

# Peace Like a River



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LEIF ENGER

Enger was born in Minnesota in 1961. His father was a band director and his mother was a teacher at Osakis High School in Minnesota. Enger attended Moorhead State University and received a degree in English. At Moorhead, he met his wife, Robin Reed. Following graduation, Enger spent sixteen years working for the Minnesota Public Radio, and he co-wrote five mystery novels with his brother, Lin Enger, under the name L. L. Enger. *Peace Like a River* was Enger's debut solo novel and received several awards, including the ALA Alex Award for the best adult novel for teens. Enger and his wife live on 56 acres near Aiken, Minnesota with their two sons.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Reuben makes several references to events that shaped the early 1960s, such as the Cold War with Russia. Tin Lurvy's beloved Democratic Party had elected John F. Kennedy in 1960, and the party gained seats in the Senate in the midterm elections of 1962. The United States experienced an economic downturn during the early 1960s, which likely contributed to the Lands' poor financial situation.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Peace Like a River* makes references to a number of novels ranging from James Fenimore Cooper's series *The Leatherstocking Tales* to Louisa May Alcott's [Little Women](#). Leif Enger's second novel *So Brave, Young, and Handsome* also explores similar themes of the American West and the quest for justice as *Peace Like a River* does. Similarly, *Peace Like a River* questions many of the tropes and themes presented in literary and film Westerns. Swede specifically reads novels by Zane Gray (*Riders of the Purple Sage*) and Frank O'Rourke (Swede reads *The Big Fifty*). Finally, Swede herself is often compared to Scout Finch from Harper Lee's [To Kill a Mockingbird](#). Both novels share sibling children grappling with adult concepts, and Swede and Scout are similarly precocious.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Peace Like a River*
- **When Written:** Late 1990s-2000
- **Where Written:** Minnesota
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary fiction
- **Genre:** Western, bildungsroman, contemporary Christian

literature

- **Setting:** 1962-63 in Roofing, Minnesota and the Badlands of North Dakota
- **Climax:** Jape Waltzer shoots Reuben and Jeremiah
- **Antagonist:** Reuben encounters several antagonists throughout the novel, beginning with Tommy Basca and Israel Finch. He initially sees Martin Andreeson as an adversary, though this opinion changes, and he grows to realize that Jape Waltzer is actually an antagonist, not a savior.
- **Point of View:** First person, narrated by Reuben

### EXTRA CREDIT

**It Is Well with My Soul.** The title of *Peace Like a River* comes from a line in the hymn "It Is Well with My Soul," which was performed at Leif Enger's wedding.

**Asthma and Westerns.** Frank O'Rourke, one of the authors of Swede's beloved Western novels, suffered from asthma like Reuben does.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Reuben, the narrator, spends his first twelve minutes of life not breathing, and he nearly dies. When his father (Jeremiah Land) picks up baby Reuben and commands him to breathe in the name of God, Reuben begins to breathe. Reuben says that this was his father's first miracle, and that he believes he was put on the earth to bear witness to his father's miracles.

Reuben is 11 years old and hunting with his family in North Dakota. Dad and Davy, Reuben's older brother, aren't speaking to each other. Out in the field, they spot a lone goose flying, and Davy lets Reuben take the shot. As Reuben guts the goose later, he and his younger sister Swede discuss why Davy is angry. Swede says that two kids in high school with Davy, Tommy Basca and Israel Finch, beat up Davy's girlfriend, Dolly, in the locker room. Dad, who is the school janitor, got to Dolly "in time."

When the Lands return home to Roofing, Minnesota, their front door is covered in tar. Reuben, who has asthma, is having trouble breathing. His Dad boils water and creates a steam tent for him. Meanwhile, Dad tries to explain in broad terms why the door is tarred, but Reuben still does not understand. Several days later, Reuben and Dad attend evening church service. When they return home, they learn that Swede has been kidnapped and then returned by Israel and Tommy. Dad calls the police, but they refuse to do anything.

The next day Tin Lurvy, a traveling salesman, visits the Lands for dinner. Reuben is shocked to see that the small batch of soup Dad made feeds them all multiple helpings, and Reuben deems it a miracle. After midnight that night, Reuben hears the back door open. Footsteps reach Reuben's bedroom door, and he hears Davy tell the intruders to turn on the light. The light comes on and Davy shoots Israel Finch and Tommy Basca.

Davy goes to jail, Reuben and Swede stay home from school, and Dad's boss, the school superintendent Mr. Holgren, makes Dad's job miserable. Mr. DeCuellar, Davy's defense lawyer, visits often to talk to Dad. Swede spends her time writing an epic poem starring a cowboy hero, **Sunny Sundown**, who is trying to kill the bandit king **Valdez**. One night, Swede comes into Reuben's room and says she can't kill Valdez. Reuben doesn't understand and fears that Sunny's story won't turn out "right."

Once he returns to school, Reuben witnesses Mr. Holgren fire Dad in front of his entire class. Immediately after Mr. Holgren fires Dad, Dad gives Mr. Holgren a strange slap and Reuben notices that Mr. Holgren's face, usually angry with boiling acne, is suddenly healed. Reuben can barely stand the injustice that Mr. Holgren was healed while Reuben still struggles with asthma.

Davy's trial begins. Reuben quickly realizes that Davy has no chance—the evidence suggests that Davy wanted to murder Tommy and Israel. When Reuben takes the stand to testify, Elvis, the prosecutor, extracts incriminating testimony from him. That night, Swede suggests that they break Davy out of jail, and Reuben agrees. However, since the DeCuellars and Dad are drinking coffee in the living room and blocking the door, Reuben and Swede are unable to sneak out. When Reuben wakes the next morning, though, he learns that Davy has escaped.

The police assemble a posse to hunt for Davy, but they can't find him. Meanwhile, Dad contracts pneumonia after working outside in the bitter cold. One day, Martin Andreeson, a federal agent tasked with finding Davy, knocks on the door, but Dad indicates that the family won't help him. On Christmas Eve, the DeCuellars knock on the door and tell Dad that Tin Lurvy died and left Dad his brand new Airstream trailer. Dad tells Reuben he prayed for a way to get to Davy, and this is the answer.

In January, the Lands receive a postcard from August Schultz, a friend from North Dakota, saying that Davy stopped by. Dad sells their possessions to buy food, stocks the Airstream, and he, Reuben, and Swede head for North Dakota. When they arrive, they visit August and his wife, Birdie, who tell the Lands everything they can about Davy. The next morning, the Land family leaves in the Airstream without a map or a destination, hoping to find Davy on faith alone. When they stop in a park for lunch, Swede notices that Andreeson is in the park, as well. At dinner, Mr. Andreeson knocks on the door and tries to reason with Dad, but Dad continues to refuse to help him.

A day later, they stop for gas and the owner of the station, who introduces herself as Roxanna, also offers them beds for the night. It snows overnight. The next evening, Roxanna, looking exceptionally beautiful, takes them on a picnic. She brings them to a lignite field, which is warm in the dead of winter. During the picnic, Andreeson once again approaches and asks Dad for help finding Davy. Dad once again refuses.

The next day, Reuben sees someone on a horse on a hillside, and knows immediately that it's Davy. Reuben runs to the hill, follows the tracks, and comes upon Davy. Davy pulls Reuben onto his horse and they ride and talk for a while. Reuben asks to see where Davy lives. After initially resisting, Davy agrees to show him later. When Reuben gets back to the house, he discovers that Dad has gone out with Mr. Andreeson. Reuben is angry; he doesn't understand why Dad would decide to cooperate with Andreeson.

That night, Davy picks up Reuben behind the barn and they ride to a valley with a cabin. There Davy introduces Reuben to Mr. Waltzer, a man with apocalyptic ideas who is himself hiding from the law and has taken Davy in to protect him. Mr. Waltzer has his daughter, Sara, to prepare dinner; Sara is silent and doesn't join them for the meal. (Later Reuben learns from Davy that Sara is not actually Waltzer's daughter, and that Waltzer is in fact raising Sara to become his wife.) During dinner Reuben has trouble breathing and faints. Davy takes him home. The next day, Dad explains that he's going to court Roxanna.

Reuben goes with Davy to the cabin several more times. These nighttime adventures make Reuben's asthma worse, and Dad calls a new doctor who gives Reuben adrenaline. One morning, Reuben goes downstairs to find Mr. Andreeson at the table with Dad. Andreeson believes he's close to Davy and says he'll call with news. Reuben feels he must warn Davy, but that night at the cabin, Mr. Waltzer doesn't seem worried at all. Two days pass without a call from Mr. Andreeson. Dad learns that Mr. Andreeson went out to meet a man who was supposed to lead him to Davy, but Mr. Andreeson never returned to his motel. Reuben, realizing that Waltzer was the man with whom Andreeson must be meeting, tells Dad that Andreeson is in trouble.

The next morning, Reuben rides with a posse, intending to lead them to Mr. Waltzer's cabin. However, Reuben then thinks he shouldn't betray Davy, so he leads the posse the wrong way. When the posse descends a steep hill, one of the horses falls and seriously injures its rider. Reuben sits with the injured rider while the officers do eventually go and find the cabin. Inside, they find only Andreeson's hat.

Reuben and his family return to Roofing with Roxanna at the end of February, and Dad and Roxanna marry a week later. They move to a farm. Reuben's asthma continues to worsen. One day in June, a car pulls up, and Davy and Sara get out—Davy had decided it was unacceptable for Waltzer to marry Sara, and so he helped her escape. Now he asks if Sara

can stay. Davy, however, knows he himself can't stay because of his past. In the morning, the family goes outside to see Davy off. But Mr. Waltzer is sitting by the granary and shoots Dad and Reuben.

Reuben wakes up in the "old country"—heaven. He's uninjured and can breathe. He walks through a meadow and an orchard, where he meets Dad. They run together to a cliff where they can see a great city. Dad tells Reuben to take care of Swede. Reuben then watches Dad head towards the city.

Years later, the Lands doctor, Dr. Nokes tells Reuben that Dad shouldn't have died from his wound, while Reuben certainly *should* have died. Reuben understands that, when he met Dad in heaven, Dad sacrificed himself so that Reuben could live. Reuben continues: after Dad's death, Roxanna became their rock. Swede became a writer, Mr. Waltzer was never caught, and Mr. Andreeson never reappeared. Reuben goes yearly to a Canadian hunting town where, on some years, Davy joins him. Reuben tells Davy about what happened in Heaven, but Davy doesn't know what to make of it. Reuben says that he himself sometimes doubts what happened, but his family with Sara—whom Reuben has married—bolsters his faith. He tells the reader to "make of it what you will."

seems to regularly work miracles and speak directly with God. For example, he walks on thin air, cures the sick, and feeds a large crowd with a small pot of soup. Jeremiah works as a janitor for the Roofing school district and he raises his three children, Reuben, Swede, and Davy, by himself. Jeremiah, whose miracles make him a Christ figure, is the moral center of the novel, and it's his example that ushers Reuben into a more complex and adult idea of morality. After Davy becomes an outlaw, Reuben cannot understand some of his father's choices and beliefs: for example, Jeremiah's belief that Davy should face consequences for his actions, and his eventual decision to cooperate with Andreeson to find Davy. While Reuben's simplistic, black-and-white morality at first can only interpret Jeremiah's actions as disloyal to the family, Reuben comes to understand that Jeremiah is operating out of empathy for everyone. Instead of understanding Davy's predicament purely in terms of family loyalty, Jeremiah takes into account the effects of the situation on everyone involved and he tries to do right by all. As Jeremiah is always willing to put his own self-interest second, it's not surprising that he makes the ultimate sacrifice for his son at the end of the book. When he and Reuben are badly wounded, they both end up in heaven, and Jeremiah chooses to die so that Reuben can live, which cements his status as a Christ figure.

**Swede Land** – Swede is a precocious and verbose nine-year old obsessed with the Wild West. As Reuben's younger sister and best friend, she habitually critiques Reuben's poorly thought out questions. She's an avid writer and throughout the novel she writes an epic poem about the cowboy hero **Sunny Sundown**, who is a thinly-veiled surrogate for Davy. As her family travels West in search of Davy, whom Swede idolizes above everyone else, Swede fictionalizes the journey, rendering all events as she wants them to happen, rather than as they actually happen. This shows Swede's immature inability to confront reality, even as she sometimes shoulders more of the family's day-to-day responsibility (such as cooking) than Reuben does.

**Davy Land** – Davy is Reuben and Swede's older brother and Dad's oldest son. At 16, Davy seems to be fully adult. Though he comes from a devoutly religious family, he finds the idea of a fatherly God annoying, as he'd rather go through life alone. When the teenagers Israel and Tommy threaten the Land family, Davy shoots them, goes to jail, and then escapes to become an outlaw. Ostensibly, Davy killed the Israll and Tommy to follow his own code of honor and to protect his family, but his motives are somewhat murky—it seems that Davy was looking for a reason to kill, making his act perhaps more vengeful and violent than heroic. Though convicted, Davy escapes prison and flees to North Dakota. The Land family chases after him, throwing their lives into chaos. When Reuben reunites with Davy later, it's obvious that Davy has not changed: he has no remorse for what he's done, and he plans to



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Reuben Land** – The novel's narrator and protagonist, Reuben is the 11-year-old son of Jeremiah Land. Reuben idolizes his older brother, Davy, and he is best friends with his younger sister, Swede. As a newborn, Reuben didn't breathe for twelve minutes until his father, performing a miracle, ordered him to in the name of God—from then on, Reuben believes he was put on the earth to witness his father's miracles, which makes Reuben a disciple of his Christlike father. The novel is Reuben's coming of age story, and his most significant development as a character is his struggle to grasp moral ambiguity. When Davy kills two teenagers who were threatening the Land family, Reuben's immaturity leads him to see Davy's act as an epic and heroic example of frontier justice. However, as the novel progresses, Reuben is confronted by moral complexity and he must reconcile his simplistic ideas with more mature perspectives on Davy's situation. While Reuben feels unwavering loyalty to Davy, he eventually comes to understand that Davy committed a crime, which shows that Reuben has come of age. At the end of the novel, Jeremiah performs a final miracle when he and Reuben are shot and go to heaven: Jeremiah, who is much less severely wounded than Reuben, dies so that Reuben can live. As such, Reuben narrates the story of his family in order to honor his father's sacrifice and spread the truth of his miracles.

**Jeremiah Land (Dad)** – Jeremiah is a deeply religious man who

continue following his own honor code rather than respecting the law. That code of honor means that Davy is comfortable taking shelter with the villainous Mr. Waltzer, but also comes to the conclusion that he can't allow Waltzer to force Sara into marriage and therefore helps her escape from Waltzer. Ultimately, Davy and Reuben continue to have a relationship as adults, but Davy remains somewhat of an outsider. He's the only member of the family with uncertain faith, and he does not seem fully part of the nuclear family.

**Roxanna Crawley** – Roxanna lives in the middle of the Badlands and operates a gas pump on her property. While Reuben doesn't think she's beautiful when they first meet her, he later decides that she is stunning. She briefly dates and then marries Jeremiah, and quickly and easily steps into the role of mother to Swede and Reuben, showering them with attention and understanding. Roxanna is immediately loyal to Jeremiah and his family, and she shares Jeremiah's deep belief in God. She is shown to be, in a sense, a disciple of Jeremiah, just like Reuben is.

**Jape Waltzer** – Jape Waltzer is an outlaw who takes it upon himself to help Davy. He lives in a shack in the hills of North Dakota with his "daughter," Sara, whom he bought from her father and intends to marry when she's old enough. Mr. Waltzer is very engaging but extremely dangerous. He often seems insane and he is insistent that the world is going to end, though it's indicated that he doesn't believe in God. Reuben never learns why Mr. Waltzer is running from the law in the first place, and the novel implies that Waltzer kills Mr. Andreeson for trying to hunt Davy down. Mr. Waltzer remains a mystery, and he makes his final appearance in the novel when, after Davy helps Sara escape from the forced marriage he has planned for her, he shoots Reuben and Jeremiah, killing Jeremiah. In Swede's epic poem about the family's journey to find Davy, Mr. Waltzer becomes the villainous character **Valdez**.

**Sara** – Jape Waltzer acquired Sara from her father when Sara was a child, and he raises her to be his wife. She has wild red hair and is very pretty. While Sara doesn't appear outwardly afraid of Mr. Waltzer, she conducts herself very carefully around him and makes sure to do exactly as he asks. Sara ends up married to Reuben when they grow up.

**Tin Lurvy** – Lurvy is a sweaty, overweight traveling salesman who prefers to conduct his life drunk. He's a poor salesman, as he never tells his customers what he's selling unless asked, but he makes himself at home in every house he stops at. He's unashamed about eating the Land family's food and often arrives on holidays and special occasions. Upon his death, he wills Jeremiah his new Airstream trailer.

**Thomas DeCuellar** – As Davy's defense lawyer, Mr. DeCuellar spends much of his time in the lead-up to the trial at the Lands' home. He wears baggy suits and Swede comes quickly to adore

him, as he loves history and can explain it in thrilling ways. Jeremiah says that Mr. DeCuellar speaks to children like a man who desperately wanted children but never had them.

**Martin Andreeson** – Swede refers to Andreeson, the federal agent tasked with locating Davy, as a "putrid fed." However, Andreeson seems to have genuine sympathy for Davy and wants to do the right thing. For much of the novel, the Lands (except for Jeremiah) see him as their enemy and treat him as such. It's implied that Andreeson is killed by Jape Waltzer.

**Superintendent Chester Holgren** – The superintendent of the Roofing school district and Dad's boss. Reuben says that Mr. Holgren was made to be a superintendent, as he inspires fear in children and seems constantly annoyed by them. Swede calls Mr. Holgren "Chester the Fester" on account of his angry, acne-ridden face. When Mr. Holgren publicly fires Jeremiah, Jeremiah shows his Christ-like characteristics by curing Mr. Holgren's acne, rather than being angry.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Israel Finch** – Reuben says that calling Israel "the town bully" doesn't begin to describe him. Israel is mean, once sent a teacher to the hospital, and scares even the police of Roofing. Davy kills him when he enters the Lands' home with a baseball bat.

**Tommy Basca** – Though he's Israel Finch's accomplice in evil deeds, Reuben eventually realizes that Tommy Basca wasn't truly evil. Rather, Tommy isn't very smart and gets drawn into Israel's wrongdoing.

**Doctor Nokes** – As the Land family's doctor, Dr. Nokes delivered Reuben and manages Reuben's asthma. He's a kind man, he believes in Jeremiah's miracles, and he promotes Reuben's steam treatments.

**Mrs. DeCuellar** – Mr. DeCuellar's wife showers Reuben and Swede with attention and is an exceptional cook, which earns her Reuben's admiration. Reuben is especially struck by the fact that Mrs. DeCuellar wears her long black hair down instead of pinned up.

**August Schultz** – August and Jeremiah grew up together in North Dakota and they remain friends into adulthood. August and his wife, Birdie, are successful farmers. He's a very generous and loyal friend to the entire Land family, particularly after Davy escapes from jail.

**Birdie Schultz** – August's wife.

**Reverend Johnny** – Reverend Johnny preaches at Reuben's Methodist church and begins the service with an hour of loud music. He's known for delivering sermons that cause people to speak in tongues and pass out. One of Reuben's classmates refers to him as a Bible thumper.

**Ted Pullet** – Ted Pullet is Roofing's primary law enforcement officer, who refuses to take action against Israel Finch and

Tommy Basca.

**Dolly** – Dolly is Davy's girlfriend and a clarinetist in the pep band.

**Mom (Mrs. Land)** – While Mom was married to Jeremiah long enough to give birth to Davy, Reuben, and Swede, she left not long after Swede's birth to marry a doctor in Chicago. Reuben suggests that she was disappointed by Jeremiah's decision to drop out of school and not become a doctor himself.

**Bethany Orchard** – Bethany is Reuben's love interest for most of the book. She's a year older than Reuben, and thus seems infinitely more mature. She features prominently in Reuben's daydreams and fantasies as an adoring onlooker.

**Elvis** – Elvis is the first name of the prosecuting attorney in Davy's trial; Reuben doesn't remember his last name. He's patronizing and draws an incriminating testimony out of Reuben.

**Pastor Reach** – The regular pastor at Roofing's Methodist church, Pastor Reach delivers boring sermons directly from the Bible.

**Raymond** – Raymond is a young boy who watches Reuben take down Mr. Layton's corncrib.

**Mr. Finch** – Mr. Finch is Israel Finch's grandfather. He's an alcoholic and very frail.

**Mr. Layton** – Mr. Layton owns Roofing's dime store and is a kind if eccentric elderly man. He pays Reuben to take down his old corncrib.

**Lonnie Ford** – A rancher in North Dakota who would rather be out riding than at home. He owns the land that Jape Waltzer's shack sits on in North Dakota.

**Mr. Juval** – A federal investigator who leads the posse to Jape Waltzer's cabin.

**Sheriff Charlie Pym** – The sheriff of Montrose and the man who leads the initial hunt for Davy.

**Walt Stockard** – A deputy at the Montrose County Jail who delights in Davy's escape.

**Dr. Nickles** – The doctor in North Dakota who deems steam treatments ineffective and gives Reuben adrenaline instead.



## YOUTH VS. ADULTHOOD

At eleven years old, Reuben exists somewhere between childhood and adulthood. He still possesses a childish understanding of the world of adults, but he recognizes the vast differences in maturity between himself and his younger, sister, Swede, as well as between himself and his older brother, Davy. Reuben fixates on the differences between himself and Davy in particular, and these comparisons influence how Reuben conceptualizes what it means to be grown up.

For Reuben and Swede, Davy represents the pinnacle of adulthood. Davy possesses a driver's license, drinks coffee with the adults, and doesn't participate in Reuben and Swede's imaginative games. He's smart, kind, and seems extremely knowledgeable about everything. Reuben begins his own coming of age process in the first pages of the book while goose hunting with his family, when Davy offers Reuben his shotgun to shoot the target goose, and surprisingly, Reuben hits it. Swede suggests later that night that Reuben is "almost like Davy" now that he's shot a goose. This shows that, according to Swede, adulthood is defined primarily by physical ability and an unwillingness to behave like a child.

As the novel progresses, however, Reuben is confronted with the possibility that being an adult doesn't simply mean possessing a driver's license, shooting geese, and staying up late drinking coffee. Rather, growing up and becoming an adult is about developing a more nuanced perspective regarding abstract concepts like justice and loyalty and what they mean. Much of Reuben's emotional growth happens as he struggles with his father's relationship with Martin Andreeson, the federal agent tasked with finding Davy. Initially, Andreeson makes a convenient "bad guy" figure for the entire Land family, as his goal is certainly to unjustly put Davy behind bars. Reuben and Swede in particular cling to the idea of Andreeson as an evil villain, demonstrating a very black and white view of the situation. As time goes on, however, Jeremiah begins to cooperate with Andreeson. This shakes Reuben's understanding of what's right, what's wrong, and what side is even the "good" side. Reuben's final emotional growing up happens when Andreeson goes missing, and Reuben finds that his feelings towards "the fed" have evolved: while he still finds it hard to stomach that Andreeson wants to put Davy behind bars, he finds the idea that Jape Waltzer may have murdered Andreeson even more horrendous. While Reuben feels immense guilt ratting out Davy, he finds his conscience is clearer when he shifts to value Andreeson's life over Davy's freedom. This suggests that growing up involves allowing one's perception of right and wrong to change as more evidence presents itself for consideration. This, notably, is something that only Reuben does over the course of the novel. While it's indicated that Swede eventually makes some of these connections in adulthood, in the book she remains a "kid sister"



## 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.

physically and emotionally, while Reuben advances and begins to grow up.

Because an adult version of Reuben narrates the novel, the reader is granted adult insight into events that were initially viewed by a child. This combination of perspectives allows the reader to understand what Reuben himself eventually learned: that while children think adulthood is simple and adults are all-knowing, actually being an adult means coming to terms with the fact that life isn't black and white. True adulthood entails being comfortable with shades of gray and, often, no single definition of what's right or wrong.



## RELIGION

The Lands are an extremely religious family, and the logic of the novel is rooted in Christian belief. The family's deep faith propels their behavior,

beginning with Jeremiah's decision to drop out of college to become a plumber after being picked up by a tornado and surviving unharmed—a truly miraculous event. This event situates miracles and religion as the central concern of the novel and asks the reader to question miracles, faith, and how these supernatural happenings interact with events on earth.

Reuben grows up knowing that his father's faith is the sole reason that Reuben survived his first 12 minutes of life with "spongy" asthmatic lungs. This initial miracle lays the groundwork for Jeremiah's role as a miracle worker throughout the rest of the novel, and situates Reuben as the primary recipient and witness of these miracles. By beginning the novel with the miracle of his birth and following soon after with the description of the tornado, Reuben makes it undeniably clear that miracles, and God by extension, are immensely powerful. For Reuben and Jeremiah in particular, these events become concrete proof that a higher being values their lives and looks out for them.

Notably, for much of the novel Reuben is the only character who bears witness to his father's miracles. He's the only one to witness his father walk on thin air, and he's the only one to notice that Jeremiah's small batch of soup somehow manages to feed a party of five. These miracles create a ready comparison between Jeremiah and Jesus, while Reuben as the sole witness and narrator of the novel becomes his father's "disciple." This relationship is reinforced after Jape Waltzer shoots Reuben and Jeremiah. Following a march with his father through Heaven, Reuben returns to earth, his asthmatic lungs miraculously healed after what should have been a fatal gunshot wound. Jeremiah, on the other hand, dies despite suffering a gunshot wound that shouldn't have killed him. This final miracle suggests that Jeremiah dies to save his son, just as Jesus died to save humanity. By telling his story, Reuben turns into a disciple of both his father and of God, while the novel takes on some of the same qualities as the Bible itself.

Though the novel's characters all believe in a Christian idea of God and religion, Davy is the only character who seems to question the degree of influence that God has on his life. Reuben attributes this to Davy's competency and confidence. He remarks that Davy finds the idea of a fatherly God annoying, as Davy wants life to be something that one undertakes alone. He'd prefer to be fully responsible for his triumphs and his failings, rather than be able to thank or blame a higher power for bringing them upon him. Reuben, on the other hand, describes himself as weak and therefore in need of a fatherly God to watch over him and treat him mercifully. Notably, even after Jeremiah sacrifices himself and Reuben finds himself cured of asthma, Reuben makes it very clear that he continues to worship and credit God for his successes. Reuben is unable to forget the fact that he's alive because of God.

Jeremiah, Reuben, Swede, and eventually, Roxanna are able to find love and a sense of community with each other because of their belief in God, their respect for Jeremiah's relationship with God, and their shared knowledge that God guides and controls everything they do. While Reuben never goes so far as to say that Davy suffers the fate he does because of his unwillingness to fully accept the power of God and religion, he also presents overwhelming evidence that religion is immensely powerful and useful—it's twice the reason that Reuben is even alive. Reuben goes on, breathing with unhindered lungs, to marry Sara, build his own house, and be a parent because of his and his family's faith in God. Further, Reuben would certainly argue that Davy's freedom continues thanks to God, suggesting that whether one truly embraces religion or not, it's an inescapable force in all lives.



## FICTION, REALITY, AND THE AMERICAN WEST

The plot of the novel uses many tropes and motifs often found in traditional Westerns: murder as self-defense, particularly in defense of one's family; escaping the law on horseback; and a loveable, misunderstood hero on the run. Both Swede and Reuben, as lovers of the fictionalized American West, use these tropes to borrow meaning and assign it to the events they experience throughout the novel. This turns the novel into a critical study of how fiction influences reality, and what the consequences are of leaning heavily on fictionalized models of life.

Throughout the novel and particularly after the Lands leave Roofing to head West, Swede records their journey in an idealized and embellished style reminiscent of her beloved Western novels. Reuben shares with the reader that while he'll wholeheartedly defend Swede's written account of events, Swede writes about her family's saga without any mention that everyone involved uses cars instead of horses—to take her account at face value would lead someone to believe that Jeremiah and his children are tracking Davy on horseback

through the Wild West. This represents an inability or unwillingness on Swede's part to reconcile her idealized version of the West with what North Dakota actually holds for the Lands. In Swede's imaginative perception, Davy remains an innocent man wronged by outlaws, and she clings to the belief that Davy will emerge from this ordeal triumphant.

Because of her obsession with the myth of the American West, Swede finds Davy's situation particularly satisfying. Davy's story seems straight out a novel, as he escapes on horseback from being unjustly jailed, heads West, and runs from the law. As Swede sees it, Davy is no different than the righteous cowboys in her novels or **Sunny Sundown**, the hero of her epic poem. Essentially, in order to deal with Davy's absence, Swede transforms her beloved real-life brother into an idealized fictional character. Reuben follows Swede in this logic until he reconnects with Davy and discovers that the idyllic life they thought Davy was leading in exile bears little similarity to Davy's reality. Seeing the truth of Davy's life on the run, Reuben must reconsider how useful Swede's thought process actually is. Reuben is haunted by the thought of Davy freezing to death in the harsh North Dakota winter after he sees the shack where Davy lives, and it's a powerful enough image to contribute to Reuben's decision to betray his brother. This suggests that fictionalizing something might make dealing with the unknown easier, as it doesn't require someone to challenge their beliefs, but engaging with the truth and evaluating the facts at hand can lead to greater understanding and decisions with actual weight in the real world.

Reuben, as the narrator, asks the reader to engage with his story and the people within it by presenting his account as entirely truthful, while acknowledging that parts of the story seem far too fantastical to be real. Notably, Reuben doesn't insist that the reader accept the story as fact. Rather, he consistently instructs the reader to "make of it what you will," suggesting that even if a reader takes Reuben's story as entirely fictional, there's still something to gain from it. This presents the idea that while engaging with fiction to the point of forsaking reality can prove to be blinding, blending the two provides life with a richness and nuance that cannot be attained otherwise.



### LOYALTY AND FAMILY

The members of the Land family are extremely loyal to one another. Reuben and the reader are led to believe that it's Davy's loyalty to his family and his girlfriend Dolly that leads him to heroically kill Tommy Basca and Israel Finch in the first place. However, as Davy and the rest of the family move westward, the very idea of loyalty—what exactly loyalty means, and who's deserving of it—is tested and questioned.

Initially, loyalty is thought to be Davy's primary motive for killing Tommy and Israel, and he's celebrated in the newspapers

for bravely protecting his family against intruders. However, it comes to light at the trial that Davy's intentions might not have been as pure as Reuben and Swede were allowed to believe. They learn that Davy smashed the windows of Israel's car earlier in the evening, essentially inviting the break-in later that night. This raises the question of whether Davy acted solely out of loyalty to his family, or if a part of him actually wanted an excuse to kill Tommy and Israel.

The novel continues to explore the morality of loyalty when Reuben and Davy reconnect in North Dakota. Reuben feels morally bankrupt and describes himself as a "ratfink" when he threatens Davy with telling Jeremiah and Swede about him if Davy doesn't show Reuben where he lives. In this situation, Reuben places conditions on his own loyalty that he finds morally questionable. Reuben struggles to understand his own reasoning behind this, but he eventually attributes the shaky morality of this deal to his own desire to receive a display of loyalty from Davy. Notably, Reuben becomes physically ill and feels increasingly guilty as he endeavors to maintain his loyalty to Davy. This offers the possibility that while exchanges of loyalty like this might be effective, they can exert a high physical and emotional toll.

When Davy reappears in Reuben's life and Reuben begins to understand that Davy isn't necessarily either the glowing hero or the remorseful wrongdoer, Reuben is caught between loyalty to the family's journey West, and loyalty to his brother. Reuben finds it especially difficult to understand his father's decision to cooperate with the federal agent Andreeson. He sees it as a betrayal of Davy, while Jeremiah sees it as the only way to find Davy and keep him as safe as possible. While Reuben initially chooses to place his loyalty in Davy by agreeing to keep Davy's whereabouts a secret, Reuben changes his mind when he begins to suspect that Davy himself has misplaced his loyalty by trusting Jape Waltzer. This turn of events suggests that while family members may pledge loyalty to other people outside the family, they largely do so in an attempt to remain loyal and protect their family members. Neither Jeremiah nor Reuben wants to harm Davy, even when they seemingly betray him; they simply want him and those participating in the search for him to be safe.



### JUSTICE AND CONSEQUENCES

*Peace Like a River* focuses intently on the idea that all actions, thoughts, and beliefs (noble or otherwise) have consequences. Reuben and Swede watch this play out through Davy's trial and subsequent escape, and Reuben experiences the consequences of his own actions in North Dakota after he reconnects with Davy. Yet justice—the notion that such consequences will be fair—doesn't always mean the same thing to different people, and much of Reuben's growing up happens as he comes to this realization. While the novel borrows a number of tropes and motifs from

Western literature and movies, the most important idea that the novel borrows from Westerns is pitting personal honor, or "frontier justice," against organized and rational systems of justice like courtrooms and sheriffs. These different schools of thought represent a conflict between valuing individuals versus valuing systems that may or may not value individuals in the same way. Davy's own personal honor leads him to murder Tommy Basca and Israel Finch, but the legal system he's then forced to contend with considers this act to have been wrong. Interestingly, though Davy physically escapes from jail, he never truly escapes the legal system, since he spends the rest of his life on the run. This suggests that while revenge and frontier justice might be romantic and righteous in theory, in reality there are harsh consequences for taking justice into one's own hands; namely, exile from the community that the law is supposed to protect in the first place.

The novel is critical of Westerns and the ideals of justice and consequences they promote in a number of ways. Davy's fate shows that frontier justice is an ineffective tool in modern society if one wishes to remain a part of that society; Swede's insistence on engaging with the search for Davy as though it's a Western blinds her to the possibility that Davy might not be safe or righteous; and Reuben's very Western experience hunting for Davy on horseback with a posse of law enforcement officers is dramatic, but ultimately unsatisfying. As these experiences play out, Reuben suggests that it's not simply ineffective but wholly impossible to simplify justice to "white hat" versus "black hat." While Swede remains fixated on this trope, Reuben finds himself stuck in moral ambiguity. Reuben eventually comes to realize that, while he's still entirely on Davy's side, what Davy did wasn't right or just. In this way, Reuben's experience in the real West leads him to the understanding that what fictional Westerns present as just and correct doesn't always hold true in the real world, Western or otherwise. Further, it's left up to the reader to decide who, if anyone, has received justice, and exactly which brand of justice that might have been.

siblings. He honorably shot Tommy and Israel to protect his family, and early excerpts from Swede's poem draw a number of parallels between Sundown and Davy in this regard. When the court doesn't agree that Davy is an honorable man, Davy is pushed to run away and become an outlaw, and Sundown's plot follows a similar path. The end of Sundown's story is particularly illustrative of Swede's unwillingness to accept the reality of Davy's situation. Sundown's story ends with him safely enclosed in a beautiful and impenetrable valley with his lovely and faithful wife. This is far from what Davy's life on the run is actually like, and therefore represents a wishful imagining of what could have been, and, in Swede's mind, what *should* have been.



## VALDEZ

Valdez is a bandit king from Swede's epic poem. As **Sunny Sundown's** adversary, he first appears as a greasy villain: obviously evil, but also sure to lose to Sundown. Following Swede's kidnapping by Tommy and Israel, however, Valdez takes a horrifying turn for the worse and transforms into a bloodthirsty monster. Through Valdez, Swede processes her fear and grapples with the unfortunate realization that bad people don't just exist in stories. Interestingly, while Swede never comes close to matching Reuben's maturity and understanding of Davy's actions, Swede reaches her own surprisingly mature conclusions about evil and justice through writing about Valdez. Sundown isn't ever able to capture and properly kill Valdez, despite how hard Swede tries to write the event. Valdez thus comes to represent Swede's uncertainty and fear that the world doesn't always observe an easy and obvious system of justice. Reuben even compares Jape Waltzer to Valdez, as Waltzer slips away after shooting Reuben and Dad and never appears again. Like Valdez, he's a horrifying yet compelling villain, and his innocent victims are left to deal with the knowledge that he's never brought to justice for his actions.



## SYMBOLS

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



## SUNNY SUNDOWN

The cowboy Sunny Sundown is a character invented by Swede, and the hero of her epic poem.

Over the course of his journey, Sunny Sundown transitions from staunch lawman to misunderstood outlaw. He acts as a symbol for Davy and, specifically, how Swede and Reuben view Davy. Until Reuben begins to question the righteousness of Davy's crime, Davy is truly a man of the law in the eyes of his



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Atlantic edition of *Peace Like a River* published in 2002.

### Clay Quotes

☹☹ I believe I was preserved, through those twelve airless minutes, in order to be a witness, and as a witness, let me say that a miracle is no cute thing but more like the swing of a sword.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Jeremiah Land (Dad)



**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 4**Explanation and Analysis**

Reuben, as the adult narrator, has just begun his tale by describing the circumstances of his birth, what constitutes a miracle, and how miracles function in people's lives. The miracles function first to draw similarities between Dad and Jesus. Many of Dad's miracles bear resemblance to miracles worked by Jesus, particularly walking on thin air and feeding many people from a small amount of food. Further, by deeming himself a witness, Reuben situates himself as a disciple to his father. It's his responsibility then to tell this story and spread the news of his father's miracles to the novel's readership. In fact, the stakes are even higher than plain responsibility—he was allowed to survive probable death precisely in order to tell about miracles, so narrating this book is fulfilling Reuben's ultimate purpose.

**His Separate Shadow Quotes**

☝ It took me a second to realize he meant us. Dread landed flopping in my stomach. We'd never had an enemy before, unless you counted Russia.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Tommy Basca, Jeremiah Land (Dad), Davy Land

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 12**Explanation and Analysis**

Davy is telling Reuben that Israel Finch and Tommy Basca told Dad that they were watching the Land family after Dad beat Israel and Tommy up in the locker room. For Reuben, hearing this is the first time that an enemy has a face, a name, and is truly after his family. When Reuben mentions Russia, he's referring to the Cold War (and probably the Cuban Missile Crisis, in particular) which, while very intense at the time, likely remained a theoretical threat for someone Reuben's age. Russia, then, while technically an enemy, doesn't seem to scare Reuben the same way that Israel and Tommy do. In this way, the novel begins to explore what makes a good villain. Reuben's thought process seems to suggest that proximity and specifically targeting his family are qualities indicative of a compelling and scary bad guy.

☝ "Rube, you're almost like Davy now, aren't you. I mean, you shot a goose this morning."

**Related Characters:** Swede Land (speaker), Reuben Land, Davy Land

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 15**Explanation and Analysis**

As Swede and Reuben are going to bed, Swede observes this of Reuben. This quote encapsulates both Swede and Reuben's childish view of what adulthood means. Reuben gets to feel like an adult because he's performed a single task that his family views as adult. This, of course, ignores the fact that adulthood is as much or more about one's emotional development—and, in particular, about becoming comfortable with ambiguity—than it is about doing “mature” tasks or passing particular milestones. But by leaving this indicator of what adulthood means to Swede and Reuben, the author provides a starting point for Reuben's coming of age: here, Reuben is simplistic in his assessment that shooting the goose equates with adulthood, but later he will develop a more nuanced idea of maturity.

**Your Toughened Heart Quotes**

☝ When did it come to Davy Land that exile is a country of shifting borders, hard to quit yet hard to endure, no matter your wide shoulders, no matter your toughened heart?

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Swede Land, Davy Land

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 50**Explanation and Analysis**

Reuben tells the reader that he and Swede often wondered when Davy realized the consequences that would come from shooting Israel and Tommy. This passage suggests, first and foremost, that Davy *will* suffer consequences, much as he (and all the Land children) attempt to evade them. The consequences, however, aren't necessarily what anyone thought in the immediate aftermath, when Davy's actions seemed heroic and driven by loyalty.


Reuben's phrasing here also foreshadows the kind of life Davy will lead going forward. Davy will lead a life apart from the rest of his family and apart from their community.

Reuben suggests that this kind of solitude is difficult, no matter how strong Davy might be. It humanizes Davy and turns him into a far more complex character, with complex reasoning and motivations, than the heroic older brother Reuben saw up to this point.

## Peeking at Eternity Quotes

☝ Well, we all hold history differently inside us. For Swede such episodes retold themselves into a seamless and momentous narrative; she had a Homeric grasp on the significance of events, and still does; one of her recent letters asks, *Is it hubris to believe we all live epics?* (Perhaps it is, but I suspect she's not actually counting on me for an answer.)

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Jeremiah Land (Dad), Swede Land

**Related Themes:** 



**Page Number:** 55

### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben is telling the reader how Swede integrated the story of Dad being picked up by the tornado into the greater narrative of her family's history. As the novel progresses, the reader begins to see just how fully Swede views her life as an epic. When she encounters elements she doesn't particularly care for, like cars, she simply chooses to not include those elements. This allows Swede full artistic control over how she makes sense of her life. This does, however, blind Swede to some of the harsher realities of life. When she refuses to consider that Davy might not be innocent, it fits perfectly into her constructed narrative that casts Davy as a misunderstood, honor-driven outlaw, but it's not something that functions particularly well in real life. In this way, Swede finds her constructed narrative consistently at odds with reality, which in turn creates situations in which Reuben must decide for himself which version of events is the most useful or the most true.

☝ But the whole thing bothered Davy, and with Dad out of earshot he'd say so. You couldn't get blown around in a tornado, he said, and not get banged up. It didn't make sense. It wasn't right. Swede challenged him. "Are you calling Dad a liar?" "Of course not. I know it happened. It just shouldn't have. Don't you see that?"

**Related Characters:** Swede Land, Davy Land, Reuben Land (speaker), Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**  



**Page Number:** 56

### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben explains Davy's reaction to the story of Dad being picked up by the tornado. Throughout the novel, Davy expresses a sense of discomfort with putting blind faith in religion. Here, he struggles to reconcile what he knows is true with what he thinks should have logically happened. This suggests that Davy doesn't believe that religion is logical. While Reuben and possibly even Dad might agree with that sentiment, it doesn't stop them from putting their belief in a higher power and existing comfortably with the illogical nature of the miracles. Davy's interpretation also suggests that while religion might not always make sense, it doesn't have to make sense in order to work in someone's life. Davy accepts that religion works in his father's life even as he finds it illogical. Similarly, Reuben's strong belief in God's guidance indicates that he believes that God guides Davy just as he guides Reuben or Dad. Essentially, nobody is exempt from God's guidance, whether they want it, or want to accept it, or not.

☝ "Just because I write it doesn't mean it really happened."

**Related Characters:** Swede Land (speaker), Reuben Land

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

Swede is attempting to explain to Reuben that she cannot write the scene in which Sunny Sundown kills Valdez in a way that makes it real. For Swede, this represents a loss of control that she hasn't felt before. Prior to this experience, she made sense of her life through writing and experienced complete control over her characters and their fates. When she finds herself unable to kill Valdez, it represents the loss of control that she feels in her own world following her abduction by Israel Finch and Tommy Basca. Prior to her abduction, Israel and Tommy were scary, but Swede wasn't necessarily aware of the extent of the threat they posed. Afterwards, however, they became monsters, just as Valdez

did. As Valdez represents a more overarching sense of fear and loss of control, he becomes uncatchable and unkillable.

## When Sorrows Like Sea Billows Roll Quotes

☝ My sister's resentments notwithstanding, Margery's pitiful recital contained a certain truth that I, at least, eventually had to face. Tommy Basca was an idiot, but he wasn't purebred evil. You could see looking at him that he might be somebody's Bubby.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Tommy Basca, Swede Land

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 71

### Explanation and Analysis

After weeks of running stories that hailed Davy as a hero, the newspapers finally printed an article that painted Tommy Basca and Israel Finch as kind, loved, and misunderstood victims. In this passage Reuben draws a clear distinction between Israel and Tommy: Israel was indeed a cruel person, while Tommy merely got caught up in Israel's cruel deeds.

For Reuben, realizing that Tommy isn't pure evil happens as he grows up and develops a sense of moral nuance regarding what happened between Davy, Tommy, and Israel. It begins to point to the fact that all people are worthy of life, not just "good" people. When Reuben recognizes that Tommy's family may have felt grief and experienced loss at his death, he recognizes as well that his own point of view is a selfish one. This mirrors Reuben's later realization about Andreeson, when Reuben decides to betray Davy because he believes that Andreeson might be in danger. Thus, the novel suggests that part of growing up and developing a more adult view on life entails learning to value people based on their inherent worth as people.

☝ It was the fact that Chester the Fester, the worst man I'd ever seen, even worse in his way than Israel Finch, got a whole new face to look out of and didn't even know to be grateful; while I, my father's son, had to be still and resolute and breathe steam to stay alive.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Israel Finch, Superintendent Chester Holgren, Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 80

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Holgren just fired Dad from his position as school janitor, and during the conversation, Dad slapped Mr. Holgren and healed his acne. Reuben is incensed by the injustice of this, and the anger he feels is indicative of his youth and his sense of loyalty. While Reuben doesn't say it outright, he seems to believe that when Dad uses his miracle-working abilities to heal unsavory people like Mr. Holgren rather than his own son. To Reuben, this represents a betrayal of familial loyalty. Essentially, Reuben feels he's more deserving of these miracles than individuals who actively do harm to the Land family. While Reuben's thought process here is understandable, it also illustrates how childishly simplistic his view of justice is. Reuben would like to see those who do his family harm punished, and those who are part of the family or help the family rewarded. However, the world is more complicated than good people versus bad people, and learning this is one way that Reuben grows up.

## Late in the Night When the Fires Are Out Quotes

☝ "We'll wait till they're asleep—take some of Mrs. DeCuellar's cookies—offer 'em to the guard, tell him we've got to see Davy—when he turns to me you grab his gun," and so on. It was one of those rare moments when I actually felt older than Swede. Seizing it, I told her to grow up.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land, Swede Land (speaker), Mrs. DeCuellar, Davy Land

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 87

### Explanation and Analysis

Swede is planning to break Davy out of jail after the first disappointing day of Davy's trial. While it's apparent to the reader that Reuben is definitely older and more mature than Swede, it's not always as apparent to Reuben and Swede themselves. Swede's youth is extremely apparent here in her slapdash plan to bribe the guard with cookies, while Reuben's maturity is also obvious as he calls Swede out on the immaturity of the plan. However, the fact that Swede is making this plan in the first place is suggestive of her confidence, her unwavering loyalty to Davy, and her simplistic sense of justice. Swede allows her loyalty to Davy

to blind her to the fact that Davy might not be the hero she thought he was. She's unwilling to consider that there might be consequences for his actions, and as such she formulates plans for her own actions that are intended to subvert the law in a similar way.

## A Boy on a Horse Quotes

☝ They were the harshest words I'd ever heard him speak. I watched him sipping his coffee, his face foreign with misgiving. How I wanted to understand him! But I was eleven, and my brother had escaped from the pit where my vanity had placed him (a vain notion itself, Swede has since pointed out, yet it was certainty to me). How could my father not be joyous over such a thing? Who in this world could ask for more?

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Davy Land, Swede Land, Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 95



### Explanation and Analysis


Following Davy's escape from jail, Swede declares that a posse won't be able to find him. Dad tells her to speak sense or be quiet, and Reuben struggles to understand his father's thought process.

Reuben and Swede are both swept up by what seems like a thrilling example of frontier justice. Because Davy escapes from jail, he also escapes the consequences of murder as set out by the court of law. Further, as both Swede and Reuben are enthralled with the idea of the wild West, Davy becomes a misunderstood, heroic outlaw on the run, one who lives by his own code of honor rather than by the rules set down by society and courts. Because Swede and Reuben see Davy as a hero who did nothing wrong, they believe he shouldn't face any consequences for killing Israel and Tommy. Dad, however, understands that Davy did something wrong. He is able to feel love for Davy and simultaneously believe that Davy should have to face the consequences of his actions, which illustrates a level of maturity that Reuben and Swede simply aren't able to grasp at this point.

☝ "She wasn't his wife!" Swede flared. Past tense, you notice—history, even the fictive kind, being beyond our influence.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land, Swede Land (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 106

### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben and Swede are arguing over whether it's appropriate for a woman to rescue Sunny Sundown if she isn't his wife. When it suits Swede (as in this passage), she is able to make something true just because she wrote that it happened. Reuben notes specifically that Swede throws off all responsibility for writing it in the first place by believing fully that once the story is written, it's true and unchangeable. This shows again how Swede engages with the intersection between fiction and reality by merging the two. In doing so, the fictional aspects of her writing become true and it becomes difficult to even differentiate between fact and fiction. Notably too, Swede doesn't show discretion for when fiction is appropriate or helpful: later, when she writes about nightshirts, Reuben mentions that the writing was inspired by a library book, but the "original research" is meant to be taken as entirely the product of Swede's imagination. Swede herself, however, takes it as fact, not fiction. It allows her a sense of control over her world and the freedom to explore how something becomes real.

## The Substance of Things Hoped For Quotes

☝ How could we not have faith? For the foundation had been laid in prayer and sorrow. Since that fearful night, Dad had responded with the almost impossible work of belief. He had burned with repentance as though his own hand had fired the gun.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 131



### Explanation and Analysis

The Lands are preparing to leave for North Dakota, despite Dr. Nokes' incredulosity that they don't have a set destination or directions for wherever they're going. Reuben, however, shows that he believes fully that God is guiding his family towards Davy. At least in the lead-up to the trip, Reuben is fully willing to place his faith in his father and in religion.

The way that Reuben describes his father as burning with repentance continues to draw similarities between Dad and Jesus. In particular, this suggests that Dad sacrifices for his own children in a manner similar to Jesus sacrificing himself for all Christians. Dad is doing the spiritual work that Davy presumably isn't, and he is working to make things right through prayer, since he can't make things right in a court of law. This also foreshadows Dad's death and Reuben's miraculous recovery, which is a similarly Jesus-like sacrifice for one of the children.

☝ I watched his face and his futile, suety hands, and for the first time a question nipped at me: Was it possible that real loss had occurred at the death of Israel Finch? That real grief had been felt?

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Mr. Finch, Israel Finch

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis


As Dad stops at the post office to stop the mail before heading west, Reuben sees old Mr. Finch struggling through the cold. Reuben's reaction suggests that prior to seeing Mr. Finch, he had believed that Israel was a one-dimensional villain, unloved by everyone. However, the pathetic sight of Mr. Finch leads Reuben to challenge his own preconceptions and wonder if Israel was possibly a person like any other, with people who loved and cared for him as well as cruel tendencies. Reuben's growing up process begins when he starts to ask these questions that don't necessarily have an easy answer. They require Reuben to develop a sense of moral ambiguity and become comfortable with the fact that the world isn't made up of purely good and bad people.

## At War with This Whole World Quotes

☝ I feared the outcome of honest speech—that it might reach forward in time and arrange events to come. If I told Swede I wanted Davy back, even at the cost of his freedom, might that not happen? And if I said what I sensed was the noble thing... might that not bring despair on this whole crusade of ours?

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Davy Land, Swede Land

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 152

### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben struggles to answer Swede when she asks if he still wants Davy back even if he has to go to jail. Reuben has seen the power of prophecy and prayer play out time and again as God leads Dad through life, but Reuben questions both his own power to bring events into being and the wisdom of trying to do so. This recalls Swede's struggle to kill Valdez, which, at its heart, was a struggle to exert control and make sense of events. While Swede tried and failed, Reuben fears even trying because of the possibility of the consequences. One of the potential consequences is that the West itself turns out to be nothing but an exercise in futility, while the alternative sees Davy's personal sense of justice and honor overtaken by the rational court of law. Both of these outcomes illustrate Reuben's youth in that they represent a very black and white view of justice and consequences and fail to consider the morally ambiguous options that lie in between.

☝ Could a person believe so strongly one way, yet take the opposite route? I wanted to ask Swede, but again, if I posed it aloud, it might become true, and then we were in for all sorts of tangles.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), August Schultz, Davy Land, Swede Land

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis

Swede and Reuben wonder why August gave Davy a car to escape if he wanted Davy to turn himself in. The fact that Reuben is asking questions like this once again illustrates that he's growing and beginning to consider things that challenge his very black and white view of the world. Here, he questions the idea of moral ambiguity itself, and whether it's even possible for a person to believe that two different things are both right and good. While it's obvious that August believes that Davy did something wrong and should



accept the consequences, he acts as he does in order to help Davy continue following his own honor code and sense of justice.

Reuben's unwillingness to ask the question out loud suggests that he's not fully ready to embrace or explore the murky outcomes of the question. This illustrates that Reuben is still very young and immature. At this point, he's willing and able to ask the question, but not to answer it.

## Something Warm Quotes

☝ "Well," I said, "he wrote a whole book and it's in the Bible." Even Dad, much as I loved him, didn't have anything in there.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Swede Land, Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 169

### Explanation and Analysis



Swede tries to compare Dad to Moses after the Lands make it through Mandan without being caught by police, and Reuben attempts to steer Swede towards a lesser prophet like Jonah. Swede refers to Jonah as a "griper." Reuben's offense at comparing Dad to Moses suggests that Reuben's loyalty to Dad has limits. It suggests that Dad's miracles, wonderful as they are, are worth less in Reuben's eyes because Dad hasn't written anything in the Bible.

In an overarching way, the novel itself becomes a bible of sorts. In it, Reuben tells a story that's focused much more on Dad and Dad's miracles than on Davy, though Davy drives the action. In this way, Dad does get to figure as a prophet of a bible-like text. Despite Reuben's hesitation here as a child, in the retelling Reuben remedies and atones for this doubt and hesitation by telling his father's story.

## The Skin Bag Quotes

☝ I thought it was odd, the trainman not recognizing him and raising a stink, but Swede pointed out that this sort of thing happened all the time. How many times did Zorro gallop magnificently out of town, everyone watching, then show up five minutes later as Diego, still breathing hard? And no one ever figured that out.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Roxanna Crawley, Swede Land

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 192

### Explanation and Analysis

Roxanna is telling Reuben and Swede about her great-uncle, a gunsmith and a doctor who dabbled in outlawry with Butch Cassidy. Her great-uncle occasionally patched up the very people he shot and they supposedly didn't notice, which Reuben finds suspect. Notice here how Reuben is willing to suspend his disbelief for a fictional tale (Zorro), but not for a tale that's meant to be taken as fact and history (Roxanna's story). This suggests that Reuben is developing critical thinking skills and growing up. However, Reuben doesn't necessarily make the connection that an integral part of fiction is that a reader or viewer is asked outright to suspend their disbelief (in fact, doing so is essential to enjoying the story). Instead, he's still taking fiction as fact, which indicates that while he's certainly on his way to growing up and attaining maturity, he's not there yet.

## Under the Gibbon Moon Quotes

☝ Were Dad's heart my tablet I'd have taken it up and erased Davy's name, so terribly did I wish to stay, and had it been whispered to me that all of Roofing had burned... I'd have rolled down the window and shouted thanks to Heaven...

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Roxanna Crawley, Davy Land, Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 198

### Explanation and Analysis

As the Lands and Roxanna head out into the snow for a picnic, Reuben thinks that he desperately wants to stay in North Dakota. Reuben finds in this moment that his loyalty has shifted greatly. While he still feels loyalty and responsibility to Dad and Swede, his loyalty to Davy and Roofing seem to be waning. This passage is an indication that the search for Davy won't bring the kind of fulfillment that the Lands are looking for, since more important things have emerged. Roxanna at this point, for example, seems more deserving of Reuben's loyalty, given the care and kindness she shows the Lands. Reuben wishes here that he could influence the power of religion, since that's what's guiding Dad, and make it lead Dad to a decision to stay with Roxanna.

## The Throbbing Heart of News Quotes

☞ For some reason I recalled old Mr. Finch, freezing in the wind outside the post office. I felt awful about Mr. Finch and wanted to believe Davy might have too.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Israel Finch, Mr. Finch, Davy Land

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 211

### Explanation and Analysis

When Reuben first meets Davy in North Dakota he wonders if Davy feels bad for what he did, though he isn't able to ask without looking disloyal. Reuben realizes he's carrying around guilt for what Davy did—guilt that he later realizes Davy isn't carrying himself. While Davy is older and appears to be more mature, he lacks the ability to see the value in feeling bad for what he's done. Mr. Finch here is a symbol of the consequences of Davy's actions. He also becomes an easy character to consider in terms of moral nuance. Reuben continues to mature as he realizes that while Mr. Finch may be a drunk, he still experiences loss like any other person. The fact that Reuben realizes this while Davy refuses to consider the possibility shows that in some ways, Reuben is far more mature than Davy. However, at this point in the story, Reuben believes that in order to perform maturity, he must first perform loyalty and not voice that he's growing up in other ways, as well.

☞ Led? This was supposed to mean the Lord was in charge and paving your way, such as letting you get fired so you'll be free to leave town, or sending you an Airstream you can go in comfort. Dad knew something about being led, I realized, yet this I could not buy.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Martin Andreeson, Roxanna Crawley, Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 217

### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben has returned to Roxanna's house after riding with Davy to discover that Dad has gone out driving with Mr. Andreeson. Roxanna explains that Dad was led to do so.

Reuben's reasoning shows how intent he is on viewing Andreeson as an enemy. Despite the fact that Dad's firing

was exceptionally cruel and made it seem as though God wasn't taking care of Dad, Reuben has evidently been able to make sense of it and fit it into his narrative. In the case of Andreeson, however, Reuben doesn't just see it as a lapse of God's oversight, he sees it as a betrayal by Dad himself. By partnering with Andreeson, Reuben sees that Dad is giving up on the entire project of the Land family's journey west to find Davy. Reuben feels betrayed, as it seems as though Dad has switched sides and decided to support the system of justice that wishes to put Davy behind bars. Reuben can't believe that God would stand for such a thing after leading them so far.

## Winning Her Hand Quotes

☞ "If you like Mr. Andreeson better as an enemy, then keep him one. Maybe that's your job as a boy—as a brother. My job is different."

"How come?"

"Because I'm the dad. I have to heed the Lord's instructions."

**Related Characters:** Jeremiah Land (Dad), Reuben Land (speaker), Martin Andreeson

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 246



### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben and Dad are discussing why Dad has decided to work with Mr. Andreeson, the enemy in question, to find Davy. Here, Dad doesn't ask Reuben to understand that Mr. Andreeson isn't necessarily an enemy. Rather, Dad wants Reuben to understand that Dad is following a different definition of loyalty than Reuben's, and that their differences are okay. This continues to challenge Reuben's growing grasp of moral ambiguity and nuance.

While Reuben sees Dad's decision to work with Andreeson as a betrayal of Davy, Dad sees it as following the word of God. This suggests that, for Jeremiah at least, loyalty to God is more important than the type of loyalty to Davy that would allow Davy to escape consequences. In short, Jeremiah sees finding Davy and making sure that Davy faces consequences for his actions as doing the right thing, despite Reuben's belief otherwise.

☞ But after talking with Dad, it was plain to me that Davy had done a grievous wrong. Don't misunderstand, I backed my brother all the way. Yet it had come to mean something whether he felt anything like repentance.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker), Davy Land

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 248

### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben describes the things he learns on his rides with Davy, which range from Sara's unfortunate circumstances to the realization that Davy doesn't see the point in regretting his crime. Through talking with Dad, Reuben comes to realize that it is indeed possible to think one way and do something different, which answers a question Reuben had once asked. Reuben comes to see that it's possible—and it's actually his lived reality—to believe that what Davy did was wrong, but to still love him and want him to escape the consequences of the law. Davy, however, remains fixated on his own code of honor. He doesn't see the use in attempting to merge his own system of justice with the system that wants to persecute him. Davy then, despite the fact that he's considered an adult, demonstrates a very one-dimensional and immature grasp of morality. Because of this, Reuben momentarily gets to seem older and more mature than his older brother.

## The Red Farm Quotes

☝☝ "I can't," he replied, after a moment. "You know that, Swede." He looked, right then, for the first time in years, his age, which was seventeen.

**Related Characters:** Davy Land (speaker), Swede Land, Reuben Land, Jeremiah Land (Dad)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 295

### Explanation and Analysis


On Davy's final visit home, Swede asks him if he's going to stay. Throughout the novel, Reuben has been extremely focused on Davy's age and the fact that Davy is, for all

intents and purposes, an adult. Here, in this very emotional moment, Davy finally looks like the kid that he is. This suggests that part of what made Davy an adult is the fact that he did such an exceptional job of acting like an adult. This shatters the childish belief held by Reuben and Swede that adulthood is attained when one meets and then passes specific milestones, like driving a car and shooting. When Davy drops the facade, it shows that adulthood isn't necessarily an end point. It's a continuous process and even Davy isn't finished yet.

## The Curious Music That I Hear Quotes

☝☝ Is there a single person on whom I can press belief?  
No sir.  
All I can do is say, Here's how it went. Here's what I saw.  
I've been there and am going back.  
Make of it what you will.

**Related Characters:** Reuben Land (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 311

### Explanation and Analysis

Reuben discusses how doubt, both his own and that of others, plays into his belief system. While Reuben humanizes himself by admitting that he does occasionally experience doubt, he still believes that he's a witness and a disciple of Jeremiah. He's come to the point where his belief is strong enough to simply take the fantastical nature of his story as fact. Further, he doesn't need the reader or anyone else to necessarily believe him; he just wants his story to be heard (or read). This shows that whether or not a reader agrees with Reuben is beside the point. Reuben simply requires that the reader take in the story and form their own conclusions about it, which suggests that there's something to gain from his story, regardless of whether it's taken as fact or fiction.





## 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.

## CLAY

The narrator, Reuben, tells the reader that all he ever wanted was a "good set of lungs." When he was born in 1951, his lungs refused to work. His father, Jeremiah, was pacing outside the hospital and praying while his mother labored inside. After the fifth time around the block, Jeremiah found himself running inside the hospital. Reuben says he adores this story, and often asked his father if God told him out loud that Reuben was in trouble; his father replied that he just knew. Dr. Nokes, inside with Reuben's mother, tried to get the infant Reuben to breathe, but his lungs were swampy and refused.

When Jeremiah entered the room, Reuben lay uncovered on a metal table and Dr. Nokes was trying to comfort Mrs. Land. Jeremiah picked up the infant and commanded him to breathe. As Dr. Nokes tried to explain that after 12 minutes there might be brain damage, Jeremiah struck him across the face and Dr. Nokes fell to the floor, unconscious. Jeremiah returned to his son and commanded him to breathe in the name of God.

Addressing the reader, Reuben says he didn't think too much about his birth until much later, although he relished telling the tragic story that he was born nearly dead. He wonders why he was allowed to breathe, and realizes now that the answer is miracles. Miracles, he explains, aren't everyday things like sunshine; rather, miracles "contradict the will of earth." Swede, Reuben's sister, says often that miracles are fearful to people, and also that miracles don't happen without a witness.

Reuben says that while several people witnessed Jeremiah's miracles, most of them ignored what they saw. Reuben believes he was allowed to live so that he could bear witness to his father's miracles.

*Reuben sets up several things for the reader straight off. First, fixing his breathing problem is a primary life goal of Reuben's. Reuben also offers a glimpse of just how devoted his father is to religion and how deeply it influences his life—it's no small thing that God allowed him to know without evidence that his newborn son was in trouble.*



*Jeremiah's confidence here is remarkable—he hits the doctor who is trying to save his child, and instead just orders the child to breathe. Jeremiah must believe in God wholeheartedly, and he must believe that God is infinitely more powerful than medicine. God will come up against medicine several times throughout the novel.*



*Reuben obviously survived if he's here to tell the story. This asserts for the reader that Jeremiah's miracles aren't myth or legend—they are real in Reuben's world, and the reader must take them as fact. Swede's statement about miracles needing a witness is also notable, as Reuben was a witness to the miracle of his lungs, and he will witness many more miracles.*



*Reuben believes that he was allowed to live in order to be a disciple for his father. This book, then, becomes almost biblical, as Reuben tells what is really the story of his father's miracles.*



## HIS SEPARATE SHADOW

Reuben says he thinks of his own survival as his father's first miracle. The second miracle is that Reuben didn't suffer brain damage, and the third miracle happened when Reuben was 11, in the middle of North Dakota, on the hunting trip where Reuben shot his first goose. At the time, the tension was so great between Dad and Reuben's brother Davy that on the way to August Schultz's farm in North Dakota, Reuben fell asleep immediately to avoid it. Davy and Dad sat in front silently, while Reuben and Swede snuggled in the backseat.

On the morning of the hunt, Dad, Davy, Reuben, and Swede settle into the field amongst their decoys. Reuben and Swede are too young to actually shoot, but are there "for seasoning." The morning is freezing and Davy tells Reuben to not fall asleep. Reuben does fall asleep, but is jerked awake by Davy as a lone snow goose flies towards them. Davy grabs Reuben, rolls him onto his back, and puts his Winchester in Reuben's hands. Reuben misses two shots, but the third hits the goose.

Swede races after the goose, which finally falls to the ground 80 yards away. The goose, apparently recovered from being shot, sees Swede and runs. Swede corners it when it reaches a fence, but the angry goose turns to Swede and begins to chase her back towards Reuben, Davy, and Dad. Dad laughs, and as Swede and the goose run past, Davy grabs the bird and wrings its neck. He hands it to Reuben and Dad keeps laughing.

Back at August's farm, Davy asks Reuben if he wants Davy to show him how to gut the goose. Reuben insists on doing it himself, since he's now a hunter. Davy leaves Reuben and Swede to the task. Swede sits on a grain truck and asks Reuben to forgive her for running from the goose. Reuben does, and then gives Swede the feet from the goose.

Reuben says that he doesn't understand what's going on with Dad and Davy. Swede explains that she heard in the car last night that Israel Finch and Tommy Basca "had" Dolly, Davy's girlfriend, in the girls' locker room during the football game the night before. Reuben can't conceive of a reason why boys would go into the girls' locker room. Swede gives Reuben a dark look and explains that Israel and Tommy beat up Dolly, but Dad, a janitor at the school, caught them "in time." Reuben doesn't understand why Davy's still mad if Dad caught Israel and Tommy, but doesn't think he can ask Davy. Reuben finishes cleaning the goose and he and Swede head inside for pancakes.

*The tension Reuben describes foreshadows the first primary conflict of the novel, which is between Davy and Jeremiah. The car's setup is indicative of the age divisions Reuben notices so acutely; he and Swede sit in the backseat because they are children, while Davy, an adult, sits up front. Further, Reuben is excluded from knowing what exactly the conflict is because of his age and lack of maturity. This provides a starting point for Reuben to grow up from.*



*Reuben never expected to have this very adult experience; it was thrust upon him. This introduces the idea that growing up doesn't necessarily happen how and when someone thinks it will. Reuben seems to believe that growing up is marked by these very concrete milestones and he has a timeline in mind for when these things are supposed to happen, an idea that will be challenged again and again going forward.*



*Davy demonstrates his adult skill and strength by grabbing the goose and saving his younger sister from it. However, by giving the goose to Reuben, Davy is able to make Reuben feel mature and adult for shooting the goose. Davy demonstrates that he's skilled at doing things that allow his brother to feel powerful.*



*Davy's kindness pays off—Reuben at least feels as though he must fully embrace this marker of adulthood. This exchange shows the type of relationship Swede and Reuben have. They rely on each other for affirmation and comfort.*



*Reuben's reaction here continues to establish his immaturity and innocence. He doesn't understand that what happened was likely sexually violent, while Swede's dark look indicates that she, though younger than Reuben, might understand. Further, Reuben's belief that justice has already been served suggests a very simplistic view of justice in a tit-for-tat kind of way. It also creates distance between Reuben and Davy, as Reuben understands this is a touchy subject and fears asking.*



Davy misses pancakes, but Dad doesn't comment. After pancakes Dad, Reuben, and Swede nap, but Reuben wakes to see Davy sitting on his bed oiling his gun. Davy explains that they're going back out to "crawl up" on a bunch of Canada geese, and then asks Reuben if he heard the conversation about Dolly in the car the night before. Reuben says he didn't hear, but Swede did. Davy explains that Israel Finch and Tommy Basca threatened to hurt the Land Family. Reuben thinks that they'd never had an enemy before besides Russia, but Davy reassures Reuben and suggests they keep this information from Swede.

Reuben explains that a "crawlup" entails belly crawling up to unsuspecting geese. Swede pretends to be a Sioux "brave" sneaking up on a cowboy, and Reuben says he would've played along if he hadn't felt so mature after shooting the goose that morning. When Reuben, Swede, Dad, and Davy reach the crest of the hill, the geese are waddling away from them. Reuben is crushed; he'd hoped that Davy would let him shoot again.

The geese panic and take flight. Dad begins to rise but Davy instructs him to wait. Davy points out a goose that broke off from the group and is heading their direction. Davy appears to melt into his hiding spot and Reuben thinks that Davy seems to be hunting alone. When the goose flies over the rock pile, Davy shoots it out of the sky.

That night, Reuben and Swede lie snuggled under mounds of quilts. Swede wonders if Davy will fight Israel Finch and Tommy Basca. Reuben thinks justice has been served already. He explains to the reader that to call Finch and Basca "town bullies" doesn't come close to describing what they really are. Reuben and Swede fall quiet and listen to the talk from downstairs as Dad and August, friends from childhood, hash through their old stories.

Swede decides to go back to her own room. After kissing Reuben, she remarks that he's "almost like Davy now" since he shot the goose. Reuben thinks that Davy's shot during the crawlup had made it very clear that Reuben isn't actually a man yet, and that Davy has knowledge that Reuben will never have. Reuben tells Swede, though, that he's definitely almost like Davy.

*Reuben's comment about Russia likely refers to the Cold War with Russia and the Cuban Missile Crisis specifically, which took place in October 1962. It's obvious that in Reuben's mind, this is the first time the enemy has been someone concrete and not just theoretical. This conversation with Davy again shows how Davy builds Reuben up and makes him feel more mature, specifically by sharing secrets.*



*Reuben is feeling the effects of Davy's adult treatment and refusing to engage in child's play. The sense of adulthood that Reuben feels here will stand in stark contrast to the maturity he gains later. Concrete milestones define this simplistic sense of adulthood: shooting, not playing, keeping adult secrets.*



*At this early point in the novel, it's already evident that Davy stands apart from his family. He seems to hunt alone, and he doesn't agree with Dad and Reuben that Israel and Tommy have been punished thoroughly. Even when he's physically a part of his family, he operates on the edge of the unit.*



*Reuben seems to have a very clear sense of justice in his mind, since he seems to believe that the conflict is finished and resolved. This thought, however, is dependent on Reuben's idolization of Dad. This suggests that Davy might not idolize Dad the same way that Reuben does, further separating Davy from the rest of his family.*



*Reuben finally understands that adulthood is about having knowledge, rather than passing particular milestones. Swede still believes that adulthood is about the milestones exclusively. By allowing Swede to continue to believe this and maintain her childish understanding, Reuben is actually acting in a very mature way.*



Reuben wakes just past midnight from a horrible nightmare. Scared to go back to sleep, he realizes he needs to go to the outhouse. Once Reuben is outside he feels better, but as he approaches the barn, he hears footsteps that stop abruptly and then pick up again. He recognizes the steps as Dad's, but he is confused by the abrupt stops and starts. Reuben creeps to the door and sees his father pacing on the flatbed truck, praying with his eyes shut tight. Reuben watches Dad reach the edge of the truck, walk right off the edge, and keep walking on thin air before turning and heading back for the truck. Reuben decides he cannot possibly walk past Dad, who's obviously walking on the hand of God, to get to the outhouse, and he runs to a willow thicket instead.

*Reuben's own sense of religious piety and respect comes into play here—he can't conceive of interrupting Dad's experience with God. While Dad walking on thin air is relatively minor in terms of Dad's miracles, it serves to create an even greater sense of awe in Reuben. Walking on air also mirrors Jesus walking on water, which continues to create a connection between Dad and Jesus and bring Dad's Jesus-like qualities to the forefront.*



## BEAUTEOUS ARE MY CAKES INDEED

When the Lands arrive back home in Roofing, with Swede fast asleep in Dad's arms and Reuben struggling for breath, they find the front door tarred. Dad puts Swede into bed and tells Reuben to sit so that Dad can attend to him. Addressing the reader, Reuben explains how his lungs work, or fail to work, using the metaphor of a bellows. He explains that his bellows has a sponge growing in it that nearly paralyzes his lungs, and describes the fear of falling asleep and never waking up again.

*The tarred door indicates that the conflict between the Lands and their adversaries is most definitely not resolved. The fear Reuben feels upon seeing the door is only intensified by his difficulty breathing. Reuben's struggle with asthma makes it very clear that while it may be a miracle he's alive, he has to suffer for the privilege of being alive.*



Dad lights the kitchen stove and pours salt and baking soda into a pot of water. He then runs downstairs to get kerosene to try to strip the tar off the door. When the water boils, Dad sets the pot on a cutting board and the board on Reuben's lap and covers him with a sheet to create a steam tent. Reuben feels his chest loosen as Dad begins to work on cleaning the door.

*Steam is a contested treatment for asthma. It can be helpful in some cases, but can also cause greater damage in others. In the novel, however, steam works like religion does and Reuben truly believes that it helps him.*



Dad says that the door isn't going to come clean, and begins to tell Reuben about the conflict that led up to the tarred door. Reuben doesn't want to hear, as he sensed when he saw the tarred door that the Land family's lives have changed. He tells Dad he knows about Dolly, and Dad is silent for a minute. Dad then explains "the principle of escalation," framing what happened in the locker room as wartime strategy and ethics. Reuben says that this speech was absorbing, but detracted from the truth and downplayed the seriousness of the situation.

*Reuben assigns a great deal of meaning to these events and symbols, which ties into how he engages with storytelling. Dad similarly uses metaphors and storytelling to explain the situation for Reuben, though Reuben interestingly doesn't find it particularly helpful. This suggests that storytelling allows people to assign meaning to events in their lives, but it can also obscure the truth when it's overused.*



Reuben says he learned later from Davy that Dolly, a clarinetist in the pep band, had gone to the locker room to retrieve a pair of shoes midway through the football game. Dad was cleaning vomit in the boys' locker room when he heard male laughter coming from the girls' locker room. Dolly, meanwhile, heard someone come into the locker room and turn out the lights. It was Israel Finch and Tommy Basca, and Dolly threw her locker padlock at them. They grabbed her and Israel began to rip open her sweater when she saw Dad's illuminated face coming up behind Israel. Dad proceeded to beat the boys with his broom handle. Afterwards, Dad took Dolly home and returned to the school to lock up, where Israel Finch approached Dad and informed him that he and Tommy were watching his family.

Reuben returns the narrative to the kitchen, and asks Dad what they will do in retaliation. Dad replies that they'll do nothing. He sweeps up Reuben and tosses him into bed.

Reuben says he worried for a day and a half before routine took over. Reuben struggles through schoolwork while Swede tries to sidestep long division by composing epic poems about the cowboy **Sunny Sundown** for her teacher. On Wednesday, Reuben is especially excited to attend church, as the Reverend Johnny Latt will be preaching (and is far more thrilling than their usual Pastor Reach), and Bethany Orchard, Reuben's crush, will be at the service. Swede and Davy stay home, and Reuben thinks it quite convenient that he'll be able to talk to Bethany without Swede watching.

Reverend Johnny begins the service with very loud music featuring a trumpet. After an hour Reuben notices that Bethany is no longer in her seat, and he gets up to find her and take a break from the music. Reuben finds her in the downstairs kitchen, where she offers to share an orange with him. She feeds him half of the orange and they move on to making pancakes. Reuben remarks that she's infinitely more mature than he is. They abandon their cooking and run back upstairs when they begin to hear thumps and shouting. When they reenter the sanctuary, people are speaking in tongues and lying all over the floor.

Reuben and Bethany watch for a moment, and Bethany points out that Jeremiah is on the floor too. Reuben approaches his father, who looks very peaceful. As Reuben kneels beside him, he feels a jolt hit his shoulder and he breathes easier. Jeremiah suddenly wakes, looking alarmed, and says that it's time to leave.

*Dad's illuminated face becomes another of his minor miracles. It also draws on religious iconography like the illuminated halos of saints and angels, which further develops the connections between Dad and Jesus or other religious figures. Notably, Reuben never offers any real reason why Israel and Tommy decided to go after Dolly, which supports the possibility that they're nothing more than evildoers out to harm others. Reuben essentially begins to dehumanize them and turn them into villains acting in cold blood.*



*Dad is obviously unconcerned, or at least unwilling to allow Reuben into his adult world. This stands in sharp contrast to how Davy allowed Reuben into the adult world of this conflict.*



*Swede is already attempting to use her writing to escape from and skip engaging with the real world, even now when her worst enemy is long division. Reuben indicates that despite his immaturity, he is beginning to grow up, experience crushes, and crave independence from Swede in these matters. He's starting to seek these things himself instead of having them forced on him.*



*Despite the fact that Reuben now has a crush (an adult milestone), this passage does little but make it very clear to Reuben how immature he still is compared to Bethany. However, both of them act as though what they witness in the sanctuary is beyond their level of understanding. This shows that though Bethany is older and more mature than Reuben, she's still very much a child as well.*



*Once again, Jeremiah simply knows where he needs to be, which mirrors what happened at Reuben's birth. This indicates that there's something happening at home that requires Jeremiah's attention.*



## YOUR TOUGHENED HEART

Reuben offers an excerpt of a poem Swede has been working on, in which **Sunny Sundown** prepares to destroy his adversary, **Valdez**. At home, Davy is in the garage working on a secret. Swede, alone in the house, runs to answer a knock at the door, and Israel Finch and Tommy Basca wrestle her unceremoniously into a Chevy parked outside. Reuben explains that Swede had moments ago been writing innocent verse to describe Valdez, her bad guy, but that the terror of her abduction caused her poem to take a dark and sinister turn.

Israel makes Swede sit in his lap as he and Tommy drive away from the Land house. Reuben says that Swede's abduction might seem inconsequential compared to the other, far more violent abductions that seemed commonplace at the time, but that a nine-year-old should never suffer what Swede did. Davy reenters the house from the garage just as Swede returns from her ordeal, white as a sheet but not crying.

Reuben listens in on the adults that night and hears Ted Pullet, the local police officer, telling Dad that he'll talk to "those boys" in the morning. Davy asks how many times a dog can bite before the dog should be put down, but Pullet refuses to take any real action. Davy gets up and leaves the house while Dad tries to convince Pullet to do something, but Pullet only says "you know Finch." Reuben explains that Israel Finch was kicked out of school the previous year for beating up a teacher, and many people are scared of him.

Swede says nothing about what happened to her. The next day she pulls out her doll and impatiently mothers it. Reuben notices two bruises on Swede's side as she rocks the doll. Later that night, Swede is hard at work in her notebook, presumably killing off **Valdez**.

Swede turns nine the following morning. Dad, Davy, and Reuben wake her up in the morning singing "Happy Birthday" to her, and Reuben is relieved to see her look normal. Reuben gifts her a paperback Western, and Dad gives her a big black typewriter. Though Swede is immensely happy with this gift, Reuben thinks of the bruises he saw when he sees her fingers smudged with ink. Finally, Davy offers Swede a Texas stock saddle. Davy explains how he came by the saddle as Swede sits on it, and Davy apologizes that he can't fix the split in the saddle's cantle.

*Reuben begins to describe how Swede uses her poem to make sense of her terrifying experience. Valdez morphs from a normal villain into something far nastier. Further, the fact that Sunny Sundown, who is a fictionalized Davy, struggles to catch Valdez begins to hint at the possibility that Davy isn't as unshakeable as his younger siblings might like to believe.*



*Israel and Tommy are evidently out to scare the Land family, and Swede as an innocent child is an easy target. Reuben indicates that Swede suffered more psychological trauma than physical trauma by mentioning other violent abductions of the early 60s, which begs the question of what the consequences of this type of psychological trauma are.*



*The language that Ted Pullet uses indicates that he views Israel and Tommy as frightening, but boys (not men) nonetheless, and presumably incapable of worse crimes. Davy obviously views them in a far more sinister light. Dad, meanwhile, appears to simply want to protect his family and Swede specifically, not necessarily get revenge.*



*The bruises suggest that Swede's experience was far more violent than previously thought. This experience is presumably one of the first times in which Swede is presented with the underbelly of the adult world without her consent—she's forced to grow up before she's ready.*



*Even if Swede is ignoring her bruises, they're obviously extremely disturbing to Reuben. On this day in particular, he seems to dwell on Swede's loss of childish innocence more than she does, though it's suggested that Swede might be playing along and pretending to some extent to be normal. This indicates that Swede isn't ready to grow up and is trying to hold onto her childhood.*



The day proceeds with all sorts of luxuries. After lunch, Dad pulls a balloon out of the closet. It turns out to be a small hot air balloon. They let it go out in the backyard and watch it rise.

The Lands then hear a honk in the front of the house. Davy runs around to look and when he returns, he says it's Tin Lurvy. Swede looks stricken. Dad invites Lurvy in for coffee, and Reuben explains that Lurvy is a traveling salesman who is quite large, eternally drunk, and never mentions what he's selling until asked. Swede insists to Davy and Reuben that she must go inside and help Dad find cookies so that Lurvy doesn't eat her birthday cake. Davy suggests they go to the woods instead, and Swede tells the boys to go without her if she's not back in two minutes. After ten minutes, Davy and Reuben leave.

As Davy and Reuben walk, Davy asks Reuben if he saw Swede's bruises. They wonder if Dad is afraid of Israel and Tommy. Davy asks Reuben if he thinks God looks out for him, and then asks if he *wants* God to look out for him. Reuben thinks it's an odd question.

Reuben and Davy encounter a tramp sleeping in the woods and quietly back away. Reuben tells the reader that the tramp really holds no clue or moral significance, but wonders if he should've felt as though something was different as he and Davy walked out of the woods.

Swede's birthday dinner is the Land family's favorite chowder. When Reuben and Davy enter the house, it's evident that Tin Lurvy is planning on staying for supper. Reuben inspects the soup and realizes that Dad only made a regular batch, not the triple batch needed to feed Tin Lurvy. Reuben looks stricken as he sits down for the meal. After his second bowl, Tin Lurvy begins to regale the table with the saga of getting his appendix out. It's a gruesome tale, and Reuben loses his appetite quickly. Everyone else, however, enjoys multiple bowls. Reuben wonders if he's the only one who noticed that a pot of soup meant to feed four fed multiple helpings to five people, and asks the reader to "make of it what you will."

*The disappearing balloon becomes a poignant representation of Swede's lost youth and innocence after her abduction.*



*Swede might be young and trying to hold onto her youth, but she displays a great deal of adult responsibility here when she insists on helping Dad. However, this sense of adult responsibility is juxtaposed with a very childish selfishness in regards to not wanting to share her birthday cake. Further, Swede seems unaware of this juxtaposition. When compared with Reuben's self-awareness, this creates a sense of immaturity in Swede.*



*Davy's question suggests that he thinks Reuben might be more capable than Reuben thinks he is. It also begins to develop the reader's sense of Davy's religious doubts and conversely, the strength of Reuben's faith.*



*Despite Reuben's insistence that the tramp is meaningless, it's possible to draw comparisons between the tramp and the life that Davy lives later in the novel. Reuben is beginning to develop a sense of dread as to what is going to change.*



*This particular miracle continues to develop the similarities between Dad and Jesus, as this miracle mirrors Jesus' miracle of feeding many people from only a few loaves and fishes. When Reuben asks the reader to "make of it what you will," he's not asking the reader necessarily to take his account at face value. Reuben wants the reader to question the truth of what happened, while making it very clear that he himself believes his story. He wants the reader to share his sense of awe and similarly admire Dad.*



Tin Lurvey leaves not long after cake. Rain falls outside and Swede wonders if it'll turn to snow. Dad trips over Swede's saddle on his way to bed, and Swede and Reuben head to bed. Davy goes out, and Reuben wonders again about Swede's bruises. He gets out of bed to check on Swede, who's fast asleep in her room. Reuben approaches Swede's saddle and notices that the split in the cantle is no longer there. He remembers Dad tripping over the saddle, and asks the reader again to "make of it what you will."

After midnight Reuben hears the back door open and notices that both Dad and Davy are in bed asleep. Reuben listens to footsteps in the living room but can't bring himself to wake Davy. The steps stop outside Reuben's door, and Reuben hears Davy tell whoever's at the door to switch on the light. When the light comes on, Israel Finch is standing in the doorway with a baseball bat, Tommy Basca behind him. Davy, Winchester in hand, shoots twice at them. Israel dies immediately, but Tommy tries to crawl away. Swede flies out of her room and Dad appears suddenly to yank her into the bathroom and close the door. Davy gets out of bed and shoots Tommy in the back of the head.

## PEEKING AT ETERNITY

Reuben explains that Davy would be very annoyed if Reuben tried to cast what happened in a "redemptive glow." Reuben, Davy, Dad, and Swede wait for Ted Pullet, and Reuben babbles that Davy hadn't meant to do it. Davy snaps out of his reverie and tells Reuben that he certainly meant to do it.

Stepping out of the narrative, Reuben says that when Dad was 28 he was picked up by a tornado. Dad was still married to Mom and attending school in Iowa, on his way to becoming a doctor. Davy was one year old. Dad had a part-time job working as a janitor in the athletic building and was working when the tornado picked him up. Mom tried to call the athletic building, but the line was dead. An hour later, a group of men knocked on the door to tell Mom that the tornado hit the athletic building. The following morning, Mom answered the ringing phone. A woman informed her that Dad was on her porch drinking coffee.

*Reuben appears fixated on the physical markers of Swede's loss of innocence. This suggests that he's aware that the experience was a transformative one for Swede, even if he's not yet sure how. Again, Reuben doesn't ask the reader to simply believe; he leaves room for the reader to interpret this miracle individually.*



*The reader will notice the power imbalance between Davy and Israel and Tommy. Davy is ready with a weapon that is far deadlier than a baseball bat, and Israel and Tommy don't even have a chance to defend themselves. Further, the fact that Davy gets out of bed to shoot Tommy at close range suggests that his intent wasn't simply to defend his family. Notice too that Reuben is Davy's sole witness to the entire event, just as he's usually the sole witness of Dad's miracles. This supports Reuben's belief that he's alive to "bear witness."*



*Davy's insistence that shooting Tommy and Israel was no accident supports the possibility that his intent wasn't to just defend his family. Reuben's initial disclaimer supports this as well, and begins to hint at Davy's sense of personal justice.*



*The fact that Dad survives being picked up by the tornado is another miracle in Dad's life. This is also the first time that Reuben mentions his absent mother, save for her necessary role in the story of his birth. Her absence throughout the story, except for where she necessarily shows up in the past, suggests that Mom is little more than a character in stories to Reuben. She exists in his mind to give birth to him and, in this instance, to love Dad.*





After that event, Dad finished the semester, moved off campus, and found work as a plumber's assistant. Reuben says he can only explain this logic with Dad's own words that "he was treated so *gently* up there." Davy, however, is bothered by the fact that Dad wasn't hurt—he insists the event shouldn't have happened. Reuben tells the reader that he eventually realized that Davy wanted life to be something someone did alone, not with the help of a fatherly God. Mom was evidently bothered as well by what happened after the tornado. She stuck around long enough to give birth to Reuben and Swede, and then left to marry a doctor in Chicago.

Returning to the narrative, Reuben says the police put Davy in cuffs and took him to jail. The rest of the Lands spend the night in a motel and go to visit Davy the next day. At the end of their visit, Dad sends Reuben and Swede out so he can talk to Davy alone. Dad's quiet when he returns, and later that night tells Reuben and Swede that the only thing they can do is persevere.

Reporters and people the Lands don't know call on them regularly, while many people they do know ignore them. Reuben lists several of these people and assures the reader that he does mean to forgive them eventually, but not yet. He remarks that Dad seemed to suffer the most in the following weeks, not Davy. Davy seemed to remain the same, just thinner. On one visit, Reuben sees certainty in Davy's eyes, and knows that he can believe in his brother.

Davy begins receiving mail from a number of individuals who read about him in the local papers and found his story heroic and compelling. Walt Stockard, a deputy, begins collecting them in a pink box and reads them aloud to Davy.

Dad learns that Davy will be charged with two counts of manslaughter rather than murder, because Israel and Tommy had been bent on "mischief." Swede finds this incredulous. Thomas DeCuellar, Davy's defense attorney, begins to visit. Reuben says he knew that Mr. DeCuellar was a good man because he was on Davy's side and brought home-canned pickles from his wife for the Lands.

*Davy's reaction to the story, particularly that he knows it happened but that it shouldn't have, shows that religion is powerful whether one believes in God or not. Davy cannot deny what happened even if he finds it wholly illogical. This indicates that Davy himself is subject to God's guidance, even if he doesn't want to be. Again, Reuben's tone doesn't indicate any strong emotions about his mother; she's simply a character that left the story.*



*When Dad says that there's nothing they can do but persevere, he suggests that the situation is out of human control and in God's hands. This continues to develop Dad's sense of faith that God will guide his family, and further that Reuben and Swede will follow Dad in his faith.*



*While it's unclear exactly how old Reuben the narrator is, the betrayal by these friends evidently still weighs heavily in his mind. The fact that Dad suffers alludes to the possibility that he believes Davy did something wrong, while Davy's lack of suffering continues to support his belief in personal honor.*



*Reuben uses the papers' coverage and Davy's letters to show how a story can change depending on one's perspective; Davy won't remain a hero like this forever.*



*"Mischief" does seem a generous term to describe Israel and Tommy's intentions, but it recalls Ted Pullet calling Israel and Tommy "those boys." While Davy is thought of as an adult, Tommy and Israel are thought of as children and therefore are described using childish language.*



One morning, Swede refuses to come out of her room, declaring that she's working and doesn't want to be bothered. Dad is at work, but had given Swede and Reuben the option of staying out of school for another week. Reuben says he thinks that Dad didn't want them back in school yet, as Dad himself is experiencing backlash. Superintendent Chester Holgren had decided to "scour that janitor's teeth" and is making Dad deal with the school's overflowing sewer alone rather than call a plumber.

Mr. DeCuellar visits several times over the next week. Davy apparently resists all his attempts to paint Davy's actions in a kind light, insists that he wanted to shoot Tommy and Israel, and refuses to be too remorseful. As such, Mr. DeCuellar's attempt to have Davy tried as a juvenile doesn't pass. Reuben says this only made sense, as Davy had been an adult already for a long time.

Swede remains in her room working on her poem. One day, Reuben finds Dr. Nokes standing outside Swede's window, looking confused at the chanting and pounding noises coming from her room. Reuben explains that the poem is giving Swede trouble, and Dr. Nokes passes Reuben a bag containing pie and freshly baked bread.

That night, Swede comes into Reuben's room with a sleeping bag and asks to sleep in Davy's bed. She wonders if Davy will ever come home, and Reuben is close to tears. She finally explains to Reuben that she's been in her room because she can't figure out how to make **Sunny Sundown** kill **Valdez**. Reuben explains to the reader that after Swede's abduction, Valdez had transformed from a scrawny villain to a full-fledged monster. Reuben finally understands how scared Swede had been, and fears that now the poem won't turn out "right."

Swede reads Reuben several options for **Valdez**'s death. Reuben thinks they sound fine, but Swede insists that just because she writes something doesn't mean it actually happened. Reuben doesn't fully understand, and he asks Swede who's in charge of the story. Swede doesn't answer.

*Dad is doing his best to protect Swede and Reuben from what might be waiting for them at school, demonstrating his own brand of familial loyalty. Swede's "work" is the poem about Sunny Sundown, which indicates that Swede is working through the events of the last several days and trying to make sense out of them.*



*Again, Davy insists on being treated like an adult, and the actual adults oblige him. This suggests that part of being adult, regardless of one's age, is simply acting like an adult. However, in this situation, being treated like an adult means that Davy might face harsher consequences than if he'd agreed to act like a child.*



*Remember that Swede writes primarily in verse—she's writing within a structure of rhyme and meter. It appears she's struggling with the verse and rhyme, which suggests that she's attempting to make sense of the very systems that control her own world.*



*Swede's world has been turned upside down and she struggles with the knowledge that she's not in control. Sunny Sundown, as a symbol for Davy, is in trouble—Davy may or may not emerge triumphant from jail, and Swede's attackers might be considered innocent in the court of law. Reuben never defines "right," but this fear shows an inkling that Davy might not be as righteous as Reuben would like to think.*



*Valdez can't receive justice yet because Swede sees so little justice in her own world. This also represents the shift from a world that Swede found predictable to one that is full of unknowns and strange systems of justice.*



## WHEN SORROWS LIKE SEA BILLOWS ROLL

Ten days before Davy's trial, a newspaper publishes an article that paints Tommy Basca as a loveable, if misunderstood, victim of a senseless crime. The papers are more than ready to write about Davy as a murderer, and the timing seems predestined. Swede makes snide comments and remains resentful of this turn of events and of Israel and Tommy, but Reuben says that he eventually realized that Tommy, while an idiot, wasn't truly evil. This article resulted in a number of letters for Davy, one of them opening with "Dear butcher."

Thomas DeCuellar finds this troubling. He tells Dad one night that people are sympathizing with Israel and Tommy, and asks Dad if he's read the papers. Mr. DeCuellar says that the jury is free to do and read what they please until the trial starts. He tells the Lands not to talk to reporters and leaves after a big hug from Swede.

The next day, Mr. Holgren fires Dad. In the school cafeteria, Reuben sits with his class drinking milk out of bottles, the entire class wearing paper pilgrim hats in observation of Thanksgiving. Mr. Holgren enters, his acne-ridden face as grotesque as always, and pulls out his own paper pilgrim hat. Mr. Holgren begins to speak, but Reuben isn't listening. He's transfixed by the text saying "shoot me!" written on Mr. Holgren's hat. Reuben tries not to laugh, but loses the battle when a classmate leans over and whispers "Bang" in his ear.

Reuben laughs and Mr. Holgren glares at him before starting towards him around the table. Mr. Holgren hits the table with his thigh and sends six bottles of milk toppling to the floor. Dad appears and begins to clean up the milk. Reuben feels ashamed that his dad is a janitor. Mr. Holgren addresses Dad and mentions that people have complained about him stumbling and muttering, even in public. Reuben realizes that word of what happened at church with Reverend Johnny has spread, and knows that Dad won't defend himself.

Mr. Holgren then angrily fires Dad. As Reuben starts toward his father, he watches Dad reach up and slap Mr. Holgren in the face. Dad then turns to walk away, but Reuben watches transfixed as he notices that Mr. Holgren's horrible complexion has suddenly turned healthy. This makes Reuben angry enough that his lungs contract, and he has to go to the nurse's office to breathe steam. Reuben refuses to allow Dad to take him home, and can only ruminate on the injustice that Dad healed the evil "Chester the Fester" while Reuben, Jeremiah's own son, remains asthmatic.

*Reuben continues to use the newspaper coverage and Davy's letters to examine how a story changes depending on one's point of view. Tommy's family, at least, experienced grief and loss when he died. The adult Reuben's commentary here shows the end result of his growing up process: he eventually accepted that Tommy's death was a loss to someone, and that isn't negated by what Tommy did to the Lands.*



*The stories in the paper have real-world consequences, as evidenced by Mr. DeCuellar's fears. He sees that the emotions elicited by the stories in the papers may turn the jury against Davy, despite the fact that the jury is supposed to be rational and only take the facts of the case into account.*



*The lack of explanation surrounding Mr. Holgren's hat and the text on it turns this situation into something absurd—a scene that almost seems fictional in a story that's very realist. However, it's obviously real—Reuben's classmate could read the text too. This all works to make Dad's firing seem even more absurd and unjust.*



*Despite Reuben's obvious love and admiration for his father, he's not exempt from childish shame at his father's profession. Reuben also knows that the muttering is just Dad praying, which shows how religion can be distorted for one's own unsavory purposes. Religion here becomes a liability.*



*This miracle of healing Mr. Holgren's acne mirrors Jesus healing the sick, creating more comparisons between Dad and Jesus. Again, Reuben experiences emotions of injustice and unfairness that are indicative of his youth and immaturity. He doesn't yet understand that Mr. Holgren deserves to be healthy, regardless of how evil he might be to Reuben's family.*



## LATE IN THE NIGHT WHEN THE FIRES ARE OUT

On the day of the trial, the DeCuellar family insist that the Lands have breakfast at their house. Afterwards, they head to the courthouse, where they're not allowed to visit Davy. Reuben and Swede pace the hallway until someone offers them a private office where they can wait. Mr. DeCuellar enters and asks Swede who in her family is the best at the game War at Sea. Upon realizing that the Lands have never played, Mr. DeCuellar instructs Swede and Reuben in the game and the two play until the trial commences at noon.

Reuben thinks that the judge looks like a vain man, while Davy looks short and skinny. Reuben only remembers the first name of the prosecutor, Elvis, who begins the formalities. His speech renders Davy as a coldhearted murderer, while Mr. DeCuellar's response, though sound in Reuben's opinion, doesn't seem to impress the jury. Reuben watches as the trial goes downhill—he learns that Davy smashed the windows of Israel Finch's car on the night of the murder. Dad and Mr. DeCuellar don't look surprised. Reuben realizes that Davy had essentially given Israel and Tommy an invitation.

As the trial continues, Reuben understands that Davy has no chance. Even Dolly's testimony seems to have little effect on the jury. Reuben, terrified at having to testify, asks Swede to help him rewrite his narrative to make Davy look better, but Mr. DeCuellar insists that Reuben just tell the truth when he testifies the next day.

That night, Reuben and Swede sleep in sleeping bags in the DeCuellar's study. Swede states that they're going to lose, and says they need to break Davy out of jail. Swede, pacing, comes up with a childish scheme to bribe the guard with cookies. Reuben tells her to grow up, and Swede turns to the books lining the walls. She returns to bed with a volume of poetry and reads several poems out loud. Swede insists that one chilling poem is certainly a sign that means they need to break Davy out of jail.

Reuben takes the stand the following afternoon. Elvis approaches, tries to chat patronizingly with Reuben, and then moves into more pressing questions. Reuben says that as his time on the stand progressed, he began to feel dangerously confident. Elvis walks Reuben through the events of the night of Swede's abduction, and Reuben finally repeats Davy's phrase about putting a biting dog down. Elvis looks pleased and extracts a testimony that makes Davy look like a coldhearted killer. Mr. DeCuellar looks alarmed.

*Now that they're finally confronted with the reality of a court of law, Swede and Reuben quickly find that courts aren't exciting and justice isn't immediate. Instead, being at court means waiting patiently and playing a childish game to stay amused. This reinforces Swede and Reuben's youth and demonstrates how kind Mr. DeCuellar is to the Land family.*



*Reuben continues to find that court isn't what he thought it was going to be. The judge doesn't look like Reuben thinks a judge should, and Davy's case is apparently not the simple matter of right versus wrong that Reuben and Swede were allowed to believe it was. Davy's actions suggest that there was more to his conflict with Tommy and Israel than previously thought. His motive also becomes muddy as it looks like he wanted the opportunity to kill.*



*Reuben and Swede want to do what they've seen the papers do and rewrite the narrative to put Davy in a better light. Mr. DeCuellar's counsel to not rewrite Reuben's testimony suggests that fiction like that has no place in the rational courtroom.*



*Swede's childish plan makes her look especially young, but it also shows how loyal she is to Davy. She truly believes that Davy doesn't deserve to suffer the consequences of his actions. She adheres to Davy's personal code of honor, while Reuben fears the consequences too much to follow her in this reasoning. He'd rather place his faith in the rationality of the court.*



*Reuben has to face consequences of his own here when his overconfidence opens up a line of questioning from which he can't recover. Through this, he becomes an instrumental figure in what will surely be Davy's conviction. Reuben not only has to suffer guilt, but the consequences of disappointing Mr. DeCuellar, Davy, and Swede.*



That night, Reuben agrees to break Davy out of jail. Swede and Reuben make childish plans, and Reuben explains to the reader why he mentioned Davy's comment about putting the dog down during his testimony. He says that he regrets *how* he said it, not that he was honest. Reuben says that humility came to him far too late.

After Reuben and Swede go to bed, they arm themselves with stolen steak knives tucked into their belts. Reuben cuts his hands tucking his shirt in. The adults, however, drink their evening coffee in the living room and block the door. Swede and Reuben can come up with no other way to sneak out, and eventually lie down to wait for the adults to go to bed. Reuben wakes up when he rolls onto one of the knives, and pulls Swede's knives from her belt. Reuben wakes before dawn to find Dad in between him and Swede, trying to rouse them. Davy has broken out of jail.

## A BOY ON A HORSE

Reuben says that Swede delighted in finding out that Davy escaped by pony, but they didn't find this fact out for several days. Early that morning, the sheriff, Charlie Pym, knocks on Mr. DeCuellar's door and asks if the DeCuellars have had visitors. They hadn't, so all anyone knows is that Davy escaped sometime in the night. The police assemble a posse and Sheriff Pym tells Dad that the police will have Davy by lunch. Swede, still thrilled with Davy's escape, remarks that even twelve hundred officers couldn't catch Davy. Dad tells Swede to either talk sense or be quiet. Reuben can't understand why Dad isn't equally thrilled that Davy escaped.

Over the next several days, the posse grows in size. According to Walt Stockard, a deputy who regularly visits Dad at the DeCuellars', local men with all manner of weapons assemble daily to join the hunt. The papers switch back to writing about Davy as though he's an escaped hero. Eventually, Walt shares how Davy escaped: Davy told the guard on duty that his toilet wasn't flushing. The guard entered Davy's cell to inspect the toilet and woke up an hour later locked in the cell.

The Lands stay with the DeCuellars for three days. Walt visits daily with news of the posse's hunt, of which there's little—the rain erased any scent trail. Sheriff Pym grows angrier, and Walt tells Dad one day that Sheriff Pym is considering a house-to-house search. Mr. DeCuellar brushes this off as unconstitutional. In the afternoon, a farmer reports a stolen horse several miles from the jail. That night, the Lands head back to their own home.

*Reuben's guilt leads him to a childish attempt to remedy what happened. Through this, he tries to embody Davy and create his own code of personal honor and justice, which stands in opposition to that of the court and the law.*



*The details in this passage work to highlight Reuben and Swede's youth and inexperience—Reuben can't handle even a steak knife without cutting himself, and they fail at waiting up long enough to sneak out. However, Reuben makes it clear that he's relieved to not have to do something to undermine the established law, since he doesn't try to wake Swede and instead lets her sleep.*



*Reuben and Swede got exactly what they wanted. At this point, they believe that Davy is free and won't have to suffer a life in prison. Dad, however, is certainly aware that Davy will face even greater consequences for running away, including being hurt by the posse. Dad sees that it's very likely that Davy will be caught, while Reuben and Swede can only understand that Davy isn't in jail. They lack the ability to see that Davy's escape won't help him, if he wishes to remain a part of the family and society.*



*The newspapers' flip in tone shows how alluring the romance of a wronged, escaped hero can be. This also mirrors Swede's glee at Davy's escape, as now he's certainly a misunderstood outlaw in her mind. Like Mr. Holgren's pilgrim hat, Davy's method of escape is so simple it borders on absurd that it even worked.*



*Even when there's no trial in session, Reuben finds that organized justice still mostly consists of waiting. The fact that there's a posse plays into the novel's consideration of Western tropes. Here, the posse is shown to be ineffective, suggesting that the system of justice often portrayed in Westerns might also be ineffective.*



That same night, Reuben falls asleep listening to Swede typing away in her own room. He wakes to find a poem on the floor beside his bed about two men awaiting the gallows in jail, though there's a third noose. Swede comes into Reuben's room as he reads. The poem shifts to **Sunny Sundown** shooting two men who had threatened Sunny's wife. Sunny is then faced with the third noose. Reuben is shocked at this turn of events, though Swede's answers to his shocked questions indicate she's not finished.

Reuben asks Swede what happened to **Valdez**. Tears well up in Swede's eyes as she admits that she couldn't write **Sunny's** victory over Valdez. Reuben feels terrible, and wonders if Valdez is more than just a fictional character.

Over the next few weeks, the Lands learn that the stolen horse has returned home, hungry but fine. Rumors circulate that Davy rode for miles to the highway and then hitchhiked. The newspapers continue to paint Davy in a heroic light, which delights Swede. Dad, however, becomes sad and stops answering the phone. He spends his nights praying over his Bible. One night when Reuben gets up to breathe steam, he asks Dad if reading the Bible helps. Dad can't answer him.

The snowstorms begin the first week of December, and Reuben and Swede don't go back to school. Swede amasses a stack of schoolbooks in her room to try and convince Dad that she's still studying, but she spends her time reading Westerns instead. She tells Reuben one day that she has a new favorite author because his women "ride like men." Reuben doesn't see how this matters, but Swede explains that every Western is a love story and lists the qualities of the "right kind" of girl. Reuben asks whether **Sunny's** wife is the right kind of girl, which Swede doesn't take well.

Reuben keeps reading new installments of Swede's epic poem. A woman who isn't **Sunny's** wife rescues him from his unjust execution, which Reuben finds very problematic. When Sunny kisses his rescuer, Reuben can barely stand it, and tries to convince Swede to rewrite the poem to make Sunny's wife rescue him. Swede refuses, and tells Reuben to think of Sunny's rescuer as a "really great sister."

*Reuben's earlier fears that Sunny's poem won't turn out "right" are coming to fruition. Notice that in this part of the poem, Sunny's plotline almost exactly mirrors Davy's. Sunny also finds himself in a situation where he must defend his family, but the law plays by different rules and seeks to punish him.*



*Valdez shifts from symbolizing Israel and Tommy specifically to symbolizing things in general that Swede cannot control. Since she can't control Valdez, he simply disappears from Sunny's story.*



*Because Dad has a more developed sense of moral nuance than his children, he understands that Davy is in a great deal of danger if he's still out on the run. Swede doesn't even try to understand her father's reservations, while Reuben only understands that religion usually helps Dad, though it doesn't seem to now. However, the fact that Reuben is even asking suggests he's starting to grow up.*



*Swede continues to show an interest in story structure as she begins to understand that Westerns all follow a similar structure and engage similar character tropes. In addition to the structure itself, she also seems to be very interested in stories and characters that deviate from the set structure. Swede essentially uses fiction to explore instances of moral ambiguity similar to those that Reuben later discovers in the real world.*



*Reuben's agitation here at this morally ambiguous installment of Sunny's story provides another point from which to grow and develop. Swede again shows herself willing to question morality and how it functions, but only as it pertains to fiction, not the real world.*



## BY THE GRACE OF LURVY

Christmas looks bleak for the Lands—Dad finds irregular work, but soon comes down with a bad cough. Reuben and Swede wonder if they could look appropriately grateful if they receive only oranges for Christmas like poor characters from books do. Ten days before Christmas, Dr. Nokes visits for tea and finds Dad's cough alarming.

Reuben says that years later, Dr. Nokes said his main concern wasn't Dad, but Reuben, as his asthmatic lungs would never be able to handle pneumonia. Back in the narrative, Dr. Nokes convinces Reuben that while Swede needs practice being a nurse and should care for Dad, Reuben should talk to Mr. Layton about tearing down his unused corncrib (a ventilated outbuilding used to dry and store corn). Dr. Nokes tells Reuben that he has a strong back and Mr. Layton will pay him. Reuben is flattered and falls for the trick to get him out of the house and away from Dad's pneumonia.

Reuben begins the job of taking down the corncrib in the middle of December. While the corncrib looks ancient, Reuben struggles to make any progress with his crowbar. When he returns home for lunch, Swede offers him a bowl of villing (milk and sugar with dumplings). Reuben isn't impressed and tells the reader this is "sick food."

Swede tells Reuben that Dad is worse, and his lungs are filling up like Reuben's do. Hearing Dad thumping his chest, Reuben goes into Dad's room. Dad asks Reuben if this is what it feels like when Reuben struggles to breathe. He asks Reuben if he'd like to move to New Mexico. Reuben thinks it sounds fantastic, but Swede asks what will happen if Davy returns and they've left Roofing. Reuben tells Swede that Davy would find them, and says that New Mexico is still out West. Reuben loses himself in a daydream about his family riding together in New Mexico. He realizes that he went into Dad's room to help but never asked Dad if he needed anything. He offers Dad a glass of water and then eats his villing, which he finds good.

Back out at the corncrib, Reuben encounters a young boy named Raymond in the corncrib. Raymond is extremely congested and asks Reuben if he can watch the corncrib come down. He sits and talks about all manner of things while Reuben works on the corncrib. Finally, Reuben discovers that he's been struggling because his crowbar is bent incorrectly, and his progress accelerates as he figures out how to use it properly. Raymond asks Reuben if his brother is a murderer.

*Reuben and Swede try to come to terms with their bleak-looking Christmas by romanticizing the poverty they've read about in novels. They fixate on the material aspects of Christmas, rather than the fact that Dad is very ill.*



*Remember that Reuben idolizes Davy in part for his strength and competence. Hearing this kind of flattery and getting to do something as physical as take a building down allows Reuben to feel similarly adult and competent. Notice, though, how easily Reuben falls for this; he obviously craves recognition for this kind of adult competence. It shows that he wants to grow up and exhibit these markers of adulthood.*



*The recognition of Reuben's strength stopped with Dr. Nokes, as the "sick food" makes Reuben feel like his hard work is unappreciated. Reuben's struggle to actually make progress points to the fact that he's not actually particularly strong or adult.*



*Here, Reuben experiences a moment of heightened self-awareness that shows he is starting to care for others in a more selfless and adult way. Interestingly, moving to this new way of thinking about others makes Reuben appreciate the "sick food" more and differently. Also, notice here that Swede is unwilling to leave in case Davy returns. She sees staying as a way to demonstrate her loyalty to her brother, even if the high desert of New Mexico would be good for Reuben's lungs and overall health.*



*Remember that Reuben isn't getting the hero's welcome at home that he'd hoped for—he goes home to "sick food." Raymond, as a young child, idolizes Reuben and makes him feel strong and competent. Here, then, Reuben gets to feel adult and admired by those younger than he is. This is similar to how Reuben idolizes Davy, and it suggests that Davy's competence might be questionable.*



Reuben says that while the corncrib was the hardest work he'd ever done at that point, he realized soon that Swede's job of caring for Dad was harder. One night, after Reuben returns home, he stands at Dad's bedside and watches him sleep. Dad's breathing is so labored that Reuben thinks of his own scary nights and fearfully shakes Dad awake. Dad asks Reuben to pound his back, and his breathing becomes easier.

Reuben finishes tearing down the corncrib a few days later. He wishes that Raymond were there to watch as he piles up the slats and posts. When he gets home, Swede is in a foul mood. She takes Dad his dinner but won't speak to Reuben. Reuben plies her with half a candy cane, and Swede finally motions to their Christmas cards and says that they haven't gotten one from Davy. Reuben wonders out loud if any historical desperados sent Christmas cards, which doesn't sway Swede. Their conversation is interrupted when Mr. Layton knocks on the front door. He refuses to come in, but pays Reuben \$25 and two candy bars for his work on the corncrib.

Swede and Reuben spend two days wondering what fantastic things \$25 could buy. Reuben wishes he knew what Bethany Orchard wanted for Christmas so he could buy her a present. On December 23, Dad finally gets out of bed. Reuben, overjoyed, runs to help Swede make oatmeal for breakfast. At Swede's request, Reuben searches several places for sugar or syrup, but they have none. They settle on putting wrinkled apples in the oatmeal. When Reuben goes to fetch Dad for breakfast, he enters Dad's room and comes face to face with a man he barely recognizes. Dad isn't wearing a shirt, and looks like a skeleton.

Later that morning, Reuben tells Swede that he'd like to buy a canoe. Swede replies that they're out of food and have no money to buy more. Stepping out of the narrative, Reuben explains that he truly needed this spelled out for him, as needing to spend his hard-earned money on groceries annoyed him for a variety of reasons. Reuben silently fumes as Swede washes dishes, and Swede begins to describe a scene from [Little Women](#) in which one character sells her hair to buy a train ticket for another. Reuben realizes with disappointment what has to be done.

*Reuben's job of tearing down the corncrib is an activity that benefits only Reuben, while Swede's job of caring for Dad is rooted in family loyalty and responsibility. This realization indicates that Reuben understands that remaining loyal to one's family can be more difficult than simply looking out for oneself.*



*Reuben again wants to feel idolized, as Swede certainly doesn't seem ready to congratulate him on his hard work. Swede's foul mood stems from the fact that she sees Davy as disloyal for not sending a Christmas card. This is indicative of Swede's youth-- sending a card could be dangerous for Davy, but she instead fixates on feeling neglected. Notably, too, her knowledge of desperados supports her position, showing how she uses this history to support her own feelings and emotions.*



*Adjusting for inflation, \$25 in 1962 has the same buying power as about \$200 in 2017. Remember that this money is something Reuben earned by himself for himself, while Swede performed the difficult (and unpaid) work of family loyalty. However, Reuben the narrator begins to set the tone for this to change through the unsuccessful search for sugar. Essentially, though Reuben feels rich, his family decidedly isn't.*



*Both Reuben and Swede demonstrate impressive maturity for their ages—Swede, at nine years old, is in charge of managing finances and feeding the family, while Reuben has now dabbled in working outside the home. His decision to buy groceries, however, is written as a much greater emotional sacrifice than Swede's childhood.*





Reuben lists some of the foodstuffs he and Swede buy. Dad is especially happy with the coffee, and remarks on Reuben's strength as he drinks his cup. Then they hear a knock on the door, and Swede leads a man in a suit with a federal ID into the kitchen. This man says he is Andreeson, a federal investigator tasked with capturing Davy. Andreeson asks Dad to contact him if Davy makes contact, and says that the feds are involved now because Davy likely crossed state lines. As Andreeson says goodbye, Dad tells him that they won't speak again.

*When Andreeson appears, the Land family's enemy finally gets a face again. Andreeson represents the rational justice system out to get Davy and put him behind bars, which everyone (Dad included) doesn't want to happen at this point. When Dad comments on Reuben's strength, he's trying to make Reuben feel as though the work he did had worth and is appreciated, even though Reuben can't experience a reward in the form of a canoe.*



That night, Swede tells Reuben how the outlaw Cole Younger was captured after a bank raid. The night before Younger was to go on trial, the sheriff promised Younger that if he could name the killer of one of the bank tellers, he'd ensure Younger's freedom. In the morning, Younger handed the sheriff a paper that said, "be true to your friends." Reuben thinks this is a fantastic display of loyalty, although he feels compelled to mention several other historical figures that performed similar acts of loyalty.

*Swede and Reuben evidently place a great deal of importance on loyalty to friends and family. Here, Swede is comparing Dad to Cole Younger, which allows her to idolize her father in a way that ties in neatly with her love of Westerns, her own writing, and her general love for things that seem literary or dramatic.*



On Christmas Eve morning, Swede wakes early and begins preparing Christmas dinner, saying she can't wait for actual Christmas. Reuben and Dad spend the day wandering through the house smelling the food smells wafting out of the kitchen. Finally, Swede sets the table and calls them for dinner. Someone knocks at the door, and Dad goes and lets in Mr. DeCuellar and Mrs. DeCuellar, carrying gifts for Swede and Reuben. They also offer Dad the keys to Tin Lurvy's Airstream—Lurvy died unexpectedly, and left the Airstream to Dad in his will. The entire party moves dinner out to the trailer. Reuben asks Dad why he keeps laughing, and Dad answers that he prayed that morning for either Davy to be sent home, or for them to be sent to Davy.

*Again, preparing an entire Christmas dinner is a huge responsibility for a nine-year-old. The amount of responsibility that Swede takes on in her family suggests the possibility that she leans so heavily on her writing as a way to still experience childish joys in spite of all her very adult responsibilities. Fiction also provides her the source material to romanticize her duties. The arrival of the Airstream is indicative of the power of prayer, and it further supports the assertion that religion guides every character in the novel.*



## THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

One day in January, Swede returns from the post office bearing a postcard from August Schultz. Apparently Davy stopped in to see the Schultzes, and August indicates that Andreeson visited them as well. While Swede is ready to head west immediately, Dad spends the next few days selling household items and buying canned food with the profits. Dr. Nokes watches Dad sell his bed and incredulously asks Dad what he's using for directions. Dad replies that he has the "substance of things hoped for." A few days later Dad burns his mattress in the backyard, and Reuben asks the reader how his family could've possibly lacked faith that God was guiding them.

*The postcard from August is a sign that Dad's prayers are being answered; remember that they'd been planning on heading for Davy long before receiving the postcard. The postcard simply reinforces the power of religion and prayer to enact change in the real world. It also works to expand the loyalty to Davy outside of the Land family, as it implies that the Schultzes sheltered and protected Davy from the law.*



Dad, Reuben, and Swede leave on January 22. They stop the Plymouth (their old car) at the post office so Dad can stop their mail, and Reuben wishes that Bethany Orchard would walk by and bestow upon him a goodbye kiss. Instead of Bethany, an old man lists up the street towards the post office. Swede points out that the man is Mr. Finch, Israel's grandfather. He looks unkempt and very cold as he struggles to pull open the door of the post office. Reuben wonders if the Finch family might've suffered a real loss at Israel's death.

*Reuben wants to think of his family's journey as a grand adventure complete with romance. This is spoiled by Mr. Finch, however, as Reuben is forced to wonder if their trip isn't necessarily rooted in righteousness. This is a moment of uncomfortable maturity for Reuben as he continues the process of humanizing his "enemies" and their families, seeing them as full humans rather than one-dimensional villains.*



The Lands head for North Dakota. Reuben remarks to the reader that he felt a little disappointed after the anticipation of the weeks before. Not long after they cross the border into North Dakota, Swede points out a black shape in the road ahead and asks what it is. As they get closer, they realize it's a dead crow. Dad mentions that he's never seen a dead crow in the road before. Minutes later, they pass another dead crow.

*The never-before-seen dead crows suggest that the trip itself will be full of surprises and unknowns. They also illustrate just how cold it is, which will be an important thing to keep in mind going forward. The Lands aren't just fighting the law; they're fighting the elements and the West itself.*



Dad, Reuben, and Swede reach August and Birdie's house late in the afternoon. Their arrival rouses Reuben from a nightmare in which Valdez had crawled into Reuben's bunk with him, but Reuben was unable to tell anyone. He cannot shake off the dream as Birdie unbundles him and Swede in her kitchen. Reuben feels scared and worried that Dad has even admitted that he doesn't know where they go from August's. He told Reuben they're like the Israelites leaving Egypt. Reuben tells the reader that sometimes you'd rather use a map than faith.

*Valdez becomes even more sinister and his appearance in the nightmare means that he exists as more than just a fictional character in Swede's poem. This dream foreshadows the experience that Reuben will have in real life in North Dakota as he encounters villains he can't talk about. The fact that Reuben doesn't find Dad's comparison to the Israelites particularly comforting suggests that Reuben might be somewhat disillusioned with their trip already.*



## THE LAST THING HE WOULD DO

August and Birdie are able to offer the Lands details on Davy. They say he looked good but skinny, and August admits that he wasn't dressed warmly enough. Swede asks if Davy misses them, and Birdie tells her that Davy said being without his family is like having no sun. Reuben says he thought it was a funny thing for Davy to say, since he wasn't known for poetics, but Birdie's stern look at August meant that Davy must've said it. After a few more tasty details, August sends Reuben and Swede to bed.

*Even if it's not obvious to Reuben, it's certainly obvious to the reader that Birdie is telling Swede and Reuben something that isn't true, but that she knows will make them happy. This shows that using fiction this way can be a good thing. Davy likely misses his family, but the particulars of how he said so don't matter as much as the fact that he does indeed miss them.*



Swede feigns exhaustion, but Dad sees right through it. Reuben explains that Dad is well aware that the children's assigned bedroom has a floor vent that makes it easy to eavesdrop on conversation in the kitchen. Reuben and Swede listen as Birdie tells Dad that Davy doesn't understand how much trouble he's in. August mentions Andreeson's visit, and Swede whispers "ratfink" in Reuben's ear, which makes Reuben giggle. Dad says the papers got the story right, but that Reuben saw "it" and Dad would "trade with Reuben" if he could.

*Dad wants to mitigate his children's suffering wherever he can, hence wanting to trade the experience of witnessing the murders with Reuben. While wanting this is a very normal parental desire, it's also very Jesus-like, which continues to strengthen the connection between Dad and Jesus. Davy is evidently still following his own honor code, as he can't grasp why the formal law is so interested in him.*



Reuben doesn't understand what Dad wants to trade, and finds that most of the conversation is beyond him. He says that his primary response to witnessing the shooting was missing Davy. Reuben's mind wanders, but Swede tells him later that Birdie said Davy would never turn himself in.

*Reuben understands that his youth is preventing him from fully understanding the adult conversation. For him, being a witness matters very little, as the result of losing Davy would've been the same whether he witnessed the shooting or not.*



Reuben is the first one up the next morning and he smells something different in the air. He goes downstairs and lights the coffee pot in darkness. August, dressed in a nightshirt, joins him not long after. August asks Reuben if he smells the fog, and Reuben realizes that was the difference he smelled. August tells Reuben that whenever fog rolls in like this, he tells Birdie "happy birthday," as she was born on a foggy day. Reuben realizes he's never been with August alone, and understands the gift of being with Dad's best friend. August suddenly stands and suggests they take a ride.

*The fog here functions like the tramp did in the woods. It heralds a change in Reuben's relationship with August. August gives Reuben the gift of being treated like an adult confidante and equal instead of a child. This shows that Reuben isn't just feeling more grown up; adults are taking notice of the fact that he's maturing and giving him the opportunity to participate in adult conversation.*



August saddles their two horses, Laurie and Brit, and instructs Reuben to mount. They walk down through the pasture. Reuben is scared; he has to haul on Laurie's reins to keep her at a walk. Eventually they reach the river and head upstream. They pull off into a fallow pasture, and August asks Reuben if Dad is okay. Reuben thinks that Dad is certainly on the mend.

*Riding a horse is something that both Reuben and Swede have likely spent time romanticizing, but here, Reuben doesn't find it as fun or as freeing as he expected. This starts to break down the myth of the Wild West and illustrate that the West is a more difficult place to live than fiction might suggest.*



As the fog begins to lift, Reuben can pick out a small house in the distance with a big black turkey lurking around it. August tells Reuben that Dad grew up in this house, and Reuben is ashamed he didn't recognize it. August describes how wonderful the house used to look. Reuben thinks it looks sad now. The two continue to discuss the past. August wonders out loud what the turkey is up to, as it's still circling the house.

*As August introduces Reuben to Dad's childhood home, Reuben is asked to think of his father as a whole person with a past and not just a dad. This provides Reuben an initial exercise to practice seeing people as people, not one-dimensional characters defined simply by their roles.*



Reuben asks August how long he thinks it'll take them to find Davy. August only says that he's sure they'll find Davy, and then points out the little boy who just appeared in the doorway of the house holding a pan of oatmeal. August and Reuben watch as the turkey skillfully ambushes the boy, scaring him and taking the oatmeal for itself. August laughs as a collie comes out of the house and scares off the turkey. When it fixes its gaze on August and Reuben, August suggests they head home.

*August is putting his faith in Jeremiah, just as Jeremiah puts his faith in God. August has evidently witnessed the turkey ambush before. Reuben describes it in terms that are very stylistically Western, which continues to thread the myth of the West through Reuben's real life. Here, the myth proves very satisfying, as the ambush is perfect and humorous.*



Over breakfast, August winks several times at Reuben while Swede pouts at having been left out. Dad calls Reuben "Natty Bumppo" (a character from *Last of the Mohicans*) and Reuben ruminates on Dad's health. Dad inquires how the house looked, and Reuben sugarcoats his answer. August suggests Reuben tell Dad about the turkey.

*The fact that August pointed out Dad's poor health alerts Reuben to the possibility that Dad might not be as well or invincible as he thought. Reuben behaves in a very adult way as he tries to protect Dad's emotions regarding his childhood home.*



## AT WAR WITH THIS WHOLE WORLD

Swede had convinced Dad to allow her to bring both her saddle and her typewriter on the trip. As the Lands pull out of August and Birdie's driveway, Swede sits on her saddle on a sawhorse, the typewriter on a folding table in front of her. Reuben says that Swede wrote dozens of pages before their journey ended. However, her writing neglected to mention that all parties involved in the story, Davy included, are traveling by car at this point—August had fixed up his old Studebaker for Davy and sent him off with the car and a sack of canned goods.

Reuben offers a few lines of Swede's writing that mention stealing their brother back. The thought of "stealing" Davy troubles Reuben. Reuben tries to remember a time when he convinced Davy of anything, concludes that he never has, and further figures that neither Swede or Dad ever have either. Reuben asks Swede her thoughts on the matter, and the two discuss the likelihood of being able to talk Davy into returning to Roofing. Swede asks if Reuben still wants Davy to come home if he has to be in jail, and Reuben refuses to answer.

Swede asks why August gave Davy the Studebaker if he wanted Davy to turn himself in. Reuben has no real answer, though Reuben wonders to himself if it's possible for someone to believe something, but still act in a completely opposite way.

Reuben asks Swede what she's writing about, which turns out to be nightshirts. They discuss why August wears one, and Swede states that the difference between nightshirts and nightgowns is lace. Swede begins to read her typed page aloud, which details the fashion choices of Charlie Pitts, an old desperado. Reuben tells the reader that this text from Swede is a prime example of "original research."

The Lands stop at a park in Linton at noon to cook beans. After lunch Reuben and Dad take a nap, but Reuben wakes minutes later to Swede saying that Andreeson is parked across the park. Reuben creeps out of his bunk to peek and sees Andreeson eating. Andreeson catches sight of Reuben and waves. Swede wonders if he's trying to intimidate them. Andreeson leaves a few minutes later and Swede and Reuben debate whether they should tell Dad. Swede fears that Andreeson will make them go home, though Reuben thinks that's unlikely. Dad wakes up with a headache and suggests they stay overnight.

*Swede's record of the journey illustrates how she blends fiction with reality. For her, it doesn't matter that her account isn't strictly factual; it's more important that it's romanticized and makes use of motifs and tropes found in her beloved Westerns. Reuben's aside, however, suggests that taking Swede's record at face value does the reader a disservice, as it's necessary to consider the actual facts to understand the situation.*



*In Swede's mind, Davy has become a true desperado and is almost a fictional character. This fictionalization allows Swede to brush off Reuben's questions, which represent a more mature and rational way of looking at the situation and also maintain Davy's status as an actual person, not a fictional character. Reuben is aware that the real Davy isn't going to play by the rules of Swede's fictional narrative.*



*This question is indicative again of Reuben's foray into morally ambiguous ground. However, regardless of the morality of what August did, it drives home August's loyalty to the Lands.*



*This "research" is even more indicative of how Swede fictionalizes things in order to create her own idyllic and romantic world in which she doesn't have to consider truth. This is a humorous and low-stakes example, but Reuben will find that Swede's method, while comforting, isn't always useful.*



*Being followed by a federal agent is much less thrilling here than Swede might've imagined. This continues the novel's process of breaking down the romantic tropes of Western novels and exposing them as dramatic, but not actually that fun in practice. As Andreeson enters the scene, Reuben and Swede also have to wonder how (or if) their journey to find Davy fits into either a system of frontier justice or organized justice.*



Dad wakes up again for dinner. As they eat, they hear a bang on the Airstream door. Dad admits Mr. Andreeson into the Airstream. Mr. Andreeson tries to make small talk about the beauty of the Dakotas. Dad refuses to play along, so Mr. Andreeson asks why he's out in the Dakotas in the middle of winter. Dad tells the truth and admits that Davy contacted August and Birdie. Andreeson says that they don't have to be enemies, which Dad refutes. Andreeson leaves and Swede bursts in through the door moments later. Reuben thinks that he hadn't noticed she even left.

Swede makes coffee and swings into her saddle. She quickly types up several verses about a posse's ill-fated search for **Sunny Sundown**. She wakes before Dad the next morning and when Dad suggests they have pancakes, she suggests they leave early instead. Dad refuses, and when Swede claims she feels ill, he sends her back to bed. After a few minutes, Swede states that she's been praying and believes that God wants them to leave. Dad finally gives in.

Reuben and Swede sit in the back of the Airstream on Dad's bed to watch the highway disappear behind them. Reuben is thrilled that they escaped Andreeson, but Swede isn't willing to celebrate. She suggests that Andreeson will just find them again.

Reuben reminds the reader of the 1955 Plymouth's poor gas mileage and describes the two five-gallon gas cans they packed along as a precaution. When they approach a station, they find it deserted. Dad decides that they'll be able to make it to Mandan.

When they reach Mandan, Dad begins to slow down for the first gas station but decides to pass it by. He states that the price is high, but Swede whispers to Reuben that a state officer was sitting at the station. Dad passes several more stations, and Reuben begins to notice troopers sitting at every single one. The Lands drive silently through Mandan without stopping. Reuben feels chilled as he realizes that the troopers are looking for his family.

*It's somewhat unclear what exactly Mr. Andreeson's goal is, particularly if he believes his goal isn't in opposition to Dad's goal. This begins to complicate the Lands' belief that Andreeson is truly and fully their enemy. It suggests that while he still represents a version of the law that works in opposition to Davy, he might have Davy's best interests at heart.*



*Swede continues to conceptualize Davy as Sunny Sundown, though Andreeson now factors into her poem as the posse. By putting current events into an idealized time period like this, Swede can use what she finds interesting or useful and continue to view Davy as heroic, crafty, and guaranteed to succeed.*



*This is an uncharacteristically down to earth reaction from Swede, which suggests that something has happened to shatter her idealistic engagement with the situation.*



*The situation becomes increasingly dire and more realistic as they deal with the necessity for gas. This stands in stark opposition to Swede's idealized writing about the posse's hunt.*



*In Mandan, Swede's posse comes to life as the state troopers, while the Lands take on the role of Sunny Sundown. This complicates the relationship between Swede's fiction and the Lands' reality, as it illustrates that fiction can become reality. However, this also shows that in the real world, common tropes like this are actually very scary.*



## SOMETHING WARM

Reuben and his family make it through Mandan without being sighted by a single police officer. He asks the reader to "make of it what you will." That night, Swede tells Reuben that Dad is just like Moses parting the Red Sea. Reuben believes this comparison is somewhat impertinent. He tries to suggest several lesser prophets, including Jonah, and Swede refers to Jonah as a griper. This further irritates Reuben until Swede explains that Jonah spent his time pouting. Reuben is dumbfounded, and hopes the other prophets hadn't had "childish flaws" like that. But he tells Swede that Jonah at least wrote a book that's in the Bible, unlike Dad.

Reuben wonders why Andreeson went to such lengths to find them. Swede says she expected it, and cagily says that Andreeson is still in Linton. She finally admits that she put maple syrup in Andreeson's gas tank, looking proud and scared.

The Lands still need gas. Ten miles out of Mandan, Dad pulls over, uses the spare ten gallons, and lies down with a headache. Swede reminds Dad that it's Saturday, and that gas stations will be closed the following day. Dad asks Swede to pray for more gas, tucks her and Reuben into bed, and goes to his room.

Later, Swede asks Reuben why they even have to buy more gas after miraculously evading state troopers earlier that day. They discuss the possibility that Dad prayed for it to happen, potentially with his eyes closed. Reuben suggests that if you're praying for something big enough, God keeps you from crashing. Reuben compares it to getting 13 doughnuts at the baker's instead of 12, which Swede deems disrespectful. After a few minutes of silence, Swede says that she thought that Dad could just pray the tank full, since it's not very different from what happened earlier in the day.

Reuben says he doesn't know if Dad prays for "them" (miracles) or if they just happen. He reminds Swede of the miracle of his birth, and goes on to detail several other of Dad's miracles. Reuben and Swede have never spoken of this before, and Swede gets up to inspect her healed saddle. Reuben says that the fact that Swede never noticed that the split disappeared is the part that people have a hard time believing.

*Reuben evidently believed that the prophets were all shining examples of Christian ideals, and the possibility that Jonah wasn't is disturbing for him. This forces Reuben to consider that the prophets were people with flaws like any other, not the type of fictional characters that behave perfectly at all times. When Reuben downplays his father's miracles only because they're not in the Bible, it reinforces the idea that the novel itself performs a Bible-like function.*



*Sabotaging Andreeson was Swede's way of showing her loyalty to her family, though the consequences of her sabotage are intensified since the Lands still need gas.*



*Dad seems to be using prayer here less to truly bring about change and more as a way to comfort Swede. This suggests that religion can provide comfort even when it doesn't necessarily bring about concrete results.*



*Remember that this is the first miracle that Swede has witnessed; in her mind, Dad could easily be capable of anything. It's an exciting prospect as it suggests that things she previously thought existed only in fiction do indeed exist in real life. Reuben demonstrates again how much he has to learn about the world when he attributes a baker's dozen to God.*



*Reuben alludes to the fact that he's told this story before, which implies that he's spent his life acting as a disciple for his father and spreading the word of his miracles. Again, he doesn't require the reader to take what he says as fact, which suggests that even as fiction, there's something to gain from his story.*



The thermometer reads 19 degrees the next morning. The trailer ran out of propane in the night, so Reuben, Dad, and Swede eat dry cereal for breakfast since the milk is frozen. As Reuben kneels on the stove to put the coffee pot away, he knocks over a stack of cups and they shatter on the stove. Dad begins to sing "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as he cleans up the shards from the cups.

The Lands drive all morning in the freezing Plymouth. They pass through several towns and take note of all the closed gas stations. Swede mentions that Teddy Roosevelt ranched not far from where they are currently in North Dakota. In the early afternoon, the Plymouth starts misfiring and bucking as it struggles to burn gas. They see a sign for the town of Grassy Butte and decide to stop there, but before they reach the town, they see a farmhouse with gas pumps outside. A sign reads "Dale's Oil Company," and Dad suggests they stop.

Dad knocks on the farmhouse door. On the second knock, a woman opens the door holding a baby goat sucking at a bottle. She informs them that it's Sunday and Dale left several months ago. Dad offers his sympathies and the woman's reply includes multi-syllabic words that thrill Swede. Dad asks to buy gas. The woman abruptly shuts the door but returns a few minutes later dressed for the outdoors. She fills their tank and tells Dad her name is Roxanna. Dad suggests she changes the name of the pump to "Roxanna's Oil," and then asks if she has propane.

Reuben, Swede, and Dad wait inside while Roxanna fills the propane tank. A nanny goat and her blind kid live in the bathroom. The billygoat is a shady character, and Roxanna and Swede exchange all manner of names to describe him. Dad asks Roxanna if Grassy Butte has a motel. He, Reuben, and Swede are almost back at the car when Roxanna opens her door again and offers them rooms at her house.

## THE SKIN BAG

Roxanna serves her guests a fantastic meal. Dad looks content and Swede appears deep in thought. Roxanna tells them that she grew up in Montana. Her mother died when she was young, so she grew up motherless like Reuben and Swede are doing. She learned how to ranch from her father, and later helped him run his movie house in Lawrence, Montana. Swede asks if Roxanna met movie stars, but Roxanna says she only once met a famous screenwriter. Swede seems disappointed.

*The bitter cold and lack of resources continue to show Reuben and Swede that the West in the winter isn't simply idyllic campfires; it's a truly difficult and uncomfortable place to live. Here, as fiction becomes reality, it loses its shine and becomes far less romantic.*



*Despite the freezing cold and lack of romance, Swede remains insistent on relating the Lands' adventure to history and fiction about the West. This shows Swede's childish optimism and drives home again how much she admires real people who embody the admirable qualities of cowboys and ranchers and engage in hard work.*



*Roxanna recalls Swede's fascination with specific women from Western novels that "ride like men." Roxanna appears fully self-sufficient, willing to buck tradition (by selling gas on a Sunday), and further, appears to be a wordsmith like Swede herself. This turns Roxanna into a prime role model for Swede.*



*Dad evidently doesn't intend to stay, despite the fact that Roxanna's farm and Roxanna herself seem like a miraculous discovery. When she invites them to stay it stands as another instance of something too good or far-fetched to be real becoming real.*



*This is Reuben's first mention that growing up motherless is even something he dwells on. Meeting someone else similarly motherless offers him a way to connect to Roxanna, while Swede continues to connect with Roxanna through the West and fiction. However, even Roxanna's experience of the West and of movies like this isn't as satisfying in real life.*



As Roxanna talks, Dad leans back and seems very happy at how their evening is playing out. Reuben remarks that by this point Dad had been so long without a wife that this sort of dinner with a woman was probably like "a favorite hymn remembered." Reuben thinks of how lonely Dad must be. Dad asks Reuben how his breathing is, embarrassing Reuben. He tells Dad it's fine and he and Swede head to bed.

That night Reuben dreams that a creepy little man with a bag made of skin comes to steal his breath. He wakes, scared and confused, to Swede crying, Dad holding him, and someone thumping his back. In his confusion Reuben tries to break free, but sees that Roxanna is the one hitting his back. After 20 minutes Reuben's breathing eases. Roxanna goes downstairs to boil water for Reuben.

When Reuben wakes the next morning, he looks out the window to see snow hip deep. Swede is gone from her bed, and Reuben yells for her. The house is empty, and Reuben looks out Dad's window. He sees Dad, Roxanna, and Swede shoveling a path to the barn. Reuben tries to yell for them to wait for him. He runs to his room to get dressed, but finds that after yelling he can barely breathe. He sits down and listens to Swede's happy yells. Reuben feels horrible for himself as he crawls back into bed. He thinks that even God isn't inside this house; He's surely outside having fun with Reuben's family and Roxanna.

Swede wakes Reuben up several hours later, excited by the deep snow and the fact that Dad decided they're going to stay another night with Roxanna. Reuben is too engrossed in his own self-pity and says that they're not going to find Davy if they stay. Swede retorts that they can't leave anyway, and begins to describe the wonders of the barn. Reuben tries to turn the conversation back to finding Davy, but Swede fixes Reuben with a disgusted expression and accuses him of feeling sorry for himself.

Reuben tackles Swede to the ground. Swede easily wins the scuffle, stands up, and yells at Reuben to watch her breathe and do jumping jacks. Reuben can barely breathe, but manages to say "uncle" at Swede's prodding. Reuben feels nearly friendless now that it's apparent his own family is sick of his asthma. Swede looks concerned and asks Reuben what's wrong with his lips. Reuben answers that she went outside without him, and Swede starts sobbing. They sit on the floor together, Swede crying and Reuben trying hard to breathe.

*Even if the West of North Dakota isn't what the Lands expected, it affects Reuben and forces him to grow up and see his father as a whole, lonely person. In this way, the real West is shown to function in the real world like it does in fiction. It remains a transformative force.*



*Roxanna slips right into the Lands' lives without a second thought. She seems already like she cares deeply for these children she met less than 12 hours ago. This suggests the possibility that her presence in their lives is meant to be and is the will of God, showing again the power of religion and prayer.*



*Reuben's health is taking a turn for the worse--in this case, the West is still transformative, but not in a good way. Notice how deep Reuben's loneliness is, and particularly that what makes it unbearable is God's absence. This not only humanizes God (who's outside having fun), it shows how much Reuben relies on religion to remain hopeful and happy.*



*For the first time in the novel, Swede has found a happy escape from difficult realities in an experience that takes place in reality rather than fiction. Notably, this distraction is exciting enough to distract her from thoughts of Davy. This suggests that the power of real experiences can be greater than that of fiction.*



*Reuben feels betrayed by his family and Swede specifically on all fronts. She got to experience the barn, while Reuben didn't even have the comfort of fiction or religion to keep him company inside. In Reuben's mind, Swede even had God outside with her. Reuben's illness is also getting worse; he's not getting enough oxygen to maintain normal color.*





Swede confesses that she really did forget about Davy for a while. She says she likes Roxanna, and they agree that it's better they stay. Reuben says to the reader that the fact that they're snowed in at Roxanna's is surely the work of the Lord, as it probably seems to the state troopers like they vanished.

Reuben asks when they're going to leave, and suggests they'll probably get arrested as soon as they hit the road again. Swede finds the idea that they're fugitives thrilling. Reuben calms her by reminding her of Tom Sawyer. He says that running from law enforcement is a privilege and they shouldn't blow it by telling Roxanna about their situation. Swede wants to swear an "appalling oath" in blood, like Tom and Huckleberry Finn, but Reuben steers her away from this idea.

It takes the county snowplows days to reach the house, so Reuben and Swede fill their days helping Roxanna with chores. One day, as Roxanna cleans out the goat pen, Reuben asks her why she has a picture of the "Wild Bunch" (a historical outlaw gang). Roxanna says that her great-uncle knew Butch Cassidy, and Swede is awestruck.

Roxanna explains that her great-uncle Howard had been a gunsmith and a doctor and was known for his cinnamon rolls. One day, upon returning home from church, Howard found a boy on his steps, asking if Howard would look at his gun. Howard allowed the young man into his kitchen and deemed the gun to be unfixable. The boy looked distraught. Howard offered him a cinnamon roll, and the boy introduced himself as Butch. Howard offered to sell Butch a similar gun from his own collection. They negotiated a deal for the gun and eventually became friends. Howard even occasionally "dabbled in outlawry" with Butch.

Dad enters and says that the snowplows are coming. He tells Roxanna that they can settle up and leave tomorrow. Reuben and Swede can barely stand the idea of leaving. Roxanna smiles at Dad and asks him if he's in a hurry to leave. Reuben explains that none of them were truly in a hurry to leave, and they stayed as long as they did mostly because Dad hadn't received any instructions from God as to where to go next.

*Again, Reuben engages with their predicament in terms of how it looks from a fictionalized standpoint. He also again attributes their situation to God, reminding the reader of how much Reuben relies on God's guidance.*



*The idea that running from law enforcement is a privilege shows that Swede and Reuben still see their journey west as an idealized, grand adventure. Reuben demonstrates his maturity by suggesting they not take this idealization to the full, dramatic, literary conclusion of a blood oath, while Swede looks even younger in comparison.*



*Reuben and Swede now have the opportunity to romanticize daily farm chores. Swede's awe stems from the fact that though the Wild Bunch was real, she only ever thought about it as though it's fiction. Now it exists in Swede's mind like her saddle does: idealized, but a real thing.*



*The tale is fantastical but again, the reader (and the children) is asked to take it as fact that Roxanna's story actually happened. This continues to blur the line between fiction and reality, while continuing as well to situate the West as a place where fantastical events like this can happen. It also provides Roxanna's character with even more mystery and allure, especially in Swede's eyes.*



*Though Reuben and Swede see being at Roxanna's in the first place as an act of God, they can't make sense of why they haven't received instructions. This suggests that there's some dissonance between what they believe God wants them to do and what will actually happen. This reinforces the idea that religion is powerful, but it can also be confusing.*



After the plow passes, Dad instructs Reuben and Swede to pack their things. Swede is extremely upset, and isn't comforted by Reuben's suggestion that Dad heard from God about Davy's whereabouts. In her anger, Swede throws her toothbrush at Reuben. She asks him if he really believes that God told Dad where Davy is, and when Reuben answers no, she tells him to shut up.

When Reuben and Swede enter the kitchen for supper, they find Roxanna standing at the counter. She turns around and smiles at the children, holding a full picnic basket. Reuben and Swede are dumbfounded by her beauty.

*Suddenly, Swede and Reuben discover that they've found something better and more fulfilling than being on the road in the Wild West. This continues to show that the West, while alluring, isn't all it's made out to be. There's value in staying put and experiencing a sense of family and community.*



*The description of Roxanna mimics descriptions of artistic representations of the Virgin Mary, suggesting that she's taking on those holy qualities and becoming more like Dad.*



## UNDER THE GIBBON MOON

Reuben explains that the reader might find the picnic basket in the middle of winter confusing, and rightly so. Roxanna, however, knows that the middle of winter in the Badlands is a wonderful time for a picnic. She and the Lands pile into the Plymouth. Roxanna gives directions and Dad drives. Reuben wishes he could erase Davy out of Dad's mind, and thinks that if he'd been able to write the scene, Roxanna would've taken Dad's hand.

Roxanna tells Dad to park and then leads them up a hill. When they look down from the top, they see steam, heat, and flames coming from cracks in the earth. Reuben thinks it looks like a beautiful Hell. Roxanna explains that this is a vein of exposed lignite (a kind of coal). She instructs Dad to set out the picnic blanket on a warm rock, and everyone is warm enough to unbutton their coats. Dad and Roxanna sit down, while Swede and Reuben run off to explore. When they return to the picnic, it's obvious that Dad and Roxanna have been talking in a way not meant for children, which Swede and Reuben find infuriating.

As Roxanna dishes up food out of her Dutch oven, Dad points out that Martin Andreeson is approaching. Andreeson refuses Dad's dinner invitation, introduces himself to Roxanna, and sits down on a rock to smoke a cigarette. Swede mysteriously disappears from the gathering. Andreeson tells Dad that they're getting close to Davy, and it's getting more dangerous for Davy as time goes on. He asks Dad for his help finding Davy, and says that a local farmer has seen Davy stealing pigs.

*Reuben indicates here that while he's telling the reader the story, he's not in charge of it. This begins to develop the difference between Reuben and Swede. Reuben believes himself to be a casual onlooker and dreams of enacting change, while Swede actively tries to shape both her real world and her fictional world.*



*Here, the wonders of the natural world take on supernatural and religious qualities in Reuben's eyes. This wonder also reinvigorates some of the magic of the West. As Dad and Roxanna appear to draw closer to each other, it becomes apparent that Roxanna is representative of the "right kind" of woman. While the wrong kind of woman might be interesting for a plot, a woman like Roxanna can provide comfort and warmth.*



*Despite the fact that Andreeson's goal runs counter to that of the Lands, his consideration for Davy's safety indicates that he cares about Davy and his family's wellbeing. This continues to humanize Andreeson by showing that Andreeson considers his own "bad guys" (in this case, Davy) as people deserving of care and consideration, regardless of their crimes.*



Roxanna remains silent through all of this. Reuben tells the reader that judging by the look on her face, she'd raised Davy herself. Andreeson asks Dad if he'd help by driving around with him, suggesting that he might be able to help "calibrate" the search. Dad is offended, but Andreeson explains that several years ago, they were able to find a kidnapped girl by driving around with the victim's sister, who, though very upset, was somehow miraculously able to lead Andreeson to her sister.

Reuben feels sick and scared of Andreeson. Dad refuses Andreeson's request and tells Andreeson he's suggesting "spookism." Andreeson says that Mr. Holgren believes Dad has access to a higher power, and Dad promptly shuts down the conversation. Dad and Andreeson exchange cards and Andreeson leaves.

Later that night, Swede and Reuben wonder why Andreeson didn't arrest them and what exactly "spookism" is. Reuben wonders why Andreeson is hoping to employ such measures if he's so close to Davy. Swede is thrilled that there's been a sighting of Davy.

## THE THROBBING HEART OF NEWS

The next morning, Reuben is carrying eggs from the barn when he sees a man on horseback up on the hill. He knows it's Davy and waves to the horseman. Davy doesn't wave back but turns his horse away. Reuben rushes to deliver the eggs to Swede and then return to Davy. Roxanna hears Reuben say he saw a horseman and says it's probably Lonnie Ford, a local rancher who runs cattle on the hill. Reuben doesn't tell either Swede or Roxanna that he knows it was Davy.

Reuben runs back outside, through the barn, and begins to climb the hill. He feels adventurous and imagines Swede later telling him that taking off after the possibility of Davy was heroic. Reuben wonders if it really was Lonnie Ford, and imagines several possibilities for what would happen if he came upon Mr. Ford. He describes them as "overbaked" and suggests that this is why Swede is the writer.

Reuben reaches the horse's trail and decides to follow it, still imagining meeting Mr. Ford. As he crests a hill, Reuben sees Davy sitting just on the other side on a horse. Reuben and Davy look at each other for a minute before Davy smiles at Reuben and asks him how the climb was.

*Andreeson suggests that miracles are possible when there's a strong sense of familial loyalty and love. Roxanna is developing her own sense of loyalty to the Lands and Dad specifically. This further supports the relationship between Dad and Jesus as Roxanna becomes another of his followers.*



*The fact that Andreeson doesn't attribute this miraculous event to God turns it into something sinister. Mr. Holgren, wanted or not, becomes another of Dad's followers.*



*Swede is so caught up in the thrill of the hunt, she fails to acknowledge that a sighting of Davy means that Davy is likely in danger of being caught and forced to reckon with the possibility of prison.*



*The sighting draws upon the visual language of Western movies. It also works to make some of Swede's imaginings about Davy's life on the run real. Like a historical desperado, he's traveling on horseback. The fictional West is becoming real and the line between fiction and reality is getting thinner and thinner.*



*Again, though Reuben admires those who take control of stories and try to shape them, he finds that he's happier telling stories than making them up. This provides Reuben more credit as a narrator and as a witness; he's far more likely to be telling the truth, since his imaginings are self-described as overbaked.*



*Even if Reuben finds his imaginings unsatisfactory from a literary point of view, they still provide enjoyment. This shows Reuben's firm grasp on reality, as he doesn't try to present these imaginings as fact by any means.*



Davy pulls Reuben up behind him on the horse and they pick their way down the hill. When the ground levels Davy asks Reuben to jump off. Reuben fumbles the dismount, but Davy dismounts after him and grabs him in a bear hug. Davy asks how Reuben knew he was the rider, and Reuben babbles about how he knew right away. Davy makes sure Reuben that didn't tell anyone about him.

*Reuben again struggles to ride a horse, even with help. This continues to break down the basic elements of Westerns and reveal them to be difficult or unsatisfactory in practice, though romantic in fiction. Reuben is quick to show Davy how loyal he is and make it clear that he still admires Davy.*



Davy says he spied on Reuben and the rest of the family last night at the lignite field. He asks who Andreeson is, and Reuben launches into descriptions of how horrible Andreeson is. Reuben asks Davy where he's living, but Davy refuses to tell. The brothers sit on a down tree and make small talk. Reuben remembers Mr. Finch and wonders if Davy feels bad about killing Israel Finch.

*Reuben still views Andreeson as a one-dimensional enemy, even as he's reminded that Davy himself isn't a one-dimensional hero. Davy appears restless, which suggests that his life on the run might not be all that idyllic or romantic.*



Davy asks about Roxanna, and Reuben gives a cursory explanation. Reuben suggests that Davy come down to Roxanna's to see Swede, but Davy gently refuses, citing the threat of Andreeson as his reasoning. Davy says that he's trying to avoid going to prison. Reuben asks what he's supposed to say when he returns to Roxanna's, and Davy sharply tells Reuben that he can't tell anyone about him. Reuben wonders if it's possible to not tell Swede.

*Davy essentially asks Reuben to grow up here by asking him to keep a secret from Swede and act as an individual. Further, this recalls Reuben's remark about Davy seeming to hunt alone. Reuben will have to choose if he'd like to move through life alone like Davy, or with the help of community and God like Dad does.*



Davy abruptly changes the subject. He says he didn't steal the horse; the horse belongs to a friend. Reuben asks if the friend is Lonnie Ford. Davy grows restless, and Reuben begins to panic as he realizes that the visit is coming to a close and he'll never see Davy again. Davy swings up on his horse, pulls Reuben up behind him, and moves off to take him back to Roxanna's.

*Davy's insistence that Reuben know the horse isn't stolen shows Davy's awareness that Reuben will romanticize Davy's life and fill in any blanks with what he knows of Western motifs. Reuben sees Davy as betraying Reuben's loyalty here, as Davy seems unwilling to return Reuben's show of loyalty.*



Reuben asks what Davy's friend's name is. Davy says that his friend is in a lot of trouble, but has been good to Davy. The friend's name is Jape Waltzer. Reuben continues to panic about not seeing Davy again. When they reach the hill behind Roxanna's, Reuben shamefully tells Davy that he'll tell Dad if Davy doesn't show him where he lives. Davy finally agrees and Reuben, surprised, falls off the horse. Davy tells Reuben that he'll be back later that night to pick him up.

*Reuben continues to demonstrate his own incompetence at existing in the West as he struggles with the horse. Though Reuben's desire for a display of loyalty is understandable, the particulars of his threat are very childish and continue to point to Reuben's youth. Davy seems to have reservations about his "friend," suggesting again that life on the run might not be entirely wonderful.*



When Reuben enters Roxanna's house, Swede is grumpily mixing up frosting for cinnamon rolls. Swede asks if Reuben was looking for Dad, and explains that Dad went out with Mr. Andreesson. Reuben cannot understand why Dad would do such a thing, but Swede offers no answers. Roxanna comes inside from helping a customer and Reuben shouts his question of why Dad went with Andreesson. Roxanna sits next to Reuben and explains that Dad was "led." Reuben doesn't buy this, but Roxanna says that she woke last night to Dad praying. Reuben explains that later, Roxanna would tell them that she heard Dad go toe to toe with God over whether or not to go with Andreesson.

Roxanna tries to show Reuben how he was led to do things too, like purchase groceries with his \$25. Reuben isn't willing yet to play along.

Roxanna tells Reuben and Swede that Butch Cassidy didn't die in Bolivia; rather, he died in Kansas. Swede is thrilled because she never truly believed Cassidy died in Bolivia. Cassidy took a new name, Jonas Work, and entered the windmill business. Roxanna shows Reuben and Swede the obituary for Jonas Work, which had been clipped out of the paper and sent to her uncle Howard by an unknown sender. Reuben and Swede spend the day poring over the obituary and wondering about the particulars of Butch Cassidy's death.

## THE LITTLE MAN'S COUNTRY

That night, Reuben fearfully walks out past the barn. He tries to think of storybook characters to give him strength, but finds he's still afraid. Finally, he calls out for Davy and a snort from a horse answers. Davy pulls Reuben up behind him and they head off. They then stop at the top of a hill and look at the stars. Reuben wonders out loud how God arranged the stars in the sky, and Davy accuses Reuben of "waxing poetic." They continue on and make small talk. Reuben offers Davy gingersnaps and asks if he and Jape live in a tepee. Davy turns around and tells Reuben in a serious tone to call Jape "Mr. Waltzer," and says that the girl with him is named Sara.

*Roxanna has now seen with her own eyes how Dad interacts with God, and she joins Mr. Holgren and Reuben in the belief that Dad has access to a higher power. Like Reuben, she becomes a witness and a disciple of Dad's. Here though, she must lead Reuben, Dad's other witness, to understand or accept the intricacies of Dad's relationship with God. Reuben childishly insists on continuing to view Andreesson as an enemy and refuses to consider a more nuanced take on the situation.*



*Reuben insists still on behaving like a child. He sees that buying groceries helped his family, while the possibility that helping Andreesson will help the family seems far-fetched.*



*The story once again seems far-fetched, though Swede and Reuben take it as fact. They do, however, continue to embellish the story and make it fit their own preconceived notions as they wonder about and discuss the particulars of Cassidy's death. This shows again how Swede in particular takes liberties with facts to make things true that she wants to be true and not think critically about them.*



*Davy shows disdain here for Reuben's belief that God arranged the stars in the sky, indicating again that he finds the idea of God annoying and not worth his consideration. Davy's insistence that Reuben refer to his friend using his title creates a sense of tension about what exactly this friend is like. Reuben's comment about the tepee is indicative of Reuben's engagement with the situation as though it's romantic fantasy, rather than potentially dangerous real life.*



Davy and Reuben ride silently and Reuben loses track of time. Finally they come upon a valley like the one where Roxanna took the Lands to picnic, but this one is far less impressive. Reuben is disappointed to see a lit window of a cabin instead of a tepee. As they ride towards it, Mr. Waltzer steps out. He helps Reuben off the horse and makes him feel welcome. Reuben notices that Davy has disappeared and catches sight of Mr. Waltzer's eyebrows, which scare him. Reuben answers Mr. Waltzer's questions—he's not tired, his toes are cold, and he means to do right by Davy.

Mr. Waltzer leans down to Reuben and asks Reuben what he'd say if he was told that the hills will turn to dust, water will flood the land, and sea creatures will swim in the water. Reuben tells the reader that he didn't even know he needed to be careful at the time. Reuben tells Mr. Waltzer that he'd want to know what day, and Mr. Waltzer invites him inside. The cabin is sparse and sheets hang in the corner, marking out a partition.

Mr. Waltzer invites Reuben to sit at the table in the cabin, and tells Reuben to ask him anything. Reuben can't think of anything to ask except why Mr. Waltzer lives here. At that, Mr. Waltzer calls for Sara to pour Reuben coffee. Sara emerges from behind the sheets and pours coffee before returning to her hiding place.

Mr. Waltzer answers that this place is a good one to wait for the world to change. Reuben asks if the world is changing the way Mr. Waltzer wants it to, and Mr. Waltzer replies that it is. Reuben doesn't know what to make of any of this, so he asks how Mr. Waltzer knows Davy. Mr. Waltzer describes being in a cafe and hearing the fry cook answer a call about a Studebaker. Mr. Waltzer then asks Reuben about how children at school are punished, and he suggests that Reuben feels happiness knowing that punishment is being dealt to someone else. Mr. Waltzer says that's how he felt sitting in the cafe, knowing that someone else was going to get in trouble and it wasn't him.

Mr. Waltzer calls for Sara to prepare dinner as Davy enters the cabin. Davy offers to help Sara, and she smiles at him. Mr. Waltzer continues his story, and explains how he whisked Davy into the woods on his horse. Sara prepares the meal without fanfare while Mr. Waltzer talks, and Reuben can tell that Mr. Waltzer isn't an easy person to please.

*This entire experience makes it very clear that Reuben is neither child nor adult, but somewhere in between. Though Mr. Waltzer succeeds at making Reuben feel very adult as he welcomes him by not treating him like a child, Reuben's fear betrays to the reader that Reuben is still subject to childish fear. However, Reuben attempts to show Mr. Waltzer that he does possess a mature sense of loyalty to Davy.*



*Mr. Waltzer obviously engages with his own brand of fiction in the real world, which draws a comparison between him and Swede. However, Mr. Waltzer's engagement with this fiction seems to be an extreme version. He's allowed fiction to entirely obscure his sense of reality and therefore appears as a crazy person.*



*Mr. Waltzer's invitation works to make Reuben feel adult, although he recognizes that his critical thinking skills aren't developed enough to come up with questions that probe any deeper.*



*Mr. Waltzer's cryptic answers beg the question of what kind of a world he'd like to see. While most of the particulars remain unclear, it's safe to assume that Mr. Waltzer's ideal world is one where he is able to move freely and not face consequences for whatever wrongs he committed. This mirrors what Reuben and Swede want for Davy, but it seems much more sinister coming from Mr. Waltzer. This suggests that even if such a world is possible, it might not be desirable.*



*Reuben begins to understand that the power dynamics at play in the cabin likely aren't in Davy's favor; he must dance carefully around Mr. Waltzer like Sara does. This suggests that even Davy's dreams of moving through life alone haven't come true.*



Reuben suddenly feels very tired and looks down. Mr. Waltzer accuses him of praying to God for the food, and says that Reuben needs to thank him, not God. Reuben does, and notices that Mr. Waltzer is missing two fingers. Mr. Waltzer asks Reuben how his family ended up in this part of North Dakota, wondering if they've been all over, and Reuben says they came straight here. Mr. Waltzer asks who led them and Reuben realizes he thinks that Davy tipped them off. Reuben thinks that God led them, but asks Mr. Waltzer what kind of "leading" he means. Mr. Waltzer's reply makes Reuben think he would actually believe Reuben's claim about God leading them, but Reuben says instead that they just had great luck.

Suddenly, a loud squeal comes from behind the sheets and a small screeching pig runs into Mr. Waltzer's lap. Mr. Waltzer calms the pig and calls for Sara. She emerges from behind the sheets and Reuben wonders why she was in there instead of eating with them. Mr. Waltzer asks Sara to explain what happened. She says she accidentally stepped on the pig's tail. Mr. Waltzer asks her to apologize to the pig.

Mr. Waltzer asks Reuben what he wants to do with his life, and Reuben answers that he'd like to breathe. Davy explains that Reuben has lung trouble. Reuben's breath is worsening, and Mr. Waltzer tries to instruct Reuben on how to properly breathe. Reuben's lungs tighten and he asks to be excused. Mr. Waltzer is incredulous. Davy tells Reuben to lie down, Mr. Waltzer tries to "help," and Reuben tells Mr. Waltzer to shut up as he struggles for breath and faints.

Reuben dreams of the man with the skin bag again and wakes to Mr. Waltzer's face close to his own. Mr. Waltzer explains that Davy is getting his horse ready to take Reuben home. He tells Reuben he cannot tell anyone about this place, and as Davy rides up, invites Reuben back so he can show Reuben how to breathe. Davy pulls Reuben up in front of him and Reuben sleeps some on the way back.

## WINNING HER HAND

Reuben explains that Teddy Roosevelt had asthma as a child. His father would gallop down the street with Teddy sitting in front to try to get air into his lungs. Reuben thinks of this as he rides in front of Davy and feels better. Davy lets him off behind the barn. Reuben wakes several hours later with a horrible fever and Roxanna's hand his forehead. Roxanna pins a quilt over the window to dim the light.

*Reuben must quickly decide what kind of story to tell and where to place his loyalty. He chooses to share what is really a fictionalized version of events, as Reuben truly believes that God led them and luck had little to do with anything. Mr. Waltzer appears to view God as a powerful guiding force, though like Davy, Mr. Waltzer wants credit for his own actions. It's clear though where Reuben's loyalty and belief truly lies; he's a follower of his father through and through.*



*Again, Mr. Waltzer insists on giving proper credit, or in this case, proper apologies. This situation continues to develop a sense of absurdity, though it's implied that despite how absurd everything might seem, it's real and potentially very dangerous.*



*Reuben's answer shows just how much his asthma rules his life--he can't even consider what else he'd like to do except be able to breathe and keep living. The reader is reminded then that Dad's initial miracle isn't all-encompassing; it comes with a price.*



*Mr. Waltzer engaged with Reuben's asthma as though it was a fictional ailment, but fiction became reality before his eyes. However, Mr. Waltzer seems to believe that Reuben himself is capable of taking control of this reality, showing that he believes he has an exaggerated sense of control over his reality.*



*Here, another absurd-seeming tale provides Reuben comfort in his real life. Used in this way, fiction once again creates positive change in the real world. Roxanna already cares for Reuben as though he's her son; this reinforces the strength of her relationship and her loyalty to Dad.*



Reuben sleeps off and on all day. At one point he wakes to see Swede sitting next to him rifling through a new **Sunny Sundown** poem. Reuben reminds the reader of Sunny's arc from lawman to "misunderstood outlaw." Sunny now finds himself in a beautiful valley with one entrance and a stick of dynamite to seal it. Reuben points out that this sounds a lot like another Western novel, and Swede says these things need to be written about so they don't fall out of circulation. Sunny hasn't yet set off the dynamite because he wants his wife to live with him in the valley.

Reuben finally wakes in the evening feeling much better. Roxanna deems him recovered and feeds him soup. As she rolls out piecrust, Reuben asks when Dad is coming home. Roxanna shares that there's been no big news, and Reuben sees that she's scared for Davy. Roxanna tells them they must be steadfast and have faith, and Reuben notes that she's using Dad's language. Swede says that if Dad says they have to leave she won't let him, and Roxanna agrees with Swede.

Later that night, Swede and Reuben see Dad appear by the gas pumps. They bounce excitedly in the window. Dad looks strangely at the gable in the house, not at the window, and Swede and Reuben stop bouncing. Swede's face mirrors Dad's strange but happy expression and she shushes Reuben when he grouses about Dad not coming inside right away. Finally, Dad straightens his coat and approaches the door. Reuben tries to go to the hallway to open it, but Swede won't let him. Then Roxanna comes down the stairs smelling of perfume. When she opens the door, she and Dad hold hands and Dad laughs. Reuben thinks that Dad looks stronger than ever.

Dad moves out to sleep in the Airstream that night. Swede tells Reuben that it's "for honor," which she finds quite romantic. Reuben asks why they're not moving out there too, since they also love Roxanna. Swede snips that he should go ask Dad if he's so concerned.

In the barn, Reuben tells Dad that he liked it better when Mr. Andreeson was an enemy. Dad leads Reuben in questioning what role Mr. Andreeson plays in what Davy did. Reuben admits that he'd like for Davy to escape consequences even if he did do a "wrong thing." Dad says that he himself has to listen to God but suggests that Reuben can keep viewing Mr. Andreeson as an enemy. He then asks Reuben what God said about enemies. Reuben thinks of the Old Testament, where enemies of God suffered all manner of gruesome fates. Dad quotes Jesus instead: "love your enemies."

*Remember that Sunny Sundown's story arc mirrors that of Davy. Swede evidently believes that Davy is on the verge of finding paradise in exile. Further, she still views Davy as a "misunderstood outlaw," not as someone who's done anything truly wrong. Davy is truly a fictional character in Swede's mind, while Reuben has come face to face with the truth. He understands that Davy's life is nothing like Sunny's.*



*Roxanna is truly becoming a convert and another disciple of Dad's. She also places her loyalty not just in Dad, but in Davy as well. Here she seems to even overtake Reuben as Dad's disciple, as she uses what she's learned from Dad to comfort Reuben. Her language also suggests that while events regarding Davy are out of human control, she herself might have some sway over Dad.*



*Dad's first point of loyalty has evidently shifted from his children to Roxanna. Swede's interest indicates that she finds this change exciting, while Reuben demonstrates again his somewhat selfish immaturity as he struggles to understand exactly what's going on. However, he does notice that this newfound love and loyalty is beneficial to Dad. This again suggests that love is capable of healing, as Dad is still recovering from pneumonia.*



*Reuben's youth is humorous here as he struggles to differentiate between romantic love and the familial, yet platonic love he and Swede feel for Roxanna. To Swede, the romance between Dad and Roxanna surely seems straight out of a Western, indicating again that Roxanna is the "right kind" of woman.*



*Interestingly, Dad aligns himself with Jesus, while Reuben's thought process recalls his earlier remark about the prophets' "childish tendencies" towards thoughts and actions that aren't as right or moral. For Reuben to truly understand how one can champion Jesus' teachings while still finding value in the fire and brimstone of the Old Testament, he must embrace the moral ambiguity.*





That afternoon, Reuben spots Davy on the hillside. Davy is waiting for Reuben behind the barn again that night with the news that Mr. Waltzer is gone for the night. Reuben is relieved; he'd been dreading seeing Mr. Waltzer again. Reuben asks Davy to come home and bring Sara, but Davy refuses.

Reuben tells the reader that he made the trip with Davy three more times and struggled to justify deceiving Dad. One night, Reuben mentions how sad Mr. Finch looked and asks Davy if he feels bad. Davy says regret won't help, since he has to go on anyway. On another night, Davy explains that Sara isn't Mr. Waltzer's real daughter—he "got her" from a man in Utah. Reuben can't fathom why a man would give his daughter away, and Davy explains that Mr. Waltzer is raising her to be his wife when she's old enough. Reuben deems this "the pukiest idea in the world."

Reuben asks Davy if he's afraid of Mr. Waltzer. Davy says he isn't, he just listens closely when Mr. Waltzer is around. Davy says he doesn't know if Sara's afraid either. Then Davy points out an owl hunting. Reuben can't see the owl and thinks that he can't ever see what Davy sees.

On Reuben's second visit, Sara asks if Mr. Waltzer showed Reuben his missing fingers. She explains that his fingers were damaged when a tow chain slipped. She says that it was her fault, and her punishment was to watch him cut off his own fingers and then dispose of them herself.

Reuben wakes up around noon the next day, barely able to breath and feverish again. Dad offers to fetch some aspirin, and Reuben notices that Dad is wearing nice clothes. He asks why Dad is dressed up. Dad admits that he's going to court Roxanna and asks Reuben's opinion on his chances. This makes Reuben feel very adult, and he tries to assure Dad that Roxanna feels more than "respectfully" about him. Dad spends his days outside in the Airstream and when he does enter the house, knocks and offers Roxanna carnations from a small nursery in Grassy Butte. One day, the man at the nursery offers Dad a guitar. Dad insists "he's no musician," but his face lights up holding the instrument.

*Reuben clings to the childish hope that he might yet be able to convince Davy to come home, even though he's said himself that doing so is surely impossible. This shows Reuben mimicking Swede's method of relying on fiction to hopefully become real.*



*For Davy, regret and repentance serve no purpose. His life's purpose is survival and evasion of the law, and that requires he maintain a sense of his own personal honor code that justifies running away from the law. Essentially, admitting what he did was wrong would rob the life Davy's chosen of any purpose. This fact about Mr. Waltzer and Sara's relationship makes Mr. Waltzer seem even more dangerous and scary.*



*Reuben again sees the oceans of maturity that separate Davy from Reuben. This reinforces the idea that Davy operates alone, while Reuben requires the guidance of God and family to exist.*



*Mr. Waltzer shows that he's very good at psychological punishment here. Sara didn't suffer physical pain, but she has to live with the reminder that she failed and the memory of her punishment.*



*Reuben is physically punished again for betraying and deceiving Dad. By continuing to go out to Davy, Reuben is sacrificing his health in exchange for seeing his brother, which shows how loyal Reuben is to Davy. In this conversation with Dad, Reuben embraces being treated like an adult. This conversation with his father is an example of a marker of adulthood, and Reuben rises to the occasion. The fact that he's not embarrassed by the conversation shows how much he's growing up.*



## BOY READY

Reuben tells the reader that his breathing overall is getting much worse at this point in the tale. One night, Swede tells Reuben to go upstairs and not help with dishes. Reuben tries to distract Swede by asking about **Sunny Sundown**, but she sends him upstairs anyway. Reuben struggles to climb the stairs and sits on the landing to catch his breath. Swede wakes him up some time later—he'd fallen asleep. Swede is worried and settles Reuben upstairs with a pan of steam.

Swede sits with Reuben reading Psalms. She tells Reuben that Dad is off courting Roxanna, and Reuben realizes that his family hadn't experienced a miracle since they arrived at Roxanna's house. He thinks he has no chance if Dad can't work a miracle.

Reuben decides to tell Swede about Davy, but when he opens his eyes Swede is reading her newest **Sunny Sundown** poem out loud. Sunny, still waiting in his valley for his wife, sees her approaching with a posse some distance behind her. Reuben tells Swede that nothing seems to go right for poor Sunny, and asks if Swede can make something turn out right for him. Swede, alarmed at Reuben's emotion, tells him what happens—Sunny, of course, sweeps up his bride, fights the posse, and detonates his stick of dynamite, sealing the valley off against any more intruders.

Reuben still doesn't feel any better. All he can think of is Davy in the shack, and Reuben feels convinced that his lungs won't get better. As he asks Swede if she'll get mad if he tells her something, they hear Dad come through the door. Dad enters Reuben's bedroom with a doctor, Dr. Nickles. Dr. Nickles examines Reuben and deems the steam treatment wholly ineffective. He says he'd hospitalize Reuben if the hospital weren't full of flu patients, and instead gives Reuben a shot of adrenaline.

After Dr. Nickles leaves, Dad comes upstairs and asks Reuben if the steam helps. Reuben insists it does. Dad asks how the adrenaline is working, and Reuben tells the reader that it's a strange sensation of alertness. Reuben is unable to truly sleep that night because of the adrenaline, and suffers noisy, scattered dreams.

*Again, Swede must behave like an adult and care for her family when they suffer. Reuben's desire to not go upstairs is very childish in comparison to Swede's behavior. This again makes Swede's love of fiction seem like a coping mechanism, as it's the one way she's able to be a child.*



*Reuben must confront the possibility that Dad's faith isn't going to guarantee Reuben's life. Reuben has felt separated from God several times since arriving at Roxanna's, suggesting that his family is making a choice between Roxanna and God's guidance.*



*Reuben certainly fears for Davy's wellbeing and sees Sunny's difficulties as a direct translation of Davy's difficulties. Swede's happy ending, however, represents what she thinks should happen in Davy's life, which Reuben likely understands can never happen for Davy. Davy will remain on the run; there's no idyllic valley waiting for him. Here then, fiction isn't comforting because it deviates so far from reality.*



*While the West has been dangerous in a number of ways, it's proving most dangerous to Reuben's lungs. This continues to shatter Reuben's idealization of the West, as Reuben can barely experience any of it due to his illness. Though Dad takes Dr. Nickles at his word about the ineffectiveness of steam, it doesn't provide Dad or Reuben any comfort.*



*Even if the adrenaline is supposed to work, its side effects suggest that there's merit in methods like steam, provided they offer comfort. As the steam treatments mirror the idea of faith, this leads too to the idea that the comfort religion provides is possibly more important than its effectiveness.*



The next morning, Reuben goes down to the kitchen to find Mr. Andreeson sitting at the table drinking coffee with Dad. Reuben wants to hate Andreeson, but can't quite bring himself to feel that way. Andreeson tells Reuben that people have sighted Davy. He promises Reuben they won't hurt Davy. Reuben thinks he wants nothing from Andreeson, and tells him, "you can't hurt what you can't find." Andreeson smiles and leaves.

Reuben prays throughout the day and sneaks outside several times, hoping to see Davy. Finally, in the evening he hears a horse neigh. Reuben goes with Davy to the shack that night and tells Mr. Waltzer that Andreeson is closing in. Mr. Waltzer is shoeing a horse and seems unconcerned. He shifts Reuben's attention to the coals of the forge and shows him how to work the bellows and shape the horseshoe. Reuben drives several nails into the horse's hoof.

Over dinner, Mr. Waltzer refuses to speak of Andreeson. Mr. Waltzer tells the table about his own amazing sense of taste. He asks Reuben to describe what he tastes in their pork (Reuben declares it dull), and then Mr. Waltzer describes the taste of the pig's diet. As Davy saddles his horse later, Mr. Waltzer points out constellations to Reuben. Reuben has never heard of the constellation "Boy Ready," and Mr. Waltzer tells Reuben the accompanying legend. It has a sickening plot twist, and as Reuben listens to other legends he finds that all of Mr. Waltzer's stories have similarly horrifying outcomes.

Mr. Andreeson calls Roxanna's house the next morning with news that the man who was supposed to accompany him to Davy never showed. Dad suggests prayer. When Dad hangs up, he asks Reuben if there's something he needs to share. Reuben nervously says there isn't. Dad goes to the trailer to pray for Davy.

For two days, the Lands hear nothing from Andreeson. A chilling wind picks up outside, and Reuben, thinking of Davy and Sara, wonders out loud to Swede how long it'd take to freeze in the wind. Swede launches into several gruesome descriptions of what happens to the human body in the cold. She mentions cannibalism, which Reuben finds especially disconcerting, since Mr. Waltzer also once mentioned cannibalism. Reuben wonders if Mr. Waltzer would eat Davy or Sara first. Reuben finally goes to the Airstream to find Dad.

*Reuben finally has to contend with the possibility that Mr. Andreeson isn't a one-dimensional villain. The fact that Dad is working with him gives Reuben even more evidence that Andreeson isn't a terrible person, though Reuben chooses to behave like a child and not accept Andreeson's peace offering.*



*Mr. Waltzer's lack of concern regarding the consequences of Andreeson finding him suggests that he's either truly crazy and doesn't understand, or he already knows how to escape those consequences. Reuben maintains his viewpoint that there's one true good and evil at play, which doesn't allow him to truly consider whether Mr. Waltzer himself is evil.*



*Mr. Waltzer demonstrates again his own twisted view on the intersection between fiction and reality. He's created these legends and found the accompanying constellations in order to give his own worldview credibility. This shows Reuben that though Mr. Waltzer might be helping Davy, he's not a good person or someone worthy of his trust. The legends force Reuben to consider if he's misplaced his trust in Mr. Waltzer.*



*Dad evidently still believes that Mr. Andreeson is in need of religion rather than "spookism," even though Dad is helping him. This demonstrates how Dad handles moral ambiguity, and suggests that the cure is prayer.*



*Though Mr. Waltzer is a terrifying individual in his own right, he's growing and transforming in Reuben's mind into something far worse. This mirrors what Valdez did in Swede's mind. As the novel begins to suggest this connection, it also suggests that Mr. Waltzer will possibly follow in Valdez's footsteps and prove himself uncatchable.*



Reuben sits outside the trailer and listens to Dad plucking away on the guitar and singing. Reuben then goes back inside, where Roxanna is making dinner and Swede is writing **Sunny Sundown's** happy ending.

When the wind finally ends, Dad, Swede, and Roxanna go outside to shovel and Reuben is tasked with waiting by the phone. Reuben continues to worry about Davy in the cold. Dad calls Andreeson's motel in the afternoon. The desk clerk tells Dad that he took a note for Andreeson several days ago, from a man waiting for Andreeson in a café. Andreeson left to meet the man and hasn't yet returned.

A horrible thought grips Reuben. Dad asks Reuben what's wrong, and Reuben says that Andreeson is in trouble. He thinks of Mr. Waltzer's lack of concern at hearing about Andreeson, and Andreeson's happiness that he'd found someone who'd seen Davy. Reuben tells Dad that Andreeson's man is called Jape Waltzer, he's with Davy, and he's surely going to kill Andreeson.

## THE LEDGER OF OUR DECISIONS

The next morning, Reuben sits with the posse that will ride on horseback to Mr. Waltzer's cabin and take Davy. Mr. Ford is there, as well as Mr. Juval, a federal investigator. They debate whether Reuben should go or not, and Dad argues that Reuben should go. With that decided, the posse rides into the hills.

Reuben tells the reader that Swede unsurprisingly took Reuben's betrayal very badly. Swede feels betrayed that Reuben didn't tell her about Davy, and then even more betrayed that Reuben snitched. She threw a massive tantrum the night before and compared Reuben to all manner of literary and historical traitors.

Reuben and the posse ride through the snowy hills. Mr. Juval rides up beside Reuben and asks if they're going the right way. Reuben admits he doesn't know. Mr. Juval asks if Reuben feels like a turncoat, and if he wishes he'd kept quiet. Reuben insists that Davy isn't the problem; Mr. Waltzer is. Reuben explains to the reader that the night before, Mr. Juval had seemed interested and on the Lands' side, but today he seems like less of an ally. Reuben asks what Mr. Waltzer is wanted for, and Mr. Juval says he has no idea who Mr. Waltzer even is.

*Reuben's loyalty to Davy prevents him from experiencing happiness like it seems the rest of his family experiences during the waiting period.*



*As Reuben worries about the cold, the West itself becomes the enemy, more so even than the people that populate the West. Now, Andreeson and Reuben share an enemy, as Dad seems to think that Andreeson is stuck in the storm rather than struggling with someone like Mr. Waltzer.*



*Finally, Reuben is able to see Andreeson as a person deserving of life, regardless of his intentions. However, this shift of loyalty isn't portrayed as glowing or heroic like it might look in a film or a novel. Instead, it's painful for Reuben, indicating that even when someone makes the "right" decision, the consequences aren't always pleasant.*



*Here, Dad hopes that Reuben's youth and immaturity will force the posse to behave in an honorable way and follow through on their promise to not hurt Davy.*



*Swede hasn't yet made the leap to see Andreeson as a person deserving of life. She maintains a very black and white perspective of justice and loyalty. She's likely also hurt because it looks like Davy never showed her any loyalty like he did Reuben in the West.*



*Now that Reuben finds himself in a situation that seems straight out of a Western, it's becoming increasingly clear that there are no delineated good guys or bad guys. Mr. Waltzer isn't even a bad guy to Mr. Juval; he's little more than a fictional character. Davy, on the other hand, is still considered a bad guy by law enforcement, while Reuben still views him as his loveable big brother.*



Reuben begins to recognize the landscape. He questions whether he did the right thing ratting out Davy, and thinks that Mr. Waltzer is certainly crazy and therefore it's silly to ascribe meaning to his not caring about Andreeson. The posse stops and Mr. Ford asks Reuben if it looks familiar. Reuben knows that the cabin is to the right, while going left will lead them away from Davy. Reuben says they have to go left.

*Reuben again gets to decide whose side he's on. Notably, he has to decide that Mr. Waltzer isn't a bad guy and is just crazy in order to justify this decision. In doing so, Reuben mimics Davy by using his own code of honor instead of the rules set down by the law.*



To the left is a steep and slick hill. The posse climbs the hill strung out, and Reuben feels exhilarated that he's protecting Davy. At the top, Mr. Juval and Mr. Ford trot a small distance away and look through binoculars. After a few minutes they return to the group, looking angry. Mr. Juval heads back down the slope and Mr. Ford quickly explains they went the wrong way. As the group descends, Mr. Ford's horse begins to skid, flips twice, and Mr. Ford disappears in the snow. The horse can't lift its head, but Mr. Juval angrily orders the deputies to not shoot it.

*Reuben himself becomes the bad guy, and his betrayal has disastrous consequences. Mr. Ford, an innocent man, suffers because of Reuben's decision, as does Mr. Ford's horse. This shows again that the combination of the West itself and the cold are enemies to everyone, regardless of what side of the law they're on.*



The posse finds Mr. Ford, who miraculously survived the fall. He's bruised and broken but fortunately unconscious. Mr. Juval takes Reuben aside and asks if he misdirected the posse on purpose. Reuben admits he did, and Mr. Juval hits him on the side of his head. Mr. Juval pulls Reuben to his feet and explains why Reuben's character is lacking, and then hits him again.

*Reuben has now betrayed everyone as well as shown everyone his loyalty, which leaves him alone in a state of complete moral ambiguity. This shows again that there are prices to pay for betrayal as well as loyalty.*



The posse puts Mr. Ford in a thicket and tasks Reuben with staying behind to look after him. The posse heads off to the cabin and Reuben comforts Mr. Ford. Reuben goes back to the horse to look through the saddlebag for something to start a fire. He finds a bottle of whiskey, miraculously unbroken, some oil, and a book. Reuben imagines what's going on at the cabin and thinks that Davy won't be able to survive multiple gunshot wounds. He wonders what Davy will think of Reuben's betrayal, and thinks that nobody but Dad will ever forgive him.

*Reuben's betrayal is punished with caring for Mr. Ford. Essentially, Reuben proved to the posse that he was nothing more than a child with a skewed sense of right and wrong, and he therefore doesn't get to participate in the adult activity of ambushing the cabin. Reuben also believes that Davy will suffer consequences because of Reuben's betrayal. Reuben is unable to consider the possibility that Davy might still escape.*



Snuggled against Mr. Ford's horse, Reuben cries and prays for Davy, Andreeson, Sara, and Mr. Waltzer. When he hears Mr. Ford speak, Reuben scrambles back to the thicket. He dribbles some whiskey into Mr. Ford's mouth and answers his questions about what happened. Mr. Ford is disgusted to hear that the posse didn't shoot his horse. Reuben reads aloud from the book until Mr. Juval and the posse return, saying they found nothing at the cabin but Andreeson's hat. They shoot the horse and the posse leaves.

*When he includes Mr. Andreeson in his prayers, Reuben shows the reader again that he sees him as deserving of life and God's guidance. Mr. Ford evidently thinks that Mr. Juval is the real villain for not shooting the seriously injured horse immediately. This briefly introduces yet another system of justice for Reuben to consider.*



## THE RED FARM

Reuben tells the reader that Dad and Roxanna got married in March. They returned to Roofing at the end of February, after Reuben spent a brief stint in the hospital for his failing lungs. Dr. Nickles told Dad to "take this boy home" and they left the next day. Reuben says that though he was glad to have Roxanna along, it took him a long time to appreciate what the move must have meant for her. He says that she was "all but their mother" by this point.

A few days after the wedding, Dad tasks Reuben with cleaning out the Airstream (which Dad had sold to Dr. Nokes months ago) while Swede helps pack for their impending move to a farm owned by Pastor Reach. It's a beautiful place to "rest and wait." Swede returns to school, but Reuben stays home. He thinks of Dr. Nickles' voice telling Dad to take him home, and spends his days looking out the window, waiting for Davy. A number of investigators stop by over the next few months, but Andreeson is never heard from.

Reuben tells one investigator that Mr. Waltzer surely put Andreeson's body in a lignite vein, but the investigator seems uninterested. Swede snappily tells Reuben that that's not satisfying for the investigators, and Reuben explains Swede's clipped response by saying that she hasn't yet forgiven him for his betrayal.

Reuben says he wasn't waiting for a miracle anymore. He figures that Roxanna was God's parting gift to the Land family. Reuben spends his days sleeping and listening to Dad play the guitar. One day, a boy from school brings Reuben the Spartacus model Reuben had wanted for Christmas. The classmate tells Reuben that his brothers put a skunk in Mr. Holgren's basement and the results were spectacular.

Bethany Orchard and her family visit in May. Reuben realizes that Bethany isn't truly interested in him, as she soon leaves him to be with the adults. Swede comes to Reuben that night, takes his hand, and sits with him.

*In Reuben's mind, Roxanna has completed her process of becoming Dad's partner, both in a romantic sense and in a religious sense. Like God, she provides Reuben and Swede comfort as they leave the West and return to Roofing. While the West didn't give the Lands what they thought it would, they still return changed. This underscores the transformative power of the myth of the West.*



*Reuben makes it very clear that he's dying and there's no hope or prayer that can save him. Further, everyone else also seems to have given up on Reuben's health, as there's not even a mention of steam. Reuben mourns the loss of Andreeson and takes the time to consider what he learned about loyalty and justice in the West.*



*Now that Reuben has seen different types of justice up close, he must now discover how forgiveness functions. Swede's inability to forgive points to her own blindness to the muddy morality of Davy's crime and Reuben's betrayal.*



*Finally receiving the Spartacus model isn't as satisfying as it might've been for Reuben. This suggests that Reuben's act of loyalty when he bought groceries is more fulfilling in the long term than a toy would've been. It also shows how much Reuben has grown up that he doesn't find the toy fulfilling, as he's actively choosing to not engage in childish pursuits.*



*Though Bethany still appears far beyond Reuben in terms of maturity, Reuben's acknowledgement that nothing will come of his crush on her points to his own maturity.*



In June, a Ford pulls up the driveway bearing Davy and Sara. The reunion is joyful. Though they don't mention Mr. Waltzer by name, they share that he'd decided it was time for Sara to be a "wife." Davy was unwilling to let that happen, so one morning when Mr. Waltzer was out they drove away in Mr. Waltzer's car. Davy asks if Sara can stay with Dad and Roxanna. Swede asks Davy if he'll stay too, but Davy tells her he can't. Reuben thinks that Davy actually looks his age as he says this.

Throughout the evening, Davy regales his family with the story of his escape from jail and his following exploits eluding the law. He doesn't mention Mr. Waltzer, and Reuben believes this is Davy being considerate of Sara, who owes Mr. Waltzer for the last six years of her life.

Nobody mentions Andreeson, but Reuben thinks about him. After 11 pm, Reuben goes upstairs with Dad to make Sara's bed. Roxanna and Sara go to bed while Davy, Swede, Dad, and Reuben stay up talking. They talk about everything except Davy's current predicament. At one point Davy looks ready to leave, and Swede goes and fetches her binder of **Sunny Sundown** poetry. She reads the entire poem out loud, and Davy listens attentively. He deems **Valdez** a perfect villain and likely uncatchable. At dawn, Roxanna makes her uncle's cinnamon rolls and the family walks outside to see Davy off.

Jape Waltzer sits with a rifle beside the farm's granary. The Lands don't see him, though he isn't trying to hide. They hear a gunshot and Dad falls across the car. Roxanna tries to restrain Reuben on the porch, but he breaks free and runs towards Dad. Mr. Waltzer then shoots Reuben. Reuben tells the reader that he supposes that Mr. Waltzer "led" him. He feels the "old country" gather itself.

## BE JUBILANT, MY FEET

Reuben wades to the shore of a river he knows he's crossed. He tells the reader that he has no notion of identity or burden, and no language. He hears a hum and a variety of birds fly up out of tall grasses. He spreads his arms and runs through the meadow. As Reuben enters an orchard he realizes he must appear before "the master," who is aware that Reuben is here.

*By leaving Mr. Waltzer, Davy demonstrates again that he wants to move through life alone. This time, however, taking Sara with him is truly the honorable thing to do. By doing this, he allows Sara the opportunity to experience family in a way that Davy never again will. Davy alludes to this when he tells Swede he can't stay. Evading the law means that he has to be alone, even if he doesn't want to be.*



*This time, truth is as fascinating and exciting as any of Swede's fiction, especially since Davy's tale borrows so many tropes and motifs from Westerns. Here, reality and fiction blend to create a compelling and useful tale.*



*Davy's remark that Valdez is uncatchable suggests that even though Davy knows he must remain faithful to his own system of personal honor and justice, he understands that the world doesn't follow one true justice system. The Land family's happy reunion recalls Sunny Sundown's final chapter in the valley. Their night together stands as a bright point in a string of dark and muddy events.*



*Mr. Waltzer seeks to employ his own system of justice to punish Davy, Sara, and Reuben, all of whom betrayed him. Mr. Waltzer himself represents the West as a dangerous and transformative force for those who tangle with it. However, Reuben again attributes the "leading" to all of this being part of God's guidance, showing that God is greater than even the West.*



*While throughout the novel Reuben has experienced glimpses of God on earth, he now experiences God (the master) in the Garden of Eden. God is all knowing and continues to guide Reuben towards his final destination.*



As he walks through the orchard, the thought "Adam" comes to his mind. Reuben looks across a valley and sees a man dressed as a Spanish knight, running. Reuben begins to hear the "pulse of the country," which he soon recognizes as music. He thinks of the line "O be quick, my soul, to answer Him; be jubilant, my feet!" and he runs forward and sings with the song of the country.

The orchard comes to an end and Reuben spots a man running by a stream. He recognizes the man as Jeremiah Land, and remembers what happened before they found themselves in this country. Dad and Reuben greet each other, notice how strong they both are, and Dad comments that Reuben is as big as he is. Reuben sees that Dad is proud of him, but sees too that Dad knows something Reuben doesn't.

Dad suggests they run and they take off towards the "master." When they reach a deep spot next to the stream, they see that far beyond the stream is a city. Surrounding the city is a great plain with rivers of people heading towards the city. Dad and Reuben watch and listen. Dad holds Reuben's hand and tells him to take care of Swede and to work for Roxanna. Reuben thinks he wants to join the rivers of people, but Dad tells Reuben to tell Davy about this place. Dad then jumps into the river, singing, and Reuben watches him disappear.

## THE CURIOUS MUSIC THAT I HEAR

Reuben tells the reader that while he was away, Jape Waltzer shot at the Ford and the house several times. Roxanna called the sheriff, Dr. Nokes, and God. Sara hid while Swede frantically searched Dad's closet for his shotgun. Reuben says that later he was told that he lay facedown while Dad propped himself on his elbow. Swede attended to Reuben while Roxanna tried to stop the bleeding from Dad's side. As Swede started crying that Reuben wasn't breathing, Dr. Nokes pulled up. He deemed Reuben gone and tried to revive Dad. County cars rolled in and Dad's eyes rolled back. A deputy then shouted as Reuben started coughing and spouting blood and water.

Weeks later, Dr. Nokes sits with Reuben and admits he doesn't know how Reuben was breathing. Since his trip to the "next country", Reuben's lungs have been perfect. Dr. Nokes tells Reuben that Dad shouldn't have died, because his wound wasn't that bad. Reuben then says that years later, Dr. Nokes told him that Reuben *should* certainly have died. His lungs were shredded as he lay in the driveway, though in the emergency room, the doctor said it looked as though they hadn't been touched. Reuben says that of course they'd been touched, and that he misses Dad.

*The line Reuben mentions is from "Battle Hymn of the Republic," the song that Dad sang the morning they met Roxanna. The particular verse mentions God calling everyone to Him for judgment, which Reuben realizes is what's going to happen.*



*Even in this supernatural country, Dad knows more than Reuben does. This suggests that Dad is more present in this place than Reuben is, indicating that Reuben will be sent back. For the first time, however, Reuben is strong and able to breathe. He finally accomplishes his goal of breathing thanks to Mr. Waltzer's shot.*



*While Dad dies for Reuben specifically, his dying wish is that Reuben goes on as Dad's disciple to share the beauty and power of religion with Davy so that Davy might be able to find some of the comfort that religion can provide. The novel itself is proof that Reuben took Dad's wish a step further and shared the story with everyone, doubters and believers alike.*



*While Reuben is the one to record this miracle in writing, he doesn't get to bear witness to how the miracle looked from earth. Mr. Waltzer's shots suggest that justice can be obtained through fear alone. Notably though, this brand of justice is the same as Davy's, as it's based on a personal code of honor. In this way, Davy doesn't truly escape the consequences of his actions. He must suffer the combination of what his own honor system and Mr. Waltzer's deem necessary.*



*Even though Dr. Nokes was technically a witness to the miracle, he insists that it shouldn't have happened. This mirrors Davy's thoughts about the tornado that picked up Dad in that the facts are undeniable, yet the reasoning remains mysterious. Reuben sees it is as Dad's final miracle and sacrifice. Dad again embodies Jesus as he dies for his son and washes away Reuben's ailments.*





Reuben says he must finish quickly, as Swede says that "drift is the bane of epilogues." Roxanna became the Land family's rock. Sara stayed with the Lands and Roxanna drew her slowly out of her shell while Reuben watched Sara from afar. Swede dropped out of school at 17 to write a novel that was never published, but today she's written four novels, a history of the Dakota Territories, and a poetry collection. Reuben deems the poetry collection fantastic. It all rhymes and parts are about cowboys. Reviewers didn't know what to do with it. One review made Swede angry enough to write a letter back to the reviewer. Their exchange was published and Swede's book landed on bestseller lists as a result.

Jape Waltzer was never caught, much like **Valdez**. Davy eventually tells Reuben that Waltzer bludgeoned Andreeson and rolled the body into the lignite vein. When Reuben was 25, Andreeson's adult son came to visit, but Reuben was too young to provide him any real comfort.

Reuben says that finally, the reader needs to know that one Thanksgiving when all except for Davy were home, they held hands around the table to pray. Swede released Reuben's left hand when the prayer ended, but Sara held onto Reuben's right.

Davy, meanwhile, shows up some years in a small hunting town in Canada. Reuben goes every year to see the geese migrate. Swede went with Reuben twice, but Davy never appears when she's there. The first time Reuben meets Davy in Canada, Reuben shares what happened in the "next country." Reuben says that it's hard to gauge belief in Davy. Davy asks to see Reuben breathe, which Reuben does easily.

Davy asks if Reuben ever doubts what happened. Reuben tells the reader that sometimes he does, but then he looks out his window of the house he built with Sara. He sees his daughter or his son, or Sara enters the room, and Reuben feels a sense of certainty. He tells the reader that he cannot press belief on anyone, but to "make of it what you will."

*Roxanna takes Dad's place as head of household and spiritual guide. Reuben shows that he maintains a childish sense of glee at Westerns into adulthood, as does Swede. However, while Reuben certainly matured and became comfortable with the difference between fiction and reality, it's left ambiguous whether Swede was able to do the same. Swede's adulthood remains driven by fiction and the thought of how things look from a literary angle. Swede never has to question how these things function in her life, as for her, they're all part of her reality.*



*The mention of Valdez in relation to Mr. Waltzer suggests that Reuben has learned to accept that bad people or villains exist in society, and that the world doesn't always follow an obvious system of justice.*



*When Reuben finds love, it suggests that his coming of age is complete. Now, as an adult, he's mature enough to engage with Sara in the real world and not just as a fantasy like he did with Bethany Orchard.*



*Once again, Davy must face the fact that a miracle occurred and reconcile those facts with his disbelief. This makes the point for the final time that while religion is an undeniable force in everyone's lives, it's up to individuals to decide how to interpret and live with that force.*



*Reuben attributes all the good he experiences as an adult, from parenthood to building his house by hand, to God and to Dad. Reuben's final request is that the reader take his story and use it to engage in their own inquiry into the power of religion and the intersection between fiction and reality, with the understanding that blending these elements provides life richness, nuance, and happiness.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Brock, Zoë. "Peace Like a River." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Aug 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "Peace Like a River." LitCharts LLC, August 25, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/peace-like-a-river>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Peace Like a River* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Enger, Leif. *Peace Like a River*. Grove Atlantic. 2002.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Enger, Leif. *Peace Like a River*. New York: Grove Atlantic. 2002.