

# Sleepers



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Kennedy was born in Lincolnshire, England but later settled in Australia, where she attended the University of Canberra and earned a BA in literature. In 2010, her novel *The World Beneath* won the People's Choice Award at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and was shortlisted for several other prizes. In 2006, she published her first collection of short stories, *Dark Roots*, which was shortlisted for the Steele Rudd Award and the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. Kennedy's bibliography also includes a travel memoir, *Sing, and Don't Cry*, as well as several poetry collections. She currently lives in the High Plains region of Victoria, Australia.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sleepers" addresses the effects of contemporary capitalism, mainly job insecurity and socioeconomic inequality. The anthology [Like a House on Fire](#) was published directly following the Great Recession in the late 2000s, when many countries were still recovering from its economic impact. Kennedy's portrayal of a town where many residents struggle to find work, despite millions of dollars pouring into an outsourced construction project, reflects the ruthlessness of capitalism in a globally connected economy.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of the short stories in Kennedy's anthology [Like a House on Fire](#), including "Sleepers," focus on failing relationships and lives of dissatisfaction. These stories display many of the characteristics of the Australian grunge lit movement, in which characters often live on the fringes of society. Two major grunge lit novels are Andrew McGahan's *Praise* and Claire Mendes's *Drift Street*, both of which follow the lives of unattractive, unemployed, and socially marginalized characters who handle their boredom and dissatisfaction by abusing drugs and engaging in violence. The stories in [Like a House on Fire](#) present characters dealing with similar struggles in milder ways, possibly as a reaction to the vulgarity of these earlier works.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Sleepers"
- **When Written:** 2012
- **Where Written:** Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** 2012

- **Literary Period:** Grunge or post-grunge
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** An unnamed small town in Australia
- **Climax:** Ray attempts to steal some of the railroad sleepers but is caught by the police.
- **Antagonist:** The outside contractors running the construction project
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Award-winning.** "Sleepers" is one of the short stories in Kennedy's anthology [Like a House on Fire](#), which won the Steele Rudd Award in 2013.

**Australian English.** Although the setting is never explicitly provided in "Sleepers," the characters' use of distinctively Australian words such as "ute," "ColorBond [steel] shed," and "sunnies" places this story in Australia.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Ray, a 35-year-old single man, is stuck in traffic while driving to his part-time warehouse job in a small Australian town. The delays are caused by a large construction project run by outsourced contractors to dig up railroad tracks, but Ray notes that nobody local was hired. He encounters a road flagger directing traffic and remembers being mocked for doing the same job by his ex-girlfriend Sharon, who later broke up with him and forced him to move out of their shared apartment.

After work, Ray goes to the pub, where locals are discussing piles of discarded railroad **sleepers** generated by the construction. Among others, Vince expresses anger at the roped-off sleepers, which the residents believe should be shared with the community for landscaping or firewood instead of being sold for further profit. In another memory of Sharon, Ray refused to landscape the garden at their apartment, much to her frustration.

Stealing sleepers is a common activity in the town over the next two weeks. One of Ray's warehouse coworkers boasts of taking a truckload home at night to finish his pool, and a trio of residents become infamous for impersonating construction workers to do the same in broad daylight. Steve holds a barbecue that Ray attends, where the backyard is also lined with freshly stolen sleepers. Ray describes a tightness in his chest while realizing he is the only single man at the gathering. He retreats to eat and drink alone while thinking about seeing a second car in Sharon's driveway, indicating that she has moved

on to another partner. Ray decides not to strike up conversation with any of the women at the barbecue, revealing that he lives in a prefabricated steel shed on a friend's property, where he has been since moving out of Sharon's apartment.

At the barbecue, Steve's teenage son, Sean, calls out for Ray to look through his telescope, but Ray is unable to remember Sean's name or see anything clearly in the lens. Blaming his poor health, Ray thinks that it's probably a good thing that he doesn't have children of his own. He attempts to drive home but has drunkenly fallen asleep in his car, dreaming of driving past Sharon's home again only to see her with a new partner through the window.

Ray drives to the construction site instead of his home, planning to steal some sleepers. At first, he justifies this as an attempt to win back Sharon, but after arriving at the site, he changes his mind and decides to take the sleepers for himself. As Ray dons gloves and starts loading sleepers into the back of his truck, he feels healthy and energetic. He begins to think of landscaping a garden and stoking a fire in the winter with the sleepers. However, a police car pulls up unnoticed by him and shines its headlights at him, catching him in the act. Ray feels his chest grow tight once more as he turns around, knowing that the police are going to arrest him to make an example of him in the hopes of deterring other residents from stealing the sleepers. He waits for the police to arrive and resigns himself to being a scapegoat for the town.



## CHARACTERS

**Ray** – Ray, the protagonist of the story, is a 35-year-old single man with no children who works part-time at a warehouse. He was previously in a romantic relationship with Sharon and seems to still have feelings for her even though she broke up with him. Like many of the town's other residents, he complains about the lack of jobs provided by the construction project but makes little effort to find work. Similarly, he considers both his current job at the warehouse and a previous one as a road flagger to be meaningless work, in which there is no point in doing more than the bare minimum that the job requires. This lack of ambition is a defining characteristic of his personality and was a major point of tension between him and Sharon during their relationship. Although they lived together, she was the breadwinner in the relationship and paid the rent. She badgered him with requests such as landscaping their lawn, which he rebuffed, not believing it to be worth the effort. After Sharon broke up with him for his lack of motivation and forced him to move out, Ray moved into a shed on a friend's property. This arrangement was intended to be temporary, but he never took further initiative to find independent housing and has lived there since. To cope with his pitiful situation, he drinks heavily, and his health has deteriorated as a result. In the capitalistic environment of the story, Ray's lack of drive causes

him to be rejected and outcompeted, both as a romantic partner and as a worker. After dreaming of Sharon with her new partner, Ray finally resolves to make an effort to steal the **sleepers**, initially hoping to surprise Sharon with a landscaped yard but eventually deciding to keep them for building his own garden. However, his actions ultimately come too late, both for improving his life and for repairing his relationship with Sharon. He is caught in the act by the police and is presumably arrested.

**Sharon** – Ray's ex-girlfriend. Unlike Ray, Sharon has moved on to a new relationship. She still lives at the same house that she and Ray once shared, implying she has a stable job that allows her to pay the rent. In contrast to Ray, Sharon displays ambition that borders on disdain for those who cannot meet her expectations—a position Ray frequently found himself in. During their relationship, she nagged him to landscape their lawn and dismissed a road flagger's job as easy, knowing that Ray had previously worked as one. Ray's apathy and lack of motivation is what spurred Sharon to break up with Ray, but he clearly still harbors feelings for her.

**Steve** – One of Ray's friends and Sean's father. Although Steve is presumably a similar age as Ray, he has a family and owns a home. And though his job is not mentioned, readers can reasonably assume that he is financially stable enough to raise a child and afford a house. Meanwhile, Ray is single and living in a shed on a friend's property, with a part-time job that could not support either a family or a home. The story largely defines people's identities based on their job titles, possessions, and relationships, so Steve—having a house, a son, a wife, friends to invite to a barbecue, and a yard lined with **sleepers**—serves as a point of contrast to Ray, who has none of these things. Without a meaningful home, job, or relationship, Ray feels that he is “just Ray” and doesn't have a more meaningful identity.

**Sean** – Steve's teenage son. Ray encounters him at Steve's barbecue but cannot recall his name until Steve uses it, even though they've met before and have even gone on a fishing trip together. Ray attempts to make up for this blunder by helping Sean spot Mars through his telescope like a father figure, but Steve correctly points out that the sky is not dark enough yet—once again, Ray can't seem to do anything right. And when he fails to find Mars in the telescope, Ray realizes that he is too old to become a father now at 35. Steve's house and **sleepers**-lined yard, Sean is a reminder for Ray that Steve has achieved much more than him in life.

**Vince** – One of Ray's friends. Vince serves as the primary voice of complaints about the outsourcing of the construction jobs. Vince and Ray discuss the project at the pub and on the ride home, where Vince convinces Ray that the **sleepers** would be easy to steal and perfect for landscaping—but Vince is all talk and no action. Like Ray, Vince turns to substance abuse to handle the boredom of unemployment, although he smokes marijuana instead of drinking. Vince and Frank are both representative of the unemployed, resentful portion of the

town's residents.

**Frank** – One of Ray's friends who frequents the pub. Having been unemployed for 14 months, Frank angrily complains about how the contractors behind the construction intend to sell the **sleepers** for profit instead of leaving them for locals. He expresses frustration at the capitalistic way of doing business, bidding on contracts and squeezing every last cent of profit out of the project.

**Bernie** – One of Ray's coworkers at the warehouse. Although they work in the same position, Bernie is enthusiastic about acquiring **sleepers** to complete a pool area in his backyard, suggesting he puts more effort into his life than Ray despite having similarly scant financial resources. He provides Ray with advice on how to successfully steal sleepers, but Ray reacts with characteristic indifference.

**The Road Worker** – The road worker is the flagger Ray encounters at the beginning of the story, who is only described by his construction uniform of sunglasses, fluorescent vest, and hard hat. His face is expressionless, and his eyes are hidden behind the sunglasses as he waves Ray past, emphasizing that he is an anonymous, generic figure that symbolizes the expendable nature of labor in a capitalist economy where workers are interchangeable and identified only by their jobs. Having worked in the same position before, Ray understands how meaningless and generic the work is. He knows that it makes no difference whether a local like him is doing the job or this unknown laborer from elsewhere.

This further infuriates the town's residents, and they begin to steal them for landscaping and firewood. The rush to obtain the sleepers is a reaction to the disruption caused by capitalist forces, as the locals are desperate to get *something*—if not work, then resources—out of the project. In her depiction of Ray's community, Kennedy criticizes the effects of capitalism on small towns but suggests that it is inevitable that people will fall into this system—it is ultimately too powerful to fight.

Inequality of wealth and opportunity in the town is created and magnified by capitalism's effects. At the pub, Frank, one of the town's unemployed residents, calls the contractors of the construction project "bastards" out of frustration over being unemployed for the past 14 months despite the number of jobs the project necessitates. Frank angrily explains that "[the company] will be selling [the sleepers] on to some other subcontractor, any money. That's why they've got that barrier round them. They tender for these jobs and they screw the last cent out of 'em. That's the way they do business." The contractors are concerned with maximizing the project's profit, which includes selling the old sleepers even though they are only a byproduct of the actual work. Additionally, the construction begins at 6 a.m. each morning, prioritizing the work over the needs of the locals, whose morning commutes are disrupted and delayed. This causes people in town to feel justified in stealing the sleepers for themselves. Ray's coworker Bernie, for instance, is proud of "grabbing a ute-load late at night to finish off his pool area."

The story also suggests that capitalism can trap people in meaningless work and apathetic mindsets. The road worker in the beginning of story, with his "mirrored and shadowed gaze" borne by an "expressionless face," is representative of all the other bored, miserable laborers under the construction project, and more broadly suggests that capitalist ventures inevitably breed this sort of dull, unfulfilling work. As Ray drives past, the two of them acknowledge their apathy towards "pretending to be doing a job" while actually feeling "bored shitless" by the work. Again, the road worker's lack of identity and individuality makes him a generic, interchangeable figure representing not only all of the workers on the construction project, but also all of the labor in a capitalist economy. Ray considers his own part-time warehouse position a dead-end job where his manager never supervises the employees and won't care if everyone is late to work. Like the road worker, Ray displays apathy toward his job, under a supervisor who does the same.

Ray's dissatisfaction in his job, which essentially situates him as a cog in a capitalist machine, bleeds over into all aspects of his life. He is unfulfilled personally, professionally, and relationally. This despair culminates in Ray following the lead of the others in town and stealing sleepers for himself, with the hopes of creating a vegetable garden outside of his shed. The night of the theft, he considers asking his friend Vince for help with the sleepers but realizes his friend is likely "three bongs down" and



## 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.



### CAPITALISM AND COMPETITION

The rise of capitalism in contemporary times has brought about rapid changes to the lives of many as it spreads to previously untouched economies. At the beginning of Cate Kennedy's "Sleepers," the story's protagonist, Ray, is stuck in traffic because of a construction project that has thrown his otherwise slow and quiet town into turmoil. Many of the town's residents are struggling with unemployment, so they are furious that the project was planned and executed by outside organizations that did not hire any local labor. To make matters worse, the construction company is upgrading the railroad tracks, but instead of letting the local residents have the discarded railroad **sleepers** (wooden beams that support the rails on the tracks), the construction company plans to sell the discard wood for profit.

asleep in front of the TV, engaging in substance abuse and cheap entertainment to numb his own boredom. As Ray loads the sleepers into his truck under cover of night, he finally feels good “to be working up a sweat” and clear his “fogged head” through this physical task, engaging in meaningful work. Though done in the spirit of self-interest, stealing the sleepers is not capitalistic work since the locals do so as an act of resistance against the system, take only what they will use, and are not selling them for profit.

Despite the undesirable consequences capitalism brings about, Kennedy suggests that the town’s resistance to the project is ultimately an empty gesture and that the lure of the capitalist system is ultimately too powerful for the town’s residents to resist. Locals are stealing the sleepers out of “a sudden professed desire to landscape,” implying that they are only taking the wood for the sake of taking it—not out of any genuine want or need. As well, the way in which locals repurpose these sleepers for purely aesthetic landscaping projects arguably only reaffirms capitalistic values of wealth accumulation rather than subverting them. At the construction site, the sleepers are left relatively unprotected by a “token” perimeter of flags, implying they are not too valuable to the contractors. Stealing them—the residents’ big act of protest—is only “harmless, face-saving looting” that makes them feel empowered but does not impact the project. Furthermore, the project was “dropped onto the town from above” and involves “thousands of dollars being spent every minute,” suggesting that the political and financial support behind it is too strong for the town to oppose on a practical level.

Ray’s situation and his sense that his life has gone to waste are representative of the negative effects of capitalism. Workers can be outcompeted and become alienated from their labor, and experience downstream impact to their social and romantic lives. The competition for the sleepers, in which already successful characters succeeded, also shows capitalism’s tendency to amplify inequality. Kennedy ends the story ironically, suggesting that meaningful labor is forbidden in a capitalist economy.



### HOPELESSNESS AND APATHY

Throughout “Sleepers,” Ray is portrayed as lethargic and apathetic, watching lazily from the sidelines as he observes other characters take initiative to improve their lives. Although he is only employed part-time, Ray does not look for other work. He also acknowledges his poor health, recognizing that he should see a doctor and cut back on drinking, yet drinks to excess, anyway, to the point that he falls asleep in his truck. When he goes to Steve’s party and considers socializing, he decides it is too difficult and chooses to just sit by himself and eat. Throughout the story, Ray’s resignation and acceptance of his circumstances and personal weaknesses traps him, further

discouraging him from trying to make any positive changes. Through Ray’s actions and inner monologue, Kennedy suggests that hopelessness and apathy are self-perpetuating and self-fulfilling.

Ray is apathetic when other characters propose activities and encourage him to improve his life. When they were still together, Ray’s now-ex-girlfriend, Sharon, would badger Ray to landscape their garden, presumably to make their rented house feel more like home. However, he would always reject the idea because he saw no point in putting any effort in while they were “just renting.” Sharon walked away in frustration during one particular argument about landscaping, but Ray was only capable of “standing there, stranded,” emphasizing that he is paralyzed by his apathy. Not only does Ray have no interest in putting effort into the garden, he also puts no effort into their relationship. Sharon eventually breaks up with him, tired of being the only one who has “tried” to make things work while Ray would only wait to see “what she was going to want next.” In the present, Ray reacts with indifference when Bernie encourages him to join the many locals who have begun to steal discarded **sleepers**, wooden beams from the construction site at the railroad tracks in town. Although he learns of successful thefts, receives advice from Bernie, and knows the wood will be useful for landscaping or firewood, Ray expresses no desire to take a few sleepers for himself. With this characteristic indifference, Ray watches on as other people spruce up their gardens with stolen sleepers.

Much of Ray’s apathy manifests as deferral and procrastination, as he always waits for better circumstances to occur instead of taking action to make his circumstances better. Toward the beginning of the story, Ray experiences a flashback to sitting in traffic with Sharon in the passenger seat. Her “mouth [was in] a sour twist,” and she was “Having a dig at him” with her condescension towards construction workers. Even though Ray’s flashback suggests that he was unhappy in the relationship, he did nothing about it at the time. Instead, as he looked at Sharon, “Something creep[ed] over him like a slow anaesthetic,” suggesting that the relationship was becoming toxic and he was simply letting it happen. Ray’s reluctance to landscape the garden despite Sharon’s repeated requests also indicates his tendency to defer tasks and find excuses. By not wanting to put any effort into a home they are “just renting,” Ray implies he will only do so once they own a home, but this aspiration unlikely to come to fruition while he is only working a part-time job.

In the present, Ray chooses to keep eating and drinking at Steve’s barbecue despite experiencing worrying physical symptoms that warn him to improve his lifestyle, such as a squeezing feeling in his chest that could potentially indicate a heart problem or unhealthy levels of stress and anxiety. He resolves to make a doctor’s appointment yet decides he can “ring tomorrow” while indulging in the meantime. However, Ray

seems unlikely to follow through on his resolution and very well might say the same thing to himself over and over, perpetually postponing the doctor's appointment.

Having let his situation deteriorate this far, Ray feels hopeless and uses his depressing circumstances to further justify not taking action, ending up trapped. Even though he is still not over Sharon and wants to “let word get back to [her] that he was out there, available,” Ray hovers around the fringes at Steve's barbecue and does not strike up conversation with any of the women there. He remarks to himself that they “knew all about him anyway”—that he is not a desirable romantic partner because of his employment and housing status—so he does not even try to make connections with any of them. He also thinks to himself that it is “probably all for the best” that is not on the path to raising children, since he feels too old and unhealthy to do so. He attempts to act as a parental figure for Sean, Steve's son, suggesting that he still wants to be a father, but in the end accepts his inability to be one.

Ray's apathy paralyzes him in any situation where he finds himself faced with a challenge, leading him to wait for things to go from “shit to good” when they are unlikely to do so without effort on his part. Once his poor situation solidifies, he resigns himself to remaining there and makes no acts of protest or rebellion until he decides to steal some sleepers in order to make a garden of his own. When he is caught in the act, he does not run and views it as a confirmation of his inability to rise above his circumstances. Like Ray, the town itself seems incapable of resisting a bad situation happening to it, in the form of the construction project “they all had [forgotten about]” that disrupts traffic without providing jobs. Even the residents' collective effort to steal sleepers has virtually no impact on the project's momentum, and it seems improbable that things will ultimately improve for the town.



## IDENTITY

The characters in “Sleepers” are primarily defined in relation to their family, housing, and employment status. Kennedy introduces locals like Bernie, Ray's coworker at the warehouse, and Frank, who has been unemployed for 14 months, both of whom are defined narrowly by their work. In their small, insular town, there is no need for longer descriptions to differentiate people—even last names are not necessary and do not appear in the story. Ray is a single man who works part-time at a warehouse and lives in a shed, but beyond that the reader learns very little about him. Ultimately, Ray can only conceive of himself as “just Ray,” an outcast with no ties to a family, no house, and no meaningful job in the community. With this bleak portrayal of her protagonist, Kennedy highlights the dangers in reducing identities to material attributes.

When commenting on his romantic ineligibility, Ray summarizes himself as “a 35-year-old man who lived in a

Colorbond shed at a mate's place, not exactly unemployed but a part-time storeman”—in other words, he pins his identity down to just his relationships, housing, and employment, all of which are lacking from his life. He has no family or partner, although he still clings to the idea of resurrecting his relationship with Sharon, his ex-girlfriend. The closest relations he has seem to be his drinking buddies Frank and Vince, who are similarly unemployed, and the unnamed “mate” whose property Ray lives on. His job is a part-time, dead-end position at a warehouse, and his house is a prefabricated steel shed, with little in the way of insulation to maintain warmth in the winter. Although he has kept his job, Ray relied entirely on Sharon for family and housing. Their breakup left him single and homeless, with only a pitiful substitute for housing and no romantic prospects. As a result, he can only anchor his sense of self to memories and what he lost. Ray seeks to reestablish the relationship to gain those back, but even that would not free him from depending on Sharon for his sense of self. In contrast, Steve seems “full of focus and purpose” with a house he owns and a teenage son to raise.

Without these material attributes, Ray can only view himself as “just Ray.” In his dream of driving up to Sharon's house, his unconscious mind imagines her dismissing him as “just Ray” to her new partner. At the end of the story, when he is caught stealing **sleepers**, Ray also imagines the police identifying him as “just Ray,” someone who is an easy arrest and the perfect choice for a scapegoat to deter others from stealing in the future. Because he does not have connections to a family, home, or meaningful job, there are no consequences to the town for sacrificing him to appease the contractors and set an example for everyone else.

In the world of the story, Ray is miserable without an identity he can take pride in. However, even the characters who are presented as successful and happy, such as Sharon and Steve, do not escape being defined in relation to material attributes. With these depictions of both haves and have-nots, Kennedy suggests that it might be inevitable to base a sense of self on external factors such as a job or a family, and that pursuing these goals is just a fact of life, not an approach guaranteed to bring either happiness or unhappiness.



## SYMBOLS

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




## SLEEPERS

The titular sleepers, which are wooden supports under the rails of railroad tracks, symbolize the invasion of capitalism—and the aggressive competition capitalism creates—into Ray's sleepy, small town. When a large

construction project on railroad tracks commences, the contractors start piling up the discarded sleepers, thus creating a competition to seize and make use of them. The project's contractors, who are from out of town, view the sleepers as a potential source of more profit, while the local residents see them as a resource that ought to be shared freely. Ray's friend Vince laments that "if that contractor was a local [...] anyone could go and help themselves to some of them for firewood. Anyone at all." Frank, a local resident who has been unemployed for over a year, adds, "Not these bastards. They'll be selling [the sleepers] on to some other subcontractor, any money. [...] They tender for these jobs and they screw the last cent out of 'em. That's the way they do business."

By treating the sleepers as a source of profit, the contractors influence the town to begin doing the same. The financially and romantically successful residents, such as Steve and Sharon, have either managed to steal some of the sleepers or have ambitions to do so, using them to further improve their homes and lives (using the sleepers as firewood, fencing around gardens, etc.). Meanwhile, marginalized and unemployed residents like Ray do not successfully obtain any sleepers, deepening the apparent inequality between the two groups. Even though Ray eventually makes an attempt to join the rat race and steal a few sleepers for himself, he is too late to the competition and is caught by the police, emphasizing the need to be opportunistic and aggressive in the town's increasingly capitalistic environment. And although many residents *have* succeeded in stealing a great number of sleepers, this is hardly a loss for the contractors—any profit from the discarded sleepers is only a bonus for the contractors, who are already backed by millions of dollars. This small-scale competition for the sleepers is representative of the larger competition for all resources under a capitalist economy, where those with more resources usually win the important competitions while the rest fight over trivial ones.

**Related Characters:** The Road Worker, Ray

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 123

### Explanation and Analysis


At the beginning of the story, Ray encounters a road worker directing traffic around the construction site. The road worker is "expressionless," hiding his "mirrored and shadowed gaze" behind reflective sunglasses. Given that eyes are often considered the windows to the soul, the man's covered eyes—and his lack of a name and "expressionless" face—strips him of his personhood and vitality, making him totally anonymous and devoid of life. His namelessness, facelessness, and expressionlessness speaks to the interchangeable nature of labor in a capitalist economy. Like the two men's feeble wave to one another, the description of the scene has also been "reduced to its bare minimum," only depicting "one man passing another man," stripping them both of any individuality. Like Ray, who has also worked as a road flagger before and feels similarly unengaged by his warehouse job, the road worker is apathetic towards his meaningless job, only "pretending" to do it because he is actually "bored shitless" by the work. With this, Kennedy highlights how capitalism often traps people in jobs that are meaningless and menial, turning workers, like the road flagger in this passage, into anonymous and expendable cogs in the capitalist machine.

“See, if that contractor was a local,” said Vince, “anyone could go and help themselves to some of them for firewood. Anyone at all.”

“Not these bastards. They'll be selling them on to some other subcontractor, any money. That's why they've got that barrier round them. They tender for these jobs and they screw the last cent out of 'em. That's the way they do business.” Frank, who hadn't worked for fourteen months.

**Related Characters:** Frank, Vince (speaker), Ray

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 123

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ray is at the pub with his friends Vince and



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribe edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2012.

### Sleepers Quotes

“The road worker aimed his mirrored and shadowed gaze at Ray as he drove past and gave a wave that had been reduced to its bare minimum: a single, slow-motion finger lifted in acknowledgement that here was one man passing another man who was pretending to be doing a job of work, bored shitless and leaning on a one-word sign. Ray raised a finger off the wheel in response, glancing at the expressionless face and looking away again. Didn't know him.”

Frank, discussing the piles of sleepers around the construction site. They express their anger and frustration towards the contractors running the project, who plan to sell the sleepers for profit instead of leaving them for the local residents to take freely and share amongst themselves. Frank, who has been unemployed for over a year, is especially resentful about “the way [out-of-town contractors] do business” and how they “screw the last cent out of [their projects]” compared to a local contractor, who would give the discarded sleepers back to their own community in a gesture of goodwill. The contractors, who are already profiting off the town’s railroad crossing while disrupting traffic and not hiring anyone local, are pursuing even *more* profit at the expense of the town’s residents by selling the sleepers to a subcontractor. By hoping to maximize their profits, these out-of-town contractors are only acting in line with what is expected in a capitalist economy—self-interest and maximizing of profits—but the locals are unprepared for this tone-deaf approach. Although there is no obligation for the contractors to leave any sleepers behind, the ruthless desire for “any money” they can get from the project leaves a bad taste in the residents’ mouths.

☛ Ray nodded. He'd seen gardens himself, of course, edged with old redgum sleepers. It was just the kind of thing Sharon had always been on his back to do, landscaping the garden.


“Why do it,” he'd argued, “when we're just renting?”

“Ray,” she'd said, exhaling a breath of resigned frustration. He'd waited for an answer, but she'd only repeated it as she'd turned away. “Ray, Ray, Ray.” Almost tenderly.

And him standing there, stranded, never knowing what she was going to want next.

**Related Characters:** Sharon, Ray (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 124

### Explanation and Analysis

While driving past the piles of sleepers with Vince, Ray remembers arguing with Sharon over landscaping the garden back when they were still in a relationship. He had refused to take on the project, citing the fact that they were

only renting and that fixing up the garden would not be worth the effort, but his apathy made her immensely frustrated. Ray remarks that “[landscaping the garden] was just the kind of thing Sharon had always been on his back to do,” implying there were probably other requests like this one that he rebuffed as well, and that the argument about the garden was only one part of a larger problem in their relationship. The disconnect between their personalities is made clear when Sharon can only say his name in frustration, unable to come up with an answer besides that he is intrinsically incapable of understanding why she would appreciate his efforts to improve the garden, perhaps as a proxy for working on their relationship. The memory ends with Ray “never knowing what she was going to want next,” since he has no ambition of his own and no ideas for putting effort into their relationship.

☛ “I guess,” said Ray. Inside the opaque layers of shrink-wrapped plastic on the pallet, he could see stacked ornamental Buddha statues. It was like gazing into a submerged shipwreck, crammed full of calmly waiting monks.

[...]

Ray lifted his knife and sliced through plastic, breathing in the chemical, sealed breath of some factory floor in China.

**Related Characters:** Ray (speaker), Bernie

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 125

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ray is working at the warehouse when his coworker Bernie boasts of having stolen several sleepers and advises Ray to discreetly take some for himself. Ray is reluctant and only responds with a halfhearted “I guess,” indicating his apathy still prevents him from joining in even though he has nothing to lose from grabbing a few sleepers for firewood.

Besides showcasing Ray’s overwhelming apathy, this passage also highlights the negative effects of capitalism. As Ray unwraps a pallet of Buddha statues shipped in from a Chinese factory, he compares them to “calmly waiting monks” who are already doomed to drown in a “submerged shipwreck.” Like the figurative monks, many of the town’s residents, including Ray, are waiting for jobs and opportunities to show up, when their town is already doomed to be exploited by powerful outside forces with

millions of dollars behind them. Even those who manage to steal some sleepers cannot stop the influx of foreign products and projects seeping into the town.

☞ At Steve's barbeque that night, he walked up and down the brand-new paved barbeque area, bordered by lines of sleepers. Set at intervals in the freshly shovelled topsoil were small clumps of perennials, which reminded Ray somehow of a hair transplant.

"It looks great," he called, feeling Steve's eyes on him.

There must have been something wrong with him, some bug he had—how else to explain that bottomed-out energy, the sapped, exhausted feeling as he watched Steve turning steaks on the grill? He'd go and have a check-up. A blood test.



"A rustic border," Steve was saying. Full of focus and purpose, pressing here and there on the meat with the tongs. "That's going to grow in no time."


Ray swatted a mosquito in the dusk, racking his brain for something to respond with. Nothing.

"We'll have a pool in here next," Steve added. "Get rid of the lawn altogether. Just an outdoor entertainment area. You right there, Ray?"

"Yeah, good."

**Related Characters:** Steve, Ray (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 126


### Explanation and Analysis

At Steve's barbeque, Ray observes Steve's freshly landscaped backyard, enhanced by some sleepers that Steve has clearly stolen from the construction site. Ray feels Steve watching him while he compliments a "brand-new paved barbeque area," hinting at a sense of competition and pride among the town's residents from owning a nice house, spurred on by the availability of sleepers for home improvement projects. Ray compares the newly planted perennials to a hair transplant, suggesting that he also sees the sleepers and landscaping as a source of rejuvenation and vitality. Steve claims the plants are "going to grow in no time," representing his flourishing, successful life trajectory compared to Ray's miserable, stagnant life. The longer Ray chats with Steve, the more his "sapped, exhausted feeling"

begins to wear him down while Steve continues to talk excitedly about future renovations with "focus and purpose" and grill steaks. Eventually, Ray is unable to respond altogether because he has no home improvement plans of his own and is so apathetic and sapped of vitality. Although Ray's own housing situation has not been revealed yet, it is apparent that Steve's newly renovated home has overwhelmed Ray and left him feeling hopeless about his ability to ever "keep up with the Joneses," as the saying goes.

☞ He'd driven past Sharon's house tonight and seen a car in the drive he didn't recognise. He couldn't stop thinking about it; his brain was like a dog jerking on the end of its chain over and over, returning to it. So that'd be the thing to do—get chatting to someone else, let word get back to Sharon that he was out there, available, a catch, on his feet. But even though he could feel those eyes on him (*car in her drive*, that convulsive choke in his throat as he circled it again), he sat back down with his laden plate on one of the sleepers instead, because the thought of trying to get a conversation going with any of them felt like heavy lifting. And they knew all about him anyway; a 35-year-old man who lived in a Colorbond shed at a mate's place, not exactly unemployed but a part-time storeman. A liability, not a catch.

**Related Characters:** Sharon, Ray

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 127

### Explanation and Analysis

After chatting with Steve at the barbeque, Ray realizes he is the only single man in attendance and wonders about his romantic prospects. He then recalls driving past the house he and Sharon used to share, seeing an unfamiliar car in the driveway, implying she might have a new partner. Ray's obsession with his ex-girlfriend resurfaces throughout the story, but he acknowledges that "his brain was like a dog jerking on the end of its chain" and formulates a plan to strike up conversation with the other women at the party as a way to spite Sharon or even reignite her interest in him. However, the combination of Sharon's potential new partner and Ray's feeling of being evaluated by the other women overwhelms him, and he gives in to his apathy, choosing not to engage with any of the women at the party because it "felt like heavy lifting" and "they knew all about him." Here, the story finally reveals Ray's age and bleak housing situation, which proves to be a significant source of



his hopelessness. Having depended on Sharon for romance and housing (that Sharon still lives at the house they once shared while Ray lives in a shed suggests that she was likely the one who paid the rent), he is adrift both physically and emotionally without her, so it is no surprise he can only think of himself as her ex-boyfriend, still defining his identity in relation to her.

☛ “Hey, Ray,” a voice was calling him. Steve’s teenage son. Scott. Sam. Something.

“Come and check this out,” the boy said, beckoning Ray over to a big black telescope on a tripod, pointed straight up into the night sky.



“Not quite dark enough yet, Sean,” Steve called from the grill, scooping meat and sausages up onto a platter. “Wait till it’s dark and I’ll show you how to adjust it properly.”

Ray stooped and squinted through the lens.

“I think it’s Mars,” said Sean.

The smell of him—grass and sunscreen, sweat and energy, all of it barely contained—registered in Ray’s head with a sudden painful awareness. This shortness of breath, the pressure on his chest...He thought of his old man’s heart attack, the way he’d staggered crabwise across the lounge room, his arm out, wordless. Take him five weeks to get a doctor’s appointment, anyway. He’d ring tomorrow.

**Related Characters:** Steve, Sean (speaker), Ray

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 128

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sean, Steve’s teenage son, asks Ray to help find Mars through his telescope, but Ray can neither remember the boy’s name, nor can he actually see anything in the telescope. This passage paints Ray as thoroughly incompetent, while Steve is the knowledgeable one who points out Sean’s name and imparts some wisdom about how and when to look through a telescope. Faced with another example of Steve “outcompeting” him, Ray suddenly feels his poor health flare up in the same “pressure on his chest” and “shortness of breath” that had led to his father’s heart attack. Although he resolves to “ring tomorrow” to make a doctor’s appointment, Ray’s comment that it would “take him five weeks to get [one], anyway” does not inspire hope that he will follow through with setting up an appointment. Like earlier remarks about his lack of energy,


it seems that Ray has accepted his deteriorating health as inevitable and not worth the effort to fix. Once again, Ray’s overwhelming apathy paralyzes him from making meaningful changes in his life, and he turns to deferral and procrastination as a way to avoid—and also perpetuate—the challenges he faces.

☛ Turning the keys in the ignition in his car, he fought the impulse to go home via the house again, check if the car was still there. Up his old street, the same streetlight broken, up to the driveway that he used to pull in to every night, taking that normalcy for granted. His ute bumping up over the kerb and the sensor light snapping on as Ray got out of the car in his loser shorts, running to flab, any fool could see that. Then Sharon’s silhouette in the ridged glass of the front door, her and whoever was there with her. He saw her put both her hands up to the glass to peer through its distorting ripples at him.

*Don’t worry*, he heard her saying, her voice muffled, *it’s just Ray*, seeing him for exactly what he was; he could hear that in her tone. Her right arm lifted and snapped off the sensor light impatiently, leaving him there in the dark, and the shapes of the two of them rippled and shifted as they stepped back from the door, Ray thinking he would never forget this one moment as their shadows swam together out of the light.

He opened his eyes and saw he was still sitting in his ute outside Steve’s place, his hands slack on the steering wheel.

**Related Characters:** Steve, Sharon, Ray

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 129



### Explanation and Analysis


After leaving Steve’s barbecue, Ray falls asleep in his car before he can start it up—a good thing, given that he’s had too many beers to count and shouldn’t be behind the wheel—and dreams about driving past Sharon’s house once again. In his imagination, Ray describes himself as “running to flab” and wearing “loser shorts.” Through Sharon’s perspective, he sees himself as “just Ray” and not an intruder to be worried about, but rather a pest to be dismissed “impatiently” so that she can return to her new partner. His dream reflects his inability to break free of his identity as Sharon’s ex-boyfriend, perhaps even on a subconscious level. The remaining features of his identity are not things Ray is proud of, such as being a single and childless man in his 30s, living in a shed on a friend’s

property, or working part-time at a warehouse. To Ray, the only characteristic he could take pride in was being Sharon's partner. After their breakup, he still jealously obsesses over winning her back because he believes he can only be "just Ray" without her, with nothing else to his name.

●● Ray stretched as he stood, his spine cracking. In the back he found himself a pair of gloves, let down the tailgate, and here came the moon, sailing out from behind a cloud, ready to help him. Sean, if he was still up, would be able to see every crater on that surface, it was so clear. Ray ducked under the orange flags and tugged at a sleeper, pushed and pulled it free, dragged it over to the ute and heaved it in with a grunt. Easy. Another one. Another. He'd only need ten. Some people he knew had taken dozens of the things. It felt good, even though it was the middle of the night, to be working up a sweat. Cold oxygen in his lungs prickling like stars, clearing his fogged head finally.

**Related Characters:** Sean, Ray

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 131

### Explanation and Analysis

Once Ray makes up his mind to take the sleepers for himself, he begins to load them onto his truck. For the first time in the story, he begins to feel hopeful and healthy, believing that luck is on his side when he procures a pair of gloves and sees "the moon, sailing out from behind a cloud, ready to help him" complete his task. The cold air "clear[s] his fogged head" enough that he can quickly associate the moon with Sean and his telescope, remembering his name easily this time. "Working up a sweat" from lifting the sleepers is surprisingly satisfying to the usually sedentary Ray and he settles into a rhythm of loading one sleeper after another into his truck. In performing the work alone and purely for his own benefit, Ray does not feel like he is throwing away his labor the way he does working in the warehouse or on a road crew—this isn't capitalistic labor, since he's not working as a cog in the machine. Like every other resident who has taken some sleepers, Ray's efforts are going towards improving himself instead of creating profits for someone else, like most jobs in a capitalist



economy.


●● And as he turned, squinting in their sudden highbeam, his chest squeezing, all that false warmth descending into his boots, he knew that they wouldn't bother with their siren, because they could see that it was just him. Just Ray. They knew he'd turn around like this, and take what was coming to him. Because they need an example, he thought wearily as he peeled off his gloves, the realisation flaring like a little chunk of burning rock, a tiny meteor.

What was the word? An escape-goat? Nowhere to put the gloves, so Ray threw them onto the ute tray, and missed. The cops' headlights casting big crooked shadows.

He waited there for them, next to the sleepers, lowering his bare hands for comfort onto weathered, solid old redgum, hauled up and discarded but with so much life in it, still, it just broke your heart to see it go to waste.

**Related Characters:** Ray

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

While Ray is occupied with the sleepers, the police arrive and shine their car's headlights on him, catching him in the act. In an instant, Ray loses all the hope he has gained while loading his truck. The symptoms of his poor health rush back into his body, causing a tightness in his chest. His self-image reverts to "just Ray" when he notices the siren is not turned on, because he is too "round and innocuous" to be any risk to the police, just as he was no threat to Sharon and her new partner in his dream. His newly cleared mind hangs on a little longer like "a tiny meteor" burning up as it falls, allowing him to realize clearheadedly that the police needed an example for the sleeper thefts—someone to arrest to deter others from stealing—but his cognitive abilities start to regress quickly as well. Within moments, he cannot remember the word "scapegoat" and misses the truck bed when throwing his gloves, highlighting his return to his incompetent, complacent state. When he waits for the police to arrive, Ray notes that the sleepers have so much potential to be put to use but are ultimately a casualty of capitalism's drive for profit, much like himself.



## 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.

## SLEEPERS

On his morning commute in a small town, Ray encounters traffic caused by construction at the town's main railroad crossing. The track upgrade, in which "Thousands of dollars [are] being spent every minute," is a construction project outsourced to a non-local company. Remembering this causes Ray to wish he could have found contract work on the project.

As he pulls up to a road worker directing traffic to a detour, Ray remembers waiting similarly at a construction site with his then-girlfriend Sharon. She had spoken condescendingly about the road crew then, knowing that he had previously worked as a road flagger. At the time, looking at Sharon in the passenger seat, Ray had felt "Something creeping over him like a slow anaesthetic." Ray's memory shifts to their breakup and being forced to move out of their shared house, with Sharon continuing to address him in a patronizing way, "like he was the thickest kid in the class."

Ray's focus returns to the present, where the detour points him past a boarded-up hotel and old livestock markets. Yawning, Ray realizes he will be late to his part-time job at a warehouse—which he is "lucky" to have—but he's not too worried since "everyone would be late today" and the manager never supervises them. As Ray drives past an expressionless road worker wearing sunglasses, the two of them do the "bare minimum" of gestures to acknowledge each other's presence and the shared pretense of "doing a job of work" while "bored shitless."

In the late afternoon, Ray is at the pub with his friends Frank and Vince when he first hears about the old railroad **sleepers** that are being removed by the construction crew. According to Frank, who has been unemployed for over a year, the sleepers are being sorted by quality, indicating they will be sold to a subcontractor. Vince interjects to angrily complain that a local contractor would have left the sleepers for residents to take for their personal use.

*Like many other residents of the town, Ray could not find work on the construction project even though there are thousands, perhaps millions, of dollars involved and the project is negatively affecting their commutes during rush hour.*



*Even though Ray wishes he had found work on a construction or road crew for the project, he remembers that Sharon does not consider these to be worthwhile jobs. Their relationship was characterized by her impatience with his apathy and total lack of ambition, which is a thread that runs throughout the story.*



*Despite the money flowing into the construction project, other businesses in town are shutting down or not doing well. The available jobs for locals consist of part-time positions consisting of meaningless, uninspired work. The road worker, like Ray and his manager, is also apathetic towards his work and gives no more than the bare minimum of effort. That the roadworker is expressionless suggests that he's anonymous and generic, just a cog in the capitalist machine.*



*The contractors behind the project intend to sell the sleepers because they are not local and have no interest in the town besides generating profit—to them, leaving the sleepers behind for the community to share would be a waste of money and resources. This narrow focus on maximizing profits angers the local residents, for whom the project is providing neither work nor material resources.*



On their way home, Ray and Vince drive past a construction site and see piles of **sleepers** with only a token perimeter of flags to protect them. Vince predicts that the locals will soon start stealing the sleepers for landscaping and firewood. He justifies this by pointing out that there will be “millions” of sleepers pulled up, so the construction company won’t even notice the ones that are taken. This prompts Ray to think of Sharon again, this time remembering an argument they had over landscaping their garden. At the time, Ray saw no point in fixing up the garden since they were “just renting,” while she expressed more patronizing frustration toward him.

Over the next two weeks, it seems everyone Ray encounters expresses interest in the **sleepers** and “a sudden professed desire to landscape.” At work, Ray’s coworker Bernie boasts about grabbing a truckload of them for his backyard pool. Another person at the pub achieves infamy for “liberating thirty sleepers in broad daylight.” Bernie advises Ray in how to successfully steal some for himself—“Just do it discreetly, and [...] Don’t get greedy”—but Ray is hesitant.

Meanwhile, Ray cuts open a shrink-wrapped pallet containing Buddha statues and reflects that it looks like “a submerged shipwreck, crammed full of calmly waiting monks,” noticing the smell of chemicals that the Chinese-manufactured statues emanate. He suddenly recalls waking up that morning with his dinner plate from the night before still sitting on his chest, having fallen asleep with it balanced there. The white plate looked as “round and innocuous as a moon.”

That night, Ray attends a barbecue at his friend Steve’s home. The backyard is freshly paved and landscaped with **sleepers** and clumps of flowers, an arrangement that Ray likens to a hair transplant but tells Steve “looks great.” He experiences a “sapped, exhausted feeling” while watching Steve grill steaks and listening to him describe with “focus and purpose” his plans to remodel the backyard. Ray thinks to himself that he should visit a doctor and get a blood test.

*The sheer number of sleepers is both what allows the thefts and makes them useless as an act of protest against the contractors’ profiteering. On another note, Ray’s past refusal to landscape the garden for Sharon reflects his general apathy and lack of ambition, foreshadowing his reluctance to join the competition to steal sleepers. His flashbacks also begin to reveal his continued obsession with Sharon, even though it’s clear that they’re no longer together. That he’s so hung up on his ex-girlfriend suggest that Ray has little else in his life.*



*Although Bernie and Ray work in the same warehouse, Bernie is enthusiastic to join the race for sleepers and has a pool area to landscape, suggesting Ray’s job is not necessarily what traps him in apathy. Other stories of bold and successful thefts highlight how easy it is to steal the sleepers, which, in turn, highlights just how terribly apathetic and lifeless Ray is. Bernie’s comment that stealing the sleepers isn’t about being “greedy” positions it as an act of protest against the construction project and capitalism as a whole. While capitalism centers around maximizing profits, which can read as greed, the residents only steal what they will actually use and aren’t interested in making a profit.*



*The Buddha statues from China, physically and culturally far from Australia, where the story is set, are another representation of a connected economy encroaching on a small community and otherwise insular community. Ray’s description of the statues as doomed monks waiting for their fates is a metaphor for the town’s residents experiencing the same helplessness and quiet complacency. He is ultimately too “round and innocuous” to make sense of these rapid changes to his small town.*



*Steve is the opposite of Ray, acting with energy and purpose in contrast to Ray’s apathy and exhaustion. The landscaping reminds Ray of a hair transplant in its representation of rejuvenation and vitality that he has not found. Upon encountering someone with so much energy, Ray’s own poor health and lethargy flare up, emphasizing the difference between the two men.*



As Ray gets up to fill his plate with food, he thinks about the “heavy squeezing [sensation] under his sternum” that he’s been feeling for a few months and wonders if he should drink less beer. He “feel[s] the eyes of women on him,” including Steve’s wife, and realizes he is the only single man at the barbecue. Earlier that night, he saw an unfamiliar car in the driveway when passing Sharon’s house. Assuming it to be evidence that she has a new partner, Ray briefly considers chatting with the women at the barbecue to advertise himself as “a catch” and “let word get back to Sharon.” However, he decides conversation would be too much effort and sits back down with his heaping plate of food, telling himself everyone knows he is just “a 35-year-old man who live[s] in a Colorbond shed at a mate’s place” and is therefore “not a catch.”

Ray thinks about how this temporary home in his friend’s shed, where he was going to live only until he could find a more suitable place, has become permanent—he’s put in carpeting, furniture, and a TV. He keeps telling himself that he’s saving money, “Waiting for things to go from shit to good.”

Steve’s son Sean calls Ray over to look at Mars through a telescope. Despite the fact that Ray has been on a fishing trip with Steven and Sean, he does not remember the boy’s name until Steve addresses Sean, telling him to wait until the sky is darker. Ray looks through the telescope and tries fruitlessly to make out Mars but only sees his own eye reflected, noticing the wrinkles and lines that surround it. Ray calculates that if he were to have a son now, he would be 50 by the time his son was 15. He concludes that being childless is “probably all for the best” at this point and lies to Sean about seeing Mars.

Later, Ray gets in his car and thinks about driving past Sharon’s home again and pulling into “the driveway that he used to pull in to every night.” Ray thinks—or perhaps dreams—about getting out of his car to peer into the house, only to see Sharon with another person before she dismisses him as “just Ray” (“seeing him for exactly what he was”) and then retreats into the house.

*Ray’s disclosure of his age, romantic status, and housing arrangement reveals how pitiful his life has become. The contrast with Steve’s well-appointed home is heightened by this new knowledge. Meanwhile, Sharon has (presumably) moved on to a new partner and continues to live at the same house (which implies that she’s capable of paying the rent), which provides another contrast to Ray’s downward spiral. Even faced with an ideal situation for improving his romantic prospects, Ray’s apathy prevents him from taking action.*



*Throughout the story, Ray often turns to deferral or procrastination as a way to cope with his bleak circumstances—but this behavior is unproductive because it only prolongs his bleak circumstances. Here, Ray thinks about how he intended to live in the shed only for a short time, until he could find a proper place to live, but his apathy and procrastination meant that he never did search for another place and instead resigned himself to living in the shed in the longer term.*



*To further emphasize the gap between Ray and Steve, Sean enters the story to show that Steve’s successful life includes not only a wife but also a son. Although Ray attempts to act as a father or uncle figure for Sean since Steve is busy with the grill, he cannot use the telescope properly or even remember the boy’s name, while Steve is able to correctly instruct Sean anyway. Ray’s resignation to being childless is the final and most irreversible result of his apathy. Even if he manages to marry and buy a home, he cannot change his age.*



*After revealing how his apathy has taken away his hopes for employment, home ownership, romance, and fatherhood, Ray subconsciously reduces himself to “just Ray,” someone who has no identity, no ambition, and no hopes. Having exhausted his options, Ray turns to heavy drinking to cope—yet another unproductive coping mechanism that keeps Ray rooted to his lowly position in life.*



When Ray opens his eyes again, he realizes that he's still in his car parked outside of Steve's place. He struggles to remember how many beers he had that night. Suddenly, he has the "crap idea" to steal some **sleepers** and surprise Sharon with them the next day. His mind skips over the logistics of showing up unannounced directly to landscaping her garden and making it "ready for some seedlings." Although he considers asking Vince for help, he knows his friend will have already started smoking marijuana heavily by this time of night.

When Ray arrives at the construction site, his plan changes from winning Sharon back with the **sleepers** to keeping them for himself to chop up for firewood and landscape a vegetable garden outside his shed. Looking at the piles of sleepers, he understands "the ire, the harmless, face-saving looting" of the discarded wood, and resents how he often finds himself lacking energy or a will to move. He begins to load some sleepers into his truck and starts feeling good from "working up a sweat," the "cold oxygen in his lungs [...] clearing his fogged head finally."

While Ray is in the middle of loading **sleepers**, a police car silently shines its lights on him. He turns around and suddenly feels "his chest squeezing" again, imagining the police viewing him as "just Ray," an easily caught scapegoat. Defeated, Ray waits for the police to arrive instead of running. He remarks that the sleepers are "discarded but with so much life in [them]," and that it is a shame "to see [them] go to waste."

*Like the description of Steve's backyard as a hair transplant, landscaping is a loose metaphor throughout the story for vitality, energy, and romantic or sexual desirability. In making Sharon's yard "ready for some seedlings," Ray intends to grow and make himself desirable to her again.*



*Ray finally suppresses his apathy and begins to perform work that is meaningful to him. By freeing himself of obsessing over Sharon—at least for the time being—he develops a plan to improve his home and life in small but tangible ways. His thoughts about landscaping a garden and stoking a fire in the winter inspire him to make further plans of growing vegetables. It's significant that the work Ray is doing in this passage is not capitalistic work. Though he's motivated by self-interest, stealing the sleepers is an act of resistance against the capitalistic system. This is in part why the work is so invigorating and refreshing for him.*



*Ray's sickliness and apathy resurface when the police car's headlights overwhelm him, just as he started feeling poorly when Steve's energetic personality overwhelmed him at the barbeque. Like Ray, the sleepers are being discarded and used for someone else's gain despite having plenty of life left.*





## HOW TO CITE

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