the Catskills. Among the results that appear, an article on the village of Agloe, New York catches his attention. Agloe, he reads, is a fictitious town created by cartographers from the Esso company and inserted into maps as a tool to guard their work against plagiarism by other mapmakers — also known as a copyright trap, or a paper town. Though the town did not really exist when it first appeared on a map, the article says that a resident of the area built “The Agloe General Store” at the location where it was supposed to exist, thus making the fictitious town a real place.

The article claims Agloe has a population of zero, but in the comments section, Quentin discovers a recent message from an anonymous user, which claims that there will, in fact, be one person living in Agloe until noon on May 29. Quentin recognizes Margo's unusual capitalization: words in the middle of the sentence are capitalized, just as they were on the shopping list she once gave him. He is certain the comment is hers.

Quentin discovers online that driving from Orlando to Agloe will take 19 hours and four minutes. He has 21 hours and 45 minutes until, according to the comment, Margo is scheduled to leave Agloe. He calls Radar and Ben, who are at school waiting for graduation to begin. Radar is amazed by what Quentin tells him, but assures Quentin that the drive to Agloe will take him at least 23 hours when he accounts for traffic. Quentin realizes that he has to leave immediately.

Quentin's new, empathetic understanding of Margo helps him see beyond the things she might have hated about Orlando, to the things she might have loved about it. As he did in Holly Meadows, when he feared he would find her body under the oak tree, Quentin sees the inextricable connections between loving something and losing it — and he sees how willingly letting a loved thing go can feel freeing, because the prospect of losing it can no longer be devastating once the loved thing has been surrendered.



Agloe is an odd example of a paper town: while most paper towns exist only in maps, and serve their function only as long as they remain limited to the world of the map, Agloe has transcended its “paper town” status and become real. Quentin's project has been to do the same thing for Margo, eradicating the fictional version of her from his mind and building a new, real version of her to replace it.



Margo is still recognizable by some of her signature quirks: her odd capitalization and her flair for drama, embodied in her clever but unnecessary announcement. Despite his much-improved understanding of Margo, Quentin still relies on her persona to identify her. To some extent, her persona is still the real her — just an incomplete version of her.



Quentin's weeks of searching for Margo have been a slow parade of disappointments, each breakthrough coming with great difficulty and then leading nowhere. Now that he seems to have found her, everything moves swiftly, and immediate action is necessary. Quentin has no time to second guess himself or allow fear to inform his decision — he acts boldly, as Margo taught him.



Radar and Ben convince Quentin to stop by the school on his way out of town, to explain to his parents what is happening. He does so, hastily. When he returns to his car, Quentin finds Ben, Radar, and Lacey waiting for him. They have decided to skip graduation as well, and go with him to Agloe.

In joining Quentin on his trip (and missing their graduation in the process), Radar, Lacey, and Ben show their loyalty to Quentin, even more than their investment in finding Margo. Unlike Margo, Quentin will not have to make this long journey alone. Also worth noting as that Quentin tells his parents about their road trip. First, this marks his relationship to his parents as very different from that between Margo and her parents. But it also shows a new level of maturity in that Quentin is explaining his “rule-breaking” and his reasons for it with authority figures, who understand.



PART 3, THE FIRST HOUR

As their trip begins, everyone in the car settles into a role: Lacey takes stock of the sparse food and supplies they have in the car, Radar plans their gas station stops and calculates the speed they'll need to travel to reach Agloe before noon the next day, and Ben makes frequent remarks about needing to pee, which are ridiculed and dismissed by his traveling companions. Ben and Radar are still wearing nothing except their graduation robes. Quentin is driving 72 miles per hour, almost 20 miles over the speed limit. Everyone is in high spirits, laughing and having fun as they speed down the highway.

The high-energy beginning of the road trip shows both the group and every individual member of the group in their best possible light. The roles they fall into highlight their strengths — even Ben, whose need to pee could easily be obnoxious, embraces his role as comic relief. This cohesion replaces their graduation ceremony as a testament to what they have learned and achieved in high school.



PART 3, HOUR 2

Quentin and his friends begin playing a variation on I Spy, in which they are only allowed to “spy” abstract concepts, rather than physical objects. Radar spies something “tragically hip.” Quentin suggests a road trip in a minivan would fit the description. The correct answer turns out to be “failing to turn in your rented graduation robes on time.” Quentin speeds past a cop, and feels grateful when the cop doesn't pull him over.

That Quentin defies an authority figure with impunity — when, just a few weeks ago, he slowed for a stop sign while fleeing Jase's house — shows his changed relationship with fear. Whereas he used to fear the consequences of breaking even minor rules, he now feels empowered to assert his own priorities when necessary.



PART 3, HOUR 3

Lacey makes a detailed shopping list in preparation for their first gas station stop, which according to Radar's itinerary is still two hours away. Ben is now desperate to pee, and since they cannot stop, Radar empties two of the beers from the cooler and gives them to Ben.

Ben establishes a lighthearted and unpretentious tone for the road trip by embracing the embarrassing task of peeing in front of his friends without shame or hesitation.



PART 3, HOUR 4

As they prepare to make their first gas station stop, Lacey choreographs an elaborate scheme to ensure that they will be able to get everything they need — food, gas, and clothes for Ben and Radar, among other things — in the six minutes Radar has allotted for the stop. When they reach the station, all four of them fly out of the minivan. Radar fills the gas tank while the others race through the store collecting provisions. As they run back to the car with their arms full, Quentin feels elated: young, goofy, and infinite. They high five one another as they merge back onto the interstate, four seconds ahead of schedule.

Though the process of losing and searching for Margo has forced Quentin to mature in a number of ways, he and his friends are still young, and most of the major challenges and pleasures of their lives are still ahead of them. Given that, the most telling sign of how Quentin has matured may be his willingness to embrace the goofiness of this moment and simply appreciate being young. He has gained humility that allows him to take himself less seriously. He and these friends have connected in a way that has let them all be their goofy selves with each other.



PART 3, HOUR 5

Sorting through their new provisions as they continue on their drive, Lacey is frustrated to find that Quentin forgot the healthy food she instructed him to buy. She remarks that she cannot eat the junk food he bought for himself, Radar, and Ben, because it will make her fat. Quentin finally coaxes her into trying a chocolate- flavored nutrition bar, and she cannot hide her delight. Unpacking the last bag, Radar discovers that the shirts Ben bought are emblazoned with the Confederate flag and the slogan, “Heritage Not Hate” — an accident, and an ironic one given Radar is African-American. Radar curses Ben, but laughs nevertheless.

As Quentin and his friends get further into their road trip, the minivan becomes a kind of alternate universe, in which circumstances for people to do things they would never do in their normal lives. In Lacey’s case, her willingness to let go of conventional standards of beauty and enjoy food without anxiety illustrates how her friends have made her feel safer and more comfortable than she typically does. In Radar’s case, as an African American he is facing a part of American history—Confederate slavery—that treated an entire race like “paper people,” like two dimensional beings who were unworthy even of freedom. In a novel focused on recognizing the common humanity of others Green, the novelist, is here recognizing the awful consequences of not doing so.



PART 3, HOUR 6

Stuck in traffic in South Carolina, Quentin and Radar invent a game in which they take turns imagining the lives of people in neighboring cars. Observing a Hispanic woman in a beat-up car, Quentin guesses she is an undocumented immigrant who left her family to move to the United States, and whose husband is gone for most of the year as a migrant worker. Radar tells Quentin he’s being melodramatic. He guesses, based on the woman’s nice clothes, that she is a secretary in a law firm, studying for a law degree of her own.

The story Quentin constructs about the woman in the next car, in addition to being cliché and melodramatic, is based on stereotypes of Hispanic people prevalent in the United States. This moment shows how whole cultures can promote the mis-imagination of certain people within them, and highlights possible social consequences of that phenomenon — like racial stereotyping — that are even more dangerous than the interpersonal consequences. It’s worth noting that it is Radar, who is African American, who points out Quentin’s stereotyping here.



Radar's alternative version of the woman's life story makes Quentin think of all the ways human beings fail to imagine one another accurately. Radar remarks that this game reveals more about the person playing than about the subject in the neighboring car. Quentin thinks of Whitman's radical empathy, and silently questions whether it is possible for one person ever to move past imagination and fully become another.

Quentin has received a valuable education in empathy from reading Whitman, but his ability to question Whitman is the greatest evidence of his growth. He is more aware of the limitations of his empathy and imagination, and so more prepared to acknowledge how people might deviate from his expectations.



PART 3, HOUR 7

Quentin and his friends have agreed to sleep in shifts, so Ben and Lacey are lying across the two back seats with seatbelts strapped around them. Quentin thinks that the minivan has become like a small house: the back seats are bedrooms, the driver's seat is the living room, the passenger's seat is the den, and the pile of food sitting between him and Radar is the kitchen. He thinks this little house has many wonderful qualities.

Quentin's sudden appreciation of his minivan, which seemed like a cruel joke when he first received it, shows how the company of people one cares for can transform places and experiences into something much greater than the sum of their parts, and even how keeping an open mind about things you originally don't like can lead to liking those things down the line.



PART 3, HOUR 8

Quentin remarks on all the new things he has learned about himself while driving: that he is willing to pee into a mostly-empty bottle of Bluefin energy drink, which he and Radar have been drinking to stay awake, and that he appreciates the turquoise color urine makes when combined with trace amounts of Bluefin.

As their trip crawls forward, Quentin is losing his last, most basic pretensions, peeing into bottles as he mocked Ben (even if in a friendly way) for doing just hours earlier. In a trivial sense, he has even mis-imagined himself – he never expected to be doing all this.



PART 3, HOUR 9

Quentin and Radar discover, as the hour approaches when they are supposed to trade places with the still-sleeping Ben and Lacey, that they have consumed too much Bluefin to imagine falling asleep. They agree to let Ben and Lacey continue sleeping. Driving on the empty interstate feels easy and pleasurable to Quentin, but it occurs to him that, while Margo may have been able to enjoy this drive in solitude, he could never feel so happy and peaceful if he were traveling alone.

Quentin has often failed to appreciate his friends, but he sees now how his happiness is tied up in them. Although he acknowledges that Margo may not have needed or wanted companions for this journey, the thought of her driving this route by herself seems lonely and sad when compared to the boisterous camaraderie of the minivan.



PART 3, HOUR 10

As they prepare for their next gas station stop, Radar and Quentin wake Lacey and Ben. Quentin buys pants and a new t-shirt for Radar, which has the slogan "World's Best Grandma" printed on it. Lacey takes over driving. They have lost five minutes more than they planned on this stop, are already behind schedule because of earlier traffic, and Radar anticipates that they will lose more time in the upcoming hour as they drive through a construction zone.

Though the atmosphere on the trip has been lighthearted and easygoing up to this point, small setbacks are beginning to accumulate, along with the exhaustion and stress that comes with making such an ambitious journey. The sober tone of the second gas station stop, which contrasts with the exuberance of the first, highlights these changes. And yet their determination to complete this quest is also still evident.



PART 3, HOUR 11

Quentin and his friends pass through the construction zone, where it is impossible to drive faster than 35 miles per hour. Lacey requests an unscheduled stop so she can use the bathroom. They find a gas station, and Quentin volunteers to take over driving. It seems only fair, since tracking Margo is his personal mission. Lacey allows Quentin to take the wheel, and lies down in the back.

Quentin feels a personal responsibility for this trip, and recognizes that his friends are there for his purposes, rather than their own. It is interesting how this mirrors the car trip he went on with Margo at the beginning of the novel, when he was there for her rather than for himself. Now, Quentin puts Lacey above himself by volunteering to drive, just as she puts him above herself by volunteering to come with him on the trip.



PART 3, HOUR 12

It is 2:40 a.m. and Quentin is driving while Radar and Lacey sleep. Ben sits in the passenger seat. He admits that he is worried about how Quentin might feel if the reunion with Margo fails to meet his expectations. He talks about the strange experience of learning to like Lacey for the flawed person she is, rather than the idealized beauty queen he imagined her to be before they were together.

For Quentin, learning to look past perceptions into complex realities has been an intensely private, introspective project. Ben has also been developing this new understanding, he reveals in this conversation, but the process has been part of his relationship with Lacey rather than a product of extraordinary circumstances, as it was for Quentin. It becomes clear during their conversation that learning to differentiate between fantasy and reality is essential to all adult relationships.



Quentin is annoyed at Ben for lecturing him. He is about to respond when two massive cows suddenly appear in the middle of the road. Quentin realizes at once that he cannot swerve around the cows, or stop in time to avoid hitting them. He knows that hitting the cow will be a disaster, and realizes that he and his friends will probably die in this accident. Frozen with panic, he takes his hands off the wheel. His can only think about how much he wants to live and grow up, how sorry he is for endangering his friends, and how he blames Margo for leading them all on this chase.

Quentin has a more clear-headed vision of his priorities at this moment than he has at any other point since Margo's disappearance. He sees the value of his own life, which at times he has been happy to lay aside for Margo's sake; of his friends, whose value he has only just begun to recognize; and he sees how strong these attachments are compared to his one-sided relationship with Margo.



As Quentin releases the steering wheel, Ben reaches over and swerves onto the shoulder of the road. The car is spinning as Ben turns the wheel in the opposite direction of the cow. Finally, they stop. Quentin is bleeding from a cut on his cheek, and both of them are overwhelmed by the fear of what they have just experienced, but otherwise they are both unharmed. Lacey and Radar are awake, and are both unharmed as well. Lacey climbs into the front seat to check Quentin's bleeding cheek; her maternal attention makes him start sobbing.

Quentin has been determined to accept total responsibility for this road trip. In this dire moment, however, he finds himself unable to handle that burden, and is forced to rely on Ben to keep them all alive. This is a dramatic illustration of the fact that no one person can handle all life's problems on their own. Everyone needs the occasional support of others, especially in times of crisis.



Quentin turns off the engine, and all four of them hear liquid pouring out from some unknown place near the back of the car. Afraid it might be gas, they abandon the car, but Radar soon discovers it is beer, leaking from the broken bottles in the cooler. They inspect the car and determine that, except for a gash in the sliding door, everything is fine. Quentin commends Ben on his heroism, and Ben assures Quentin that he was only trying to save himself. The four of them take a vote about whether to go forward with their trip. Quentin waits to vote until everyone else has affirmed that they want to go on. They continue toward Agloe.

Their near-collision with the cow tests Quentin and his friends' resilience. Their decision to go forward with the journey shows their continued confidence in one another and their commitment to finishing what they have started by finding Margo, even if they are now more aware of the potential risks. The pause also gives Quentin a chance to reorganize his priorities. He is still loyal to Margo, but by waiting to vote, he gives his friends a chance to change their minds and so puts them ahead of Margo and himself.



PART 3, HOUR 13

As they continue driving, Radar, Lacey, and Quentin marvel aloud at what has just happened. They praise Ben lavishly for his heroism. Ben, embarrassed, again insists he was only thinking of himself. Seeing how uncomfortable their praise makes him, the other three exaggerate their compliments even more.

Ben, used to his role as comic relief, is clearly uncomfortable being lauded as a hero. His friends accept this discomfort and turn their gratitude into jokes, but it is clear that Ben is capable of more than his role suggests.



PART 3, HOUR 14

As they resume driving, Quentin and his friends clean the broken glass and spilled soda from the floor of the minivan as best they can. Radar estimates that the cost of replacing the sliding door will be more than \$300. For Quentin, the money is nothing compared to the relief and happiness he will feel if they find Margo. Outside, the sun is rising.

That Quentin stays calm facing the mess and damage caused by the accident illustrates how much stronger and more stable he has become. Whereas small transgressions like missing school once seemed like major issues to him, he now absorbs the chaos around him with a clear sense of what really matters.



PART 3, HOUR 15-18

Quentin finds comfort in the consistency created by fast food restaurants and gas station chains. He likes that the country looks exactly the same no matter where they travel. Lacey straps Quentin in the back and encourages him to sleep. As he dozes off, Quentin hears his friends laughing. He decides that, if they don't find Margo in Agloe, they will drive around the Catskills and find a place to sit, enjoying themselves and laughing together. He imagines the possibility of letting Margo go. It occurs to him that he could be happy without her, and that he could feel connected to her even if he never saw her again — they are tied together, like the leaves of grass Whitman imagines. For the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteen hours of the journey, Quentin sleeps.

Quentin has grown and changed an enormous amount due to Margo's influence. Recognizing that he can hold onto her by living the lessons she taught him — relishing the time he has with his friends, appreciating his connection to her and other people, and enjoying his life without fear — is the culmination of those lessons. In working so hard to retrieve Margo, Quentin has prepared himself to live a life without her.



PART 3, HOUR 19

Quentin wakes up to find Radar and Ben evaluating possible names for the minivan. Ben wants to name it Muhammad Ali, and Radar wants to name it Lurlene. Lacey informs Quentin that they are in New York. Quentin tells Lacey he is scared. She admits to being scared as well, and tells Quentin that she hopes they will stay friends over the summer. Quentin finds this comforting. He leans forward and suggests a winning name for the minivan: The Dreidel, after the spinning top used for children's games at Hanukkah, in honor of its excellent performance while spinning them away from the cow.

Lacey provides Quentin with a reminder of all the fulfilling connections he has made and will make as his life goes on, regardless of whether things in Agloe end up the way he hopes they will. The disappointments of his search, combined with his growing humility with regard to his understanding of Margo, make it impossible for Quentin to put his faith in the idea of Margo as fully as he has in the past. But this search for Margo has also given him a broader base of friends, including Lacey with whom he can now talk about serious things such as their mutual anxieties about their upcoming meeting with Margo.



PART 3, HOUR 20

As they drive through upstate New York, Quentin starts a game of Metaphysical I Spy. Ben's first clue is: "I spy with my little eye something I really like." The answer turns out to be "Lacey." Radar mocks Ben for his sappiness, and decides they will all be happier if they sing "Blister in the Sun." When the song ends, Quentin takes his turn at Metaphysical I Spy. He spies a "great story." Ben realizes that answer is their trip.

Margo was always famous for the amazing stories of her adventures that circulated around school. Now, Quentin and his friends have lived a story of their own — they have become the kind of people at whom they could only marvel a few weeks ago.



PART 3, HOUR 21

As they get close to Agloe, Lacey and Quentin begin listing everything they know about Margo, from the make of her car to the color of her hair. Ben points out that they already know this information, but Quentin does not care. He wants to remember Margo now, while he is still hopeful that he will see her again.

Quentin knows his ideas about Margo may soon dissolve, and talking through his memories and perceptions of her is a way of reconciling himself to that possibility rather than denying it. He is preparing himself to accept whatever he finds in Agloe, regardless of whether it is what he hopes to find.



PART 3, AGLOE

Driving on highway outside Roscoe, a town near the intersection where Agloe General Store supposedly stands, Quentin and his friend spot a crumbling barn in the field beside a dirt road. Lacey recognizes Margo's car parked outside the barn, and Quentin leaps out of the car and runs to investigate. Ben, Radar, and Lacey follow him into the barn. Inside, they find Margo writing in her **notebook**. She seems completely unsurprised to see them. She stares at Quentin and he thinks that her eyes look silent and dead; she reminds him of Robert Joyner, staring through his blank eyes.

Margo's emotionless response to the arrival of Quentin and his friends makes a startling contrast with the exuberance and intimacy of the road trip that has just ended. This contrast is an early sign that Margo does not belong in the world Quentin and his friends have created for themselves.



Margo asks for five minutes to finish writing. When she closes her **notebook**, she offers each of them a tepid hug or handshake. She seems at a loss for what to say, and Quentin is disappointed that there is not more drama in this moment — no tears or embraces. She asks what they are doing in Agloe, and when Lacey says how worried they have been, Margo brushes her off with chipper comments about being “A-OK.” Her cavalier attitude infuriates Lacey, who calls Margo a bitch and storms out of the barn. Ben and Radar follow her, but Quentin stays behind.

With the others gone, Margo and Quentin launch into a massive fight. Margo is angry at Quentin for coming to Agloe, telling him she intended to break from every connection she had. She accuses him of using her to play the hero and expecting her gratitude as a prize for discovering her. Quentin accuses Margo of being selfish, not thinking about how her disappearance would affect Ruthie, or her friends. He tells her he couldn’t move on from losing her because he thought she had killed herself.

Quentin’s criticisms send Margo into a fit of temper, which has the odd effect of calming Quentin down. She asks Quentin how he found her, and he explains the trail of clues. He tells Margo about his theory that she had killed herself in a pseudovision and wanted him to find her body. Margo apologizes for her anger, and tells Quentin she has been thinking about him — and her family — a lot since she left. She tells him she was afraid to maintain ties to anyone in Orlando, because those ties might eventually compel her to go back.

Lacey calls Quentin’s cell phone, asking to speak to Margo. While they talk, apparently amiably, Quentin explores the barn. He finds Margo’s books: Sylvia Plath’s [The Bell Jar](#) and Kurt Vonnegut’s [Slaughterhouse-Five](#). When Margo finishes her call with Lacey, she tells Quentin that his friends are staying at a nearby motel, and will be leaving in the morning with or without him. She tells Quentin she has made plans to leave for New York City that day. She adds that her original plan was to leave Orlando on graduation night rather than three weeks before, as she did, but that she made last-minute adjustments when she found out Jase was cheating on her.

Margo’s blasé attitude is her tool for pushing Lacey and the others away. The road trip among the friends in the car was marked by its honesty and camaraderie. But Margo refuses to be honest about what she feels at that moment, masking truth with her obviously false cheer. Her saccharine happiness is also a way of insulting Lacey and the others for their worry. Her “A-OK” comment implies they were stupid for being so afraid, but also has a tinge of irony that implies they could not possibly understand how unwell she really is.



Many people worried Quentin would lose himself in his obsession with finding Margo, and for the first time Quentin sees the extent to which this did happen — how he could not “move on” because he felt so tied to her. Margo is aware of the ways Quentin has idealized her in the past, and shows this awareness when she accuses him of having ulterior motives for coming after her.



Margo’s fear of being brought back into her old life in Orlando shows that she still feels connected to the people and places she left behind. Though things she has said in the past have made her seem totally disenchanted with Orlando and everyone in it, her real feelings are much more complicated.



In reaching out to Margo and offering forgiveness (as implied by the tone of the conversation), Lacey shows her compassion and enduring loyalty to her friend. The revelation that Margo had been planning her departure from Orlando long before Jase began cheating on her illuminates how long and painful her unhappiness must have been, and hints at how planning elaborate escapades — something she long ago admitted to enjoying — has helped her take refuge from a painful reality over the years.



Quentin asks Margo to explain her plan, to help him understand what was and wasn't intentional, and what everything meant. Margo begins by showing him her **notebook**. She explains that, when she was ten years old, she began writing a detective story in which she and Quentin, together with a talking version of Myrna Mountweazel, investigate the death of Robert Joyner, who in her version of the story is murdered by his demon-possessed brother-in-law rather than taking his own life. Quentin is a heroic love interest for Margo in this mystery, and the Spiegelmans are doting parents who shower her with presents. After finishing the story in fifth grade, Margo explains, she used the notebook to plan her pranks and schemes, writing new ideas on top of the pages that she had already filled with her mystery.

Margo tells Quentin that she began planning her final night in Orlando during their junior year of high school, and that she always intended to bring him along as her partner. She hoped that she could liberate Quentin through a night of adventure, and inspire him to become the hero she imagined him to be in her childhood story. When they finally had their night together, Margo tells him, she was surprised to find how much she loved being with him — after imagining him as a two-dimensional boy for years, she was amazed to see him as a real person. She tells him the clues that lead him to the strip mall — whose real name, she reveals, is The Osprey — were thrown together hastily. She wanted to give him the place, where she spent so much time during high school, as a gift to help him become a braver person. She tells Quentin she never meant to worry him, and that she tried to paint over the troubling graffiti about going to the paper towns and never coming back.

Quentin asks Margo why she would come to Agloe, of all places. Margo explains that she has always felt like a “paper girl,” more flimsy and artificial even than the people who surrounded her. She says she loved being reduced to a beautiful idea, and encouraged others to see her that way because it made them love her. Still, she knew she had to force herself to become a real person. She tells Quentin she was drawn to Agloe because it was a place where something fictitious — the copyright trap that existed only in the world of the map — became real. Quentin tells her again how he feared she was dead, and Margo reads him a passage from [The Bell Jar](#) about how fruitless it would be to kill a body when the thing one wants to kill is much deeper — for Margo, the parts of herself that feel painfully empty and false.

Margo's story represents her dream of living in a happier world, where she feels loved (both by Quentin and by her parents) and where she never has to confront the scary reality of depression that she discovered much too young. That this story is literally written underneath the plans she imagined as an adult is a symbol of the way these essential desires for love and peace of mind have motivated her actions throughout her life and pushed her to become the person she is.



Margo admits here to having transformed Quentin into an idea in the same way he did to her, which emphasizes both how easy it is to reduce people to concepts, and how many opportunities for connection are lost when people refuse to see one another's complexity. Her revelation that the strip mall was supposed to be a gift that would make Quentin happy rather than a clue that would terrify him recalls Mr. Jacobsen's remark about humans lacking good mirrors — because Margo could not see how her behavior and her gift would appear to Quentin, she failed to communicate the affectionate, encouraging message she wanted to leave for him.



Margo's notion that being a paper girl made her easier for others to love is evidence that she fears her authentic self — the struggling person whom she wishes she could “kill” — is not worthy of love. As cool and collected as she's always seemed, it is clear that Margo craves approval and is afraid of being rejected by people who are not willing to accept the more complicated parts of her personality.



Quentin encourages Margo to come home with him, telling her she can stay with his family until she starts college. Margo insists she cannot go back to Orlando, claiming it will be too easy for her to begin believing in superficial things — not just popularity, but college and the other trappings of a successful life she has chosen to reject. Quentin acknowledges to himself that he still believes in the value of things like family and education. He tries to convince Margo that going to college, at least, is important, but she scoffs. He asks what she plans to do in the long term, and Margo quotes Emily Dickinson: “Forever is composed of nows.”

Margo borrows Quentin’s phone and calls her family. She has a tense conversation with her mother, then talks briefly with Ruthie, apologizing for not calling her and promising to call every Tuesday from then on. When she hangs up, she screams. Her mother has told her about having changed the locks, and Margo is hurt by that gesture. She also feels guilty for having gone so long without speaking to Ruthie.

Margo and Quentin walk through the fields outside the barn, and he tells her everything that has happened since her disappearance. Quentin takes Margo’s hand. They lie down in the field, and Margo talks about how surprising it was to find, on the night before she left, how similar Quentin was to the hero she imagined in her story. She tells him nothing ever happens like you imagine it will, and Quentin answers that, if you don’t imagine, nothing ever happens. He understands that, as impossible as it is to imagine the mind of another person— or another vision for the world, or anything at all — the act of imagination is the only way for a person to reach outside themselves. Margo rests her head on Quentin’s shoulder, and they fall asleep.

Quentin wakes around sunset, and sees Margo digging a few feet from him. He kneels next to her and begins to dig as well. She tells him they are “digging graves for Little Margo and Little Quentin and puppy Myrna Mountweazel and poor dead Robert Joyner.” They make the grave carefully, though they only have their hands to dig with.

Margo and Quentin have different aspirations for their lives that reflect their different values and needs. Neither can understand the other’s reason for choosing the path they do, and their attempts to persuade each other to reconsider their values are fruitless. There is a sense that neither Quentin nor Margo has chosen the wrong path — that both conventional and unconventional ways of approaching adulthood are legitimate. As they learn to see each other more clearly and with greater humility, they will need to learn to respect each other’s choices, even those they don’t understand.



Margo is committed to forging her own path through adulthood without feeling tied down by the expectations of her parents. Still, she is very vulnerable and craves the love and approval of her family, so Mrs. Spiegelman’s rejection is extremely painful. Their exchange is a reminder of the fact that becoming an adult does not mean abandoning every connection or ridding oneself of every vulnerability — like children, adults need to feel cared for and supported.



Though Quentin has learned greater humility, and has begun to question his capacity to understand other people, he has also developed a sincere optimism about the ability of human beings to make nourishing, substantial connections. Although he was wrong about what Margo felt and intended, he has reached out to her with compassion, and made a sincere effort to understand her. That gesture of love and openness is valuable in itself, even if the understanding it yields is imperfect.



The people Margo hopes to bury are both characters from her story and real people (and animals) who impacted her when she was young. Margo wants not only to put the past behind her, but to reconcile herself to the things that have made her who she is. Burying them ceremonially, rather than simply trying to forget about them, is a way of acknowledging those influences with respect, even as she tries to move on.



Margo tells Quentin that she never thought of Robert Joyner as a real person, and instead thought of him as a minor character in the drama of her life. Quentin realizes he has done the same thing. He tells Margo he has always found her metaphor — of strings breaking inside Joyner — compelling, but that there are other ways of thinking about life and death and brokenness. The metaphor of string implies that a person can be broken beyond repair, while Whitman’s metaphor of grass implies that people are tied together and can live through one another. Quentin suggests an alternative metaphor: that people are vessels who start out perfect but become cracked over time, and that it is only by looking through the cracks that people begin to see one another clearly.

Quentin kisses Margo. Margo asks Quentin to come to New York with her, but they both understand that it will not happen. Quentin tries to explain the reasons he can’t go with her, telling her that he has a life in Orlando, but she stops his explanation with another kiss. They bury the **notebook**, saying “Godspeed” to their childhood selves, and to Robert Joyner. Back in the barn, Quentin helps Margo pack her car.

Margo takes Quentin to the motel where Lacey, Radar, and Ben are staying. They promise to call and write, and Quentin says he will try to visit her later in the summer. He does not know whether any of these things will happen, but knows they have to imagine them to keep themselves from falling apart. Staying behind while she goes on without him is the hardest thing he has ever done. Before getting into her car, Margo turns back to face Quentin. Her eyes are soaked with tears, and Quentin embraces her. They kiss, and he thinks he can see her almost perfectly.

Quentin has spent a great deal of time trying to understand and apply metaphors crafted by other people: Margo’s strings, Whitman’s grass, his father’s mirrors and windows, Detective Warren’s balloons. The metaphor he creates for himself is the product of all the new insight he has gained, and shows how he has come into his own through the process of searching for Margo. He can assert his own philosophy of human connection — one that embraces pain without losing hope — and express himself in his own words rather than borrowing others’ language.



As much, and as sincerely, as Quentin has come to love Margo, searching for her has also taught him to appreciate the connections and attachments that make up his life in Orlando. Quentin’s choice is an incredibly hard one to make, but he makes it with full knowledge of what he is giving up and what he is gaining — he has a new sense of agency in his own life, and he is able to live with purpose in a way he has never been before.



Quentin accepts the uncertainty that comes with separating from Margo, seeing that he cannot control her actions or make her want the same things he does. When they come back together after walking away from each other, though, there is a strong sense that their connection will endure their separation in some way, as they are now tied together by bond of loyalty, love, and compassionate understanding.





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