

Speak



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON

Originally a journalist, Laurie Halse Anderson wrote children's books before transitioning to young adult novels with *Speak* in 1999. Since then, she has written many bestsellers and has been honored with multiple literary awards. Anderson has traveled to high schools across the country to discuss the issues raised in the book; she has also spoken out against issues such as book banning, and for increased gender equity in YA fiction. An ardent feminist, Anderson has revealed that she took the plot of *Speak* from a similarly traumatic and violent experience that she herself experienced as a ninth grader.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The narrative of *Speak* is closely connected to the idea of feminism, and to the dialogue in America surrounding the issue of rape. Since the rise of the feminist movement in the mid-20th century, rape has increasingly become a part of the national conversation. Progress has been slow, however; in fact, marital rape, in which a husband rapes his wife, was not criminalized in all 50 states until 1993. The 21st century has brought about new advances in the way we as a society talk about and view rape, but there have been setbacks as well. In Steubenville, Ohio, for instance, several football players raped a high school girl and documented their crime, yet were not immediately charged or arrested; these events in 2012 led to a national controversy. *Rolling Stone Magazine*, meanwhile, published a shocking piece about rape at UVA in 2014, only to retract the article because much of it was false. These scandals help to explain why a culture of silence (which Melinda experiences) still keeps many rape victims from speaking out; they are fearful of being accused of lying, of having their own characters questioned, or of being shamed for the violence that was perpetrated upon them.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Laurie Halse Anderson has written many other books about contemporary teenage issues; one of the most prominent is *Wintergirls* (2009), which deals with the sensitive topic of eating disorders as thoughtfully and poignantly as *Speak* discusses rape and depression. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) also deals with issues of rape, disenfranchisement, and coming of age as a woman. J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) represents the original dark coming-of-age story, while Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (2007), which depicts a young boy growing up on a reservation,

similarly focuses on the narrative of a teenager trying to grow up under difficult circumstances. *The Book Thief* (2007), by Marcus Zuzak, also focuses on a female protagonist whose internal strength helps her to mature in the face of life's challenges; although she lives in Nazi Germany, not upstate New York.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Speak*
- **When Written:** 1999
- **Where Written:** Mexico, New York
- **When Published:** October 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** YA fiction
- **Setting:** Syracuse, NY
- **Climax:** Andy Evans, Melinda's rapist, tries to attack her at the end of the school year and she successfully fights him off, finding her voice in the process
- **Antagonist:** Specifically, Andy Evans, Melinda's rapist; more broadly, the culture of silence that has made her ashamed of her own rape
- **Point of View:** 1st person

EXTRA CREDIT

Such stuff as dreams are made on. In interviews, Laurie Halse Anderson has said that Melinda came to her in a dream; she credits this experience with helping her to develop Melinda's strong and distinctive voice.

Melinda in the movies. In 2004, *Speak* was adapted into a movie starring Kristen Stewart; the movie has helped contribute to the widespread popularity of the book.



PLOT SUMMARY

Melinda Sordino begins her freshman year at Merryweather High depressed and alone. Throughout the day, students bully and isolate her. Her former best friend, Rachel, is particularly cruel. The only person who will talk to her is Heather, an annoying new girl in town who is focused on social advancement. Cynical but perceptive, Melinda mocks every aspect of Merryweather. She only becomes excited in the art room, where the passionate Mr. Freeman tells his students that they will each spend the year on a single subject; Melinda gets a **tree**.

Melinda describes her workaholic mother and disinterested

father. She discusses her hatred for her babyish **bedroom**, decorated when she was in fifth grade. In the bedroom, Melinda hides her **mirror**; she loathes her appearance, especially her raw, bitten **lips**.

In the following weeks, Melinda has an icy interaction with Rachel, spends time with Heather, works on her tree, and begins to use an old abandoned janitor's **closet** in school as a hiding spot. Although she was once "happy" and "driven," she now feels detached and depressed. This depression worsens when students at a pep rally recognize her as "the one who called the cops at Kyle Rodgers's party" and torment her.

Heather becomes angry with Melinda for being an unsupportive friend, but quickly apologizes. Meanwhile, Melinda's parents are upset about her low grades and her apathy. They scold her but end up yelling at each other. In biology class, Melinda encounters David Petrakis, her brilliant lab partner. She continues to pay no attention in her classes, and spends Halloween by herself, remembering when she once had friends.

Heather joins the Marthas, a preppy clique dedicated to community service. Although Melinda helps Heather with Martha duties, the other girls make fun of her lips, causing Melinda to cry in a bathroom. Even worse, Melinda sees a male student she calls IT in the hallway. She freezes, describing him as "my nightmare."

Melinda cleans her closet and covers its mirror with a **poster of Maya Angelou**. She notes that it is growing harder to talk, and is grateful for her closet because it allows her to hide her emotions. In her social studies class, after her bullying teacher Mr. Neck goes on a racist rant, David Petrakis begins to protest for his own freedom of speech.

On Thanksgiving, Melinda's mother tries and fails to cook a turkey (which she forgot to defrost). Her father can't cook the **bird** either, and after fighting, the family eats pizza. The next day, Melinda creates a sculpture using the turkey's bones. Mr. Freeman approves of the piece, as does Melinda's artistic former friend, Ivy.

School continues, bringing an apple dissection in biology (Melinda flashes back to a childhood memory in an apple orchard) and more protests from David in social studies. As winter break starts, Melinda feels nostalgic for her childhood. On Christmas, Melinda's parents give her a sketchpad and charcoals because they've noticed her drawing. Touched, Melinda almost tells them her secret, but cannot. In the following days of winter break, she's forced to work at both her mother's and her father's jobs.

School starts and Melinda struggles with her tree. She helps Heather with a Martha poster project, and faints during a frog dissection in biology (after identifying with the dead frog). Heather, having been hired as a model, asks Melinda to hang posters; as she does, Melinda encounters IT, who whispers

"Freshmeat" in her ear as she stands **frozen**.

Hearing about her terrible grades, Melinda's parents scream at her. Melinda refuses to speak, and spends the night in her bedroom closet, scratching at her wrist with a paperclip until **blood** appears. Matters grow even worse when IT—a senior named Andy Evans—begins to flirt with one of the Marthas, harassing Melinda as he does so.

Melinda continues to earn terrible grades, and makes no progress on her tree. After missing her school bus one day, she walks toward school only to see Andy, who once again targets her. She remains frozen and then runs away from him, after which she decides to cut school, spending the day in the warm, **sunny** mall.

School continues. Melinda's English class discusses symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*, and she tries to work on her tree. She becomes deeply depressed after Heather decides to stop being friends with her, telling her that she needs "professional help." On Valentine's Day, Melinda receives a valentine that she hopes and fears might be from David Petrakis. It is actually a friendship breakup valentine from Heather, which causes Melinda to break down in her closet. She cuts school and ends up hiding in a hospital.

Furious about her terrible grades, Melinda's parents have a dysfunctional meeting with her principal (whom she names Principal Principal) and her guidance counselor. She remains silent as the adults argue, and is forced to attend in-school suspension. Andy Evans is there, and blows in her ear. She fantasizes about killing him.

On a positive note, Melinda is inspired by the fractured work of Pablo Picasso in art class. One day when she needs a ride to meet her mother, Mr. Freeman drives her, and tells her that she needs to use her tree to express her emotions. She also actually studies for a biology test about **seeds**, even though she is increasingly depressed by her friendlessness. After sleeping too long in her janitor's close, Melinda catches the final seconds of a winning basketball game. In the happy hubbub afterwards, David Petrakis asks her to come over to his house for pizza, but she panics and declines.

After a night of insomnia, Melinda climbs to her roof and flashes back to the night of Kyle Rodger's party; sneaking in with her group of friends, downing three beers to keep from feeling awkward, wandering off into the trees, and being asked to dance by Andy. She recalls him kissing her and becoming more aggressive, and as her memories become fractured, remembers how he suddenly was on top of her, and how she tried to say no until he covered her mouth with his hands. Barely coherent, she recounts how he raped her, and how she dialed 911 afterwards but was unable to make a sound. As she flashes back to the present, she finds that she has bitten through her own lip.

As winter turns to spring, Melinda has a positive interaction

with Ivy, but finds out that Rachel and Andy are dating. Horrified, she writes an unsigned warning note to Rachel. In social studies, she turns in an extra-credit report on the suffragettes and becomes excited about the topic, until Mr. Neck tells her that she must read it aloud in front of the class. She and David come up with a plan, and Melinda protests for her right to silence (though David feels she should fight for her right to speak).

As Melinda works in the art room, Andy comes in looking for Rachel, and Melinda is once again unable to speak as he approaches. Ivy comes in during the encounter, and calls Andy bad news. The next day, Melinda wakes up with a fever, and imagines being on Oprah and talking about her rape.

It is May at last, and Melinda begins gardening. She and Ivy, meanwhile, name Andy Evans a guy “to stay away from” in marker on a bathroom wall. Melinda gets stronger, and even rejects Heather when her two-faced friend comes to ask for help making prom decorations. Feeling empowered, Melinda decides to talk to Rachel; the interaction goes well, up until the moment when Melinda tells Rachel that she was raped at the beginning of the year. Rachel is at first horrified and concerned, but reacts with disbelief and cruelty when Melinda reveals that Andy was the perpetrator. Although deeply upset, Melinda becomes happier when Ivy shows her that many girls have added additional warnings about Andy to the wall.

After watching arborists prune a tree in her yard, Melinda goes to visit the place where she was raped; in the quiet grove, she vows to nurture her old self like a seed, hoping that she will soon be able to grow once again. She spends a night with her parents without fighting, and then finds out that Rachel broke up with Andy at prom. Melinda is ecstatic, and decides that she doesn't need to spend time in her closet anymore.

Melinda goes to clean out her closet, but Andy Evans follows her in. He calls her ugly and jealous, and tells her that she's lying about her rape. He then vows to give her what she wants, and attempts to rape her a second time. As he goes to unzip his jeans, Melinda screams “no.” She uses her turkey sculpture to break the closet's hidden mirror, and holds a broken shard to his neck, leaving him speechless and terrified. As she does so, the entire girls' lacrosse team breaks down the closet door.

School is close to ending, and a summer school-bound Melinda suddenly finds herself popular because of the attack. She sits in the art room and at last creates an imperfect but beautiful tree. As she does so, she admits to herself that her rape happened, but that she will survive it. She then adds birds to her tree, and begins to cry. As she does so, Mr. Freeman comes over and remarks that she's been through a lot. Melinda feels as though the ice in her throat is melting, and replies, “Let me tell you all about it.”



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Melinda Sordino – The protagonist of *Speak*, Melinda begins high school (and the novel) traumatized by a rape that occurred at the hands of upperclassman Andy Evans at a party the summer before. She has not told anyone about the rape, however, and her classmates loathe her for calling the police on the party, while her parents and teachers are disappointed and angered by her sudden depression and apathy. She is smart, but refuses to do her homework, or go to class. She displays aptitude for basketball and tennis, yet refuses to make any effort to follow through on her skills. Terrified of opening up to anyone, or of growing up in any real way, Melinda must learn over the course of the novel to overcome her trauma and to find her own voice. Her inability to tell anyone about her rape manifests itself in an inability to speak at all, but creating art, gaining independence, and standing up to the bullies in her life helps her to regain the ability to articulate herself once again. While she is silent and cold on the outside, Melinda has a rich interior life. She is funny and perceptive, and has the ability to be both cynical and empathetic towards both her peers and the authority figures in her life. By the novel's end, Melinda has begun to come out of her shell, opening up to her art teacher and to her former friend, Ivy. Her growth reaches its peak when she fights off Andy Evans as he attempts to rape her a second time, and subsequently finishes the drawing of a **tree** that she has been working on all year. She has regained both her voice and her autonomy, and is finally able to move forward with her life.

Andy Evans – A popular and handsome upperclassman, Andy Evans raped Melinda at a party the summer before *Speak* begins. He is the main antagonist of the book, and spends much of the narrative harassing Melinda in various subtle but menacing ways. Despite his friendly façade, he also has a terrible reputation at school, with many girls reporting his violent behavior. When he begins dating Melinda's former best friend Rachel, Melinda at last takes action, telling Rachel about the rape. After he finds out what Melinda has done, Andy tries to rape her for a second time in the supply **closet** that she considers her safe space. When she calls out for help and threatens him with a shard of glass, however, the whole school finally finds out about Andy's crimes. Melinda also refers to him as “IT” and “Andy Beast” over the course of the novel.

Melinda's mother – Overworked and distracted, Melinda's mother is aware that her daughter has suddenly become withdrawn and depressed, but has no idea why. Rather than attempting to understand and connect with Melinda, her mother instead reacts with frustration and anger. Even when she sees that Melinda has intentionally hurt herself, she reacts coldly and dismissively. She also has a strained and combative

relationship with Melinda's father, even more reason for Melinda to distrust the adults in her life.

Melinda's father – An insurance salesman, Melinda's father is clueless and removed, although he pretends to be warm and jocular. Like Melinda's mother, he has no idea of the trauma that Melinda has suffered, and yells at his daughter rather than attempting to understand her true feelings. He is removed and distant from both his wife and daughter, and he and Melinda's mother frequently take their frustration with Melinda out on each other.

Heather – A transfer student from Ohio, Heather is everything that Melinda is not—perky, friendly, and obsessed with being popular. She is willing to be Melinda's friend, however, because she initially doesn't know that Melinda called the police at the party before school began (which other students think Melinda did to get everyone in trouble but in fact she did to try to report her rape). Throughout the book, Melinda watches as Heather desperately tries to fit in with the other students at her school, only to fail over and over. Although she clearly finds Melinda strange and frustrating, Heather also takes advantage of Melinda's willingness to help her complete various tasks for the clique called the Marthas that she is trying to join. She finally ditches Melinda, telling her that she is too unfriendly and withdrawn, but later asks Melinda for help once again. When Melinda says no, she at last puts an end to the unhealthy and unequal friendship.

Mr. Freeman – Melinda's free-spirited, kind, warm art teacher, Mr. Freeman is the only adult whom Melinda respects or trusts. He tells his students to use art to express their emotions, and helps Melinda to once again find her voice by forcing her to focus on a single subject—a **tree**—over the entire year. Mr. Freeman also frequently stands up to the school administration, refusing to give students grades and protesting the budget cuts to his art supplies by painting a giant satirical mural on one of the walls of his classroom. At the end of the book, Melinda begins to tell him the story of her rape.

Rachel Bruin – Although she and Melinda used to be best friends, Rachel now hates Melinda, believing (like the other students at their high school) that Melinda called the police on a summer party in order to get others in trouble, when really she was attempting to report her own rape. A pretentious social climber, Rachel calls herself Rachelle for much of the book, and hangs out with foreign exchange students whom she perceives as cool. She eventually begins dating Andy Evans, Melinda's rapist, at which point Melinda finally tells her former friend about the rape. Although she does not believe the story at first, Rachel eventually breaks up with Andy, an act that incites him to attempt to rape Melinda a second time. At the end of the novel, Rachel has reached out to Melinda, but it is unclear whether the two will become friends again.

Ivy – A former member of the Plain Janes, Melinda's middle

school friend group, Ivy is never as cruel to Melinda as Rachel is. In fact, she and Melinda begin to become friends after spending a great deal of time together in Mr. Freeman's art classroom. Together, they write graffiti about Andy Evans (Melinda's rapist) on a bathroom wall, and are surprised to see how many other girls have had negative experiences with him. Throughout the novel, Ivy is kind and supportive, helping Melinda to see the good in her peers once again.

David Petrakis – Like Ivy, David Petrakis becomes an ally of Melinda's, after beginning the year as her biology lab partner. Generally considered a genius, David is also a principled and moral person, qualities that he displays when he protests Mr. Neck's racist and bigoted remarks about immigrants. David acts in a friendly way towards Melinda, and may even show romantic interest in her, despite her hesitance and mistrust around people, particularly men. He also helps her to join in his fight against Mr. Neck by silently protesting the tyrannical teacher in front of the whole class, although he tells her that she needs to speak out for what she believes.

Nicole – Like Ivy and Rachel, Nicole used to be a part of Melinda's friend group, the Plain Janes, in middle school. She is now a talented athlete, and her strength and confidence represent to Melinda everything that she herself is not. When Melinda almost beats Nicole at tennis, this is a major boost to her self-esteem. Nicole is cordial to Melinda—not as warm as Ivy, but not as cruel as Rachel. When Andy Evans attacks Melinda in the supply closet, it is Nicole and the girls' lacrosse team who come to her aid.

The Marthas (Meg n' Emily n' Siobhan) – An insipid and tyrannical group of girls obsessed with community service and school spirit, The Marthas are the clique that Heather tries to join. They take advantage of her insecurity and eagerness, forcing her to decorate for their events and then taking all the credit for her work, even as they tell her that she has done a terrible job. Heather frequently enlists Melinda to help her with these projects. To Melinda, these girls represent the height of high school conformity and cruelty.

Greta-Ingrid – Greta-Ingrid is one of Rachel's new foreign exchange student friends, whose name Melinda intentionally fails to remember. She is incredibly beautiful and, like Rachel, appears to have captured the interest of Melinda's rapist Andy Evans. When Melinda attempts to warn Rachel about Andy Evans, she tells her to warn Greta-Ingrid as well.

Mr. Neck – A bullying bigot, Mr. Neck is Melinda's social studies teacher, often singling her out for mistreatment because of her silence and sullenness. When his son doesn't get a job as a firefighter, Mr. Neck goes on an anti-immigrant rant, and earns the anger of David Petrakis, who eventually ends up protesting him along with Melinda. To Melinda, Mr. Neck is the epitome of everything wrong with adulthood—he uses his power to hurt people, refuses to listen, and is blind to anything that contradicts his point of view.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Guidance counselor – Melinda’s guidance counselor means well, but is unable to find out why she is cutting classes and is unable to make friends. Yet another powerless and unhelpful adult, the guidance counselor only makes matters worse in attempting to talk to Melinda’s parents about her problems.

Principal Principal – Melinda considers Principal Principal so incompetent that she refuses to even learn his name. Frequently fooled and mocked by students, Principal Principal tries and fails to connect with Melinda and to understand what is wrong with her.

Hairwoman – Melinda names her English teacher Hairwoman because she cannot see her face through her thick hair. Obsessed with [The Scarlet Letter](#) and creative writing, Hairwoman continually tries to get her students excited and inspired about English, although she often comes across as clueless and incompetent.

Ms. Keen – One of the few adults whom Melinda does not dislike, Ms. Keen is her smart and interesting biology teacher. Melinda is especially interested in her units about plants and [trees](#), because of her art project on the subject.

Mr. Stetman – Like Ms. Keen, Mr. Stetman, Melinda’s algebra teacher, is kind, hardworking, and genuinely excited about his subject. Melinda, however, puts no effort into understanding algebra, and frequently earns terrible grades in his class.

Ms. Connors – Melinda’s gym teacher, Ms. Connors is impressed by her skill in basketball and tennis, but disappointed that Melinda’s terrible grades will not allow her to join the basketball team.

Spanish teacher – Melinda’s Spanish teacher attempts to use immersion to teach her students Spanish, but fails; she is yet another adult who fails to communicate with the high schoolers around her.

Librarian – Kind and understanding, the Librarian gives Melinda a late pass after she cries in the library. Melinda ends up taking advantage of this, stealing an entire pad of late passes in order to cut class.

Heather’s mother – Another clueless adult, Heather’s mother is friendly but phony. She encourages Heather’s friendship with Melinda, and seems concerned that her daughter hasn’t made more friends.

Coach Disaster – Because the school’s football team is so awful, Melinda renames the football coach Coach Disaster.

Basketball Coach – Like Ms. Connors, Basketball Coach is impressed by Melinda’s ability to make baskets, but disappointed that she cannot join the girls’ team. They offer to let her help coach the boys’ team in exchange for an A in gym, and while she says yes, she never actually follows through.

Kyle Rodgers – Although Kyle Rodgers never appears in the

novel, it was at his party that Andy Evans raped Melinda.

Jessica – A former member of the Plain Janes (Melinda’s old friend group), Jessica has since moved to Nevada.

Raven Cheerleader and Amber Cheerleader – Melinda makes fun of the cheerleaders at her school, especially two blonde seniors whom she names Raven Cheerleader and Amber Cheerleader. At the end of the book, however, she sees Amber Cheerleader saying goodbye to Mr. Freeman, and realizes that she may have misjudged her.

Basketball Pole – One of the players on Merryweather High’s basketball team. His real name is Brendan Keller.

Hana – An exchange student from Egypt; Rachel’s friend.

Todd Ryder – A sleazy yearbook photographer, Todd Ryder uses his position for popularity – only the cool kids who hang out with him get good pictures.

Brendan Keller – A player on the boys basketball team who Melinda agrees to teach to shoot free-throws after impressing her gym coaches with her skill. Melinda refers to Brendan, privately, by the name "Basketball Pole," and doesn’t actually show up to coach him.



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.



COMING OF AGE

Like many novels with high school settings, *Speak* is deeply focused on ideas of growing up and coming of age. What makes this book’s exploration of that subject particularly poignant and pointed, however, is that Melinda has already experienced a major milestone of adulthood—losing her virginity—before the novel begins. The fact that this event occurred as the result of rape, however, has derailed Mel’s maturation, and for much of the book she clings to any remnants of childhood that she can find. As she begins high school (another milestone on the journey to adulthood), she acts in childish ways, from cutting class to hiding in her room, all while articulating a cynical attitude that she mistakenly believes to be “adult.” Melinda’s parents, meanwhile, are terrible examples of maturity, as they consistently act in ways that are childish, selfish, close-minded, and neglectful.

Ultimately, Melinda must become independent in order to begin growing up once more; as she begins to do yard work, bike, stand up to a bullying teacher, and express herself through art, she begins the maturation process that froze after her rape. Through much of the book, Melinda resents the idea of growing

up, but by the narrative's end, she has embraced the idea. After having her power to choose violently taken away from her, she has at last learned that adulthood is about agency, and that choosing to grow up is itself a mature decision.



COMMUNICATION VERSUS SILENCE

Given that the name of the book is *Speak*, it is unsurprising that communication versus silence is a critical theme within the book. Silence sits at the narrative's core: Melinda has not told anyone about her rape at the hands of popular senior Andy Evans the previous summer, and has morphed from a happy, popular student to a traumatized outcast as a result. Throughout the book, Melinda finds it harder and harder to speak; a psychological block that symbolizes the fact that she cannot talk about her rape. It is important, too, to note that the connection between silence and rape is simultaneously destructive and common. Victims are often ashamed of what has happened to them, and think that no one will believe them; in this context, Mel's decision to keep her violation a secret is a tragic but understandable one.

Every other character within the novel has problems with communication as well. Heather talks so much that she cannot hear what her friend has to say; Mel's parents find it impossible to understand either their daughter or each other; Rachel, Mel's former best friend, is so far removed from the protagonist that she literally begins to speak a different language.

For Mel, redemption comes through communication. Throughout the book she explores many different methods of communicating, from passing notes to graffiti to silent protest to art. This last medium, especially, teaches her that there are many different ways to speak. Creating art gives Mel faith in herself, and proves to her that she has a valid and important voice.

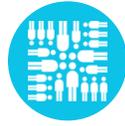


APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY

Much of Melinda's cynicism within *Speak* springs from what she views as a fundamental disconnect between appearance and reality. She has experienced a deeply traumatic rape, yet her parents view her as a disappointment, her teachers view her as a problem, and her classmates view her as a freak. Because she is deeply perceptive and sensitive, Mel notices gaps between appearance and reality everywhere she goes. She sees the cracks in the façade of her parents' marriage; the social climbing of her only friend, Heather; the petty tyranny of teachers who supposedly have her best interests at heart; and the true evil within her rapist, popular senior Andy Evans. She sees lies within institutions as well, believing that places like schools and shopping malls, and even concepts like family, are built on a foundation of lies. Mel is discouraged and depressed

by these gaps, believing that she is the only one who can see them, and assuming that they make the world a false and deceitful place.

Through art, however, Mel learns that the relationship between appearances and reality is more complicated than she thinks. As she creates her own works, she comes to see that images and appearances can in fact express emotional truth. She ends the book understanding that, although she cannot fix the gap between appearances and reality, she can act as a bridge between the two.



FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP

Like any student in high school, Melinda's life revolves around family and friends. Unlike most high schoolers, however, Melinda is completely alienated from both groups. Her parents are neglectful and distant, and she feels completely unable to tell them about her recent trauma. Her friends, meanwhile, have all abandoned her, believing that she maliciously called the cops on a party when in fact she was only trying to report the fact that Andy Evans had just raped her.

This separation from both friends and family makes Mel simultaneously lonely and cynical. She yearns for friendship, and is deeply hurt when her friend Heather ditches her, even though she has spent most of the book mocking Heather's stupidity and immaturity. At the same time, she finds it impossible to connect with her peers, and pushes away an offer of friendship from class geek David Petrakis because she believes that emotional attachment leads to pain and betrayal. In general, she maintains a deeply skeptical attitude about high school friendships, believing them to be superficial and harmful, even as she is incredibly jealous of these connections. This pattern is similar to the behavior she displays towards her parents, pushing them away even as she wishes that they would help and protect her.

Mel must learn, over the course of the book, how to trust and connect with people. She finds allies in David, her former friend Ivy, and her art teacher Mr. Freeman, all of whom prove to her human connection is not always harmful, but is in fact necessary for health and happiness.



ISOLATION, LONELINESS, AND DEPRESSION

Because *Speak* takes place within Melinda's mind, author Laurie Halse Anderson is able to vividly and achingly portray the effects of isolation and loneliness upon human consciousness. Throughout the book, Mel struggles to emerge from a cloud of depression and apathy that surrounds her, yet continually finds herself rejected and alone. Mel's attitude towards her isolation is conflicted. On one hand, she believes that she has chosen it, pushing away all those close to

her in order to protect both them and herself from the fact of her rape. On the other hand, Mel is desperately unhappy and lonely; her self-imposed isolation is a symptom of her trauma, rather than a conscious and healthy choice. While her parents and teachers believe that she is simply a slacker, readers can understand that Mel is deep within the throes of depression.

Mel's isolation and sadness does, however, give her deep insight into others characters' unhappiness. Heather, for instance, is isolated and lonely because she cannot see to fit in at her new school. Melinda's parents are isolated and unhappy as well, trapped in a troubled marriage with seemingly no way to escape. Mel's isolation, then, is a double-edged sword: it sinks her deeper into depression, but also allows her to see past the masks that people present to the world. As Mel matures, she realizes that she can connect with people while still maintaining this insight. She emerges from the book still deeply empathetic, but rejecting the isolation that she had previously sought out.



MEMORY AND TRAUMA

Melinda begins *Speak* burdened by memory and trauma: she has been raped and relives the experience every day, yet is unable to speak to anyone about it. As for her happier memories, the rape and the events that followed it have stained them. When she remembers her friends, she realizes that they have since abandoned her. When she remembers her childhood, she feels pity and nostalgia for how innocent and carefree she used to be.

The novel is about the various events that happen to Melinda over the course of the school year, but it also focuses on how she interprets those events. As she experiences everything through the lens of her rape, Mel finds it difficult to enjoy anything, or to view any person or event without distrust and cynicism. In setting the entire novel with Mel's mind, Laurie Halse Anderson is portraying the effects of trauma upon the impressionable consciousness of a fourteen-year-old girl. She shows how difficult it is for Mel to move past her trauma, and depicts how painful but inescapable the act of remembering is for her. As the novel progresses, Melinda begins to learn to communicate her trauma, a process that allows her to stop reliving the past and to begin making new memories. Her healing process is slow, but the book ends on an optimistic note, allowing readers to hope that the strong and resilient Mel will one day emerge from her trauma.



TREES, SEEDS, PLANTS, AND FORESTS

Near the beginning of the novel, Melinda is assigned a **tree** as her yearlong assignment in art class. As the narrative progresses, Melinda's attempts to draw a tree come to symbolize her ability to move past her rape, and to mature as a person. Trees, and plants in general, are powerful symbols because of the life, strength, and fertility that they represent. Although she originally draws trees that have died after being struck by lightning, just as she believes that her life stopped after her rape, Melinda eventually moves on to creating trees that are living and thriving. As Melinda's life and mind become less desolate and hopeless, she moves closer and closer to being able to create her work of art. She fails at this task over and over, but never gives up, a fact that represents her resilience in the face of her trauma. Throughout the novel Melinda also experiences many memories of childhood associated with plants and trees; as she begins to heal, she also starts gardening, an action that represents how she is coming back to life from her previously frozen state. She even describes her former, untraumatized self as a "seed" that will one day emerge again. As the novel comes to a close, Melinda is finally able to draw what she calls a "homely sketch" of a tree; she knows the sketch is imperfect, yet feels satisfied with it anyway. Similarly, she knows that she has been damaged by her rape and its subsequent trauma, yet feels that she will be able to grow and heal once again.



BIRDS

Birds appear multiple times in the text of *Speak*—the most memorable of these appearances, of course, being the doomed turkey that Melinda's mother attempts to cook on Christmas. After Melinda's mother ruins the bird by forgetting to defrost it, and her father mutilates it with a chainsaw, the parents bury the bird. Melinda, however, digs its bones up and makes it into a disturbing work of art. Although this is a darkly comic subplot, the dead and mutilated bird represents the freedom that Melinda believes she has lost. The art she makes, meanwhile, has two meanings: on one hand, by placing a Barbie head within the turkey bones, Melinda is expressing how trapped and alone she feels within her own mutilated mind. On the other hand, her ability to turn the ruined turkey into art represents her ability to move on from her own trauma. By the end of the novel, birds have become an unambiguous symbol of freedom and joy. When Melinda realizes that there is something missing from her crucial tree sketch, she adds birds, which symbolize her own eventual release from the trauma and depression that have burdened her throughout the book.



SYMBOLS

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



MELINDA'S CLOSET

Melinda feels unsafe and isolated in high school; and she responds by isolating herself even further, making an unused janitor's **closet** into a hiding place where she can cut class and avoid seeing the peers who mock and despise her. Melinda's closet represents the double-edged sword of her loneliness; on one hand, she makes the environment rich and creative, adding a picture of Maya Angelou, a blanket, and her own turkey sculpture. On the other hand, the closet symbolizes her inability to deal with the real world, and her own immaturity. The closet also represents the prison of silence that Melinda has fashioned for herself; it makes her feel secure, but isolates her from all others. She has created herself a safe space, but she has done so at the cost of her grades, her relationships, and the possibility of human connection. Ultimately, of course, Andy Evans violates this safe space just as he violated her body a year earlier. He attempts to rape her in the closet but Melinda, newly empowered, and on her own turf, fights back. By fighting him off in the closet and screaming for help, Melinda retakes ownership over her own body and her own space. At the end of the novel, she no longer needs the closet to feel safe, because of her newfound voice and autonomy.



MELINDA'S BEDROOM

While Melinda's closet is a haven for her hide from her new, traumatized existence, her **bedroom** is a symbol of the childhood innocence that she has lost. Adorned with pink roses, the room looks like a child's, and throughout the novel, Melinda feels out-of-place and uncomfortable within it. Of course, all high school students sometimes feel uncertain and scared about growing up. Melinda who has had her childhood ripped away from her by her rape, is even more terrified than most. She hates her room because it demonstrates that she is no longer a child; at the same time, she refuses to decorate it, because that would entail actually admitting that she needs to mature and move forward. At the end of the novel, however, Melinda asks her mother whether she can redecorate (though the book ends before she actually does).



MIRRORS

At the beginning of *Speak*, Melinda despises **mirrors**. She thinks her reflection looks ugly in her bedroom mirror, and covers up the mirror in her closet with a poster of Maya Angelou. In fact, whenever Melinda sees her reflection in the novel, she notices her flaws and is disgusted by herself. This hatred of her own image symbolizes Melinda's deeper self-loathing. She believes, on some level, that it was her fault that Andy Evans raped her, and until she comes to

understand that the assault was not her fault, she will always hate herself for what she perceives as her own weakness and stupidity. In the end, however, Melinda uses a mirror as a weapon, shattering the one in her closet in order to threaten Andy as he attempts to rape her. She has, metaphorically at least, regained control over her own image.



LIPS

Melinda hates her appearance, but is especially disgusted by her ragged **lips**, which she can't stop picking at and chewing. In a novel called *Speak*, of course, it is significant that Melinda is fixated on her lips. Since she cannot talk about her own trauma, it makes sense that Melinda would hate and mutilate her own lips, which are so often silent when they should be speaking. At the end of the novel, Melinda is at last able to speak, and it is her rapist Andy Evans who finally falls silent. She has regained her own voice, while "his lips are paralyzed."



BLOOD

Melinda is hyperaware of **blood** throughout the novel. An incredibly charged symbol, blood represents both life and death, and also is especially connected to the idea of adult womanhood (because of menstruation). Blood is also significant because, presumably, Melinda bled during her rape. Whenever Melinda draws blood, either intentionally or unintentionally, it represents the pain that she feels but cannot speak. Frequently (and disturbingly), Melinda reacts positively to the idea of bleeding; to her, blood is proof that she has been injured. Although she cannot tell people that her mind has been harmed, blood is visible evidence that the body has been harmed. This positive association with bleeding makes it especially upsetting when Melinda's mother reacts dismissively and coldly when she sees that her daughter has been harming herself; Melinda has essentially shown evidence of her suffering, and her mother has ignored it. Contrast this instance with the moment in which Melinda draws "one drop of blood" from the neck of her rapist, Andy Evans. He drew her blood and rendered her powerless; and now Melinda is returning the favor.



WATER, ICE, AND MELTING

Images of **water and ice** are prevalent throughout *Speak*. This symbol is appropriate because Melinda is, in effect, frozen. She is cold to all those around her, from Heather to her teachers to her parents. She is also frozen in the sense that she has stopped moving; she refuses to do her homework, go to class, go out, or mature in any real way. Essentially, since her rape, she has had to freeze her mind in order to protect herself. The idea of **melting** into water,

therefore, is an incredibly important one. As cold, snowy Syracuse, New York gradually melts into spring, Melinda, too, finds the frozen walls around her mind coming down. This is not a sign of weakness, but of strength, as she begins once again to mature and to let others in. This imagery reaches its climax when Melinda finishes her picture of a tree (which also needs water) and finds a “river in her eyes.” Her crying represents another step in the melting process, as she moves further away from her trauma and towards true adulthood.



WARMTH AND SUNLIGHT

Just as water and ice symbolize how dead and frozen Melinda feels, **warmth** and **sunlight**

represent moments in which she feels as if she might be alive inside after all. As winter turns to spring, and Melinda begins to move past her trauma, she spends more and more time outside, a shift that represents her re-engagement with the world around her. Because of her deep identification with trees and plants, warmth and light are especially important to Melinda because they allow plants to grow and thrive. It is also significant that the art room, Melinda’s refuge throughout the year, is the warmest, lightest place in school. Finally, when Andy attempts to rape Melinda for a second time in her closet, he does so with the light on (in contrast to the night when he raped her at the party). Light is a force of enlightenment and truth – it reveals – and Andy’s attempt to assault Melinda reveals the truth about him to the whole school.



POSTER OF MAYA ANGELOU

Although Melinda doesn’t know it, her choice of a **poster of Maya Angelou** to cover her own

reflection in her janitor’s closet is an appropriate one. A famous African American writer, Angelou writes eloquently about her own rape in the memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Throughout the year, Melinda imagines the poster as an empowering force, such as when it urges her to tell Rachel the truth about Andy. In the end, Melinda actually rips through the poster in order to shatter the mirror behind it to use as a weapon against Andy. The action is a deeply symbolic one, as the poster has literally allowed her to use a piece of herself—in the form of the jagged edge of a mirror—to fight back against her rapist.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar Strauss Giroux edition of *Speak* published in 2011.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞☞ I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don’t have anyone to sit with. I am Outcast.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

As Melinda begins her freshman year of high school, she reacts to her new environment with pessimism and dread. On one level, this quote reflects how sorely Melinda sticks out within the conformist world of Merryweather High. On a deeper level, Melinda's repetitive description of herself as "wrong" gives readers a sense of her deep self-hatred, and her lack of comfort within her own skin. By criticizing her own appearance, Melinda is unknowingly revealing the reality of her emotional state. Despite claiming frequently that she doesn't care what others think, Melinda's description of herself as an "Outcast" reveals that she is in fact thinking of herself in the way that others see her. Although she may pretend that her isolation doesn't bother her, Melinda is in fact acutely sensitive to her peers' opinions of her; in an effort to ignore their rejection and cruelty, she judges herself as harshly as possible.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

☞☞ This is where you can find your soul, if you dare. Where you can touch that part of you that you’ve never dared look at before. Do not come here and ask me to show you how to draw a face. Ask me to help you find the wind.

Related Characters: Mr. Freeman (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

The art teacher Mr. Freeman welcomes freshmen to his art class, using extremely passionate and imagistic language to engage them in the subject he teaches. At first, Melinda judges her teacher's manner as overly enthusiastic and dramatic. In time, however, his prophecy will come to pass. By the end of the book, Melinda has used art in order to access parts of herself that are buried deep within, and to exorcise the traumatic effects of her past.

Mr. Freeman's language is also challenging in tone—he "dare[s]" his students to look within themselves, and to represent what they find there. In this way, he represents self-expression as an act of incredible bravery and strength. Author Laurie Halse Anderson encourages readers to think in a similar manner. Melinda's eventual decision to talk about her trauma, and to portray it through art, is not simply healthy, it's heroic.

The quote also immediately sets Mr. Freeman up as a figure of great wisdom and empathy within the novel. Throughout the narrative, he will provide Melinda with safety and support, and he is the only adult able to do so. By essentially predicting Melinda's journey as her story progresses, Freeman is displaying wisdom and insight, as well as his own powers of self-expression.

☝ My room belongs to an alien. It is a postcard of who I was in fifth grade.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

As she introduces readers to her childlike bedroom, Melinda reveals both her distance from her past self, and her longing for a time of innocence (fifth grade). By calling herself an "alien," Melinda makes clear that she no longer feels like the same person she was at age eleven. This would make sense for any adolescent, but for Melinda, it is especially and painfully true, considering the act of violence and violation that prematurely forced her into adulthood.

At the same time, Melinda clearly misses the girl she was in fifth grade. The room is a "postcard," a message written by someone you miss and wish to see. Every time that she steps into her room, Melinda is reminded of the innocence that she has lost, and the child that she used to be. She is also reminded that appearance and reality are not the same thing—that no matter how childlike her room is, she herself is no longer a child, and never will be again.

☝ I look for shapes in my face. Could I put a face in my tree, like a dryad from Greek mythology? Two muddy-circle eyes under black-dash eyebrows, piggy-nose nostrils, and a chewed-up horror of a mouth. Definitely not a dryad face. I can't stop biting my lips. It looks like my mouth belongs to someone else, someone I don't even know. I get out of bed and take down the mirror. I put it in the back of my closet, facing the wall.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:    

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

While contemplating herself in the mirror of her bedroom, Melinda feels a surge of loathing. The protagonist often comments negatively about her own appearance, but this quote is one of the most vivid examples of her deep self-hatred. Melinda has essentially internalized all of the hatred and harm that she receives from her peers, and is projecting it back onto herself. In fact, in biting her lips until they bleed, Melinda has actually begun to self-harm, physically punishing herself both for her traumatic past and her current isolation, even though she is blameless in regards to both. The fact that she "can't stop" biting her lips only further emphasizes her feelings of powerlessness, illustrating for readers how out-of-control she feels, even within her own body.

Throughout the book, Melinda will associate herself closely with trees. Here, though, she doesn't think that she is good enough to be a tree nymph, a "dryad," thus cutting herself off from the healing and rebirth that trees symbolize within the novel.

Last, Melinda's admission that she "doesn't even know" her own reflection, and her decision to hide her mirror, illustrate how far Melinda is alienated from her own appearance. Inside, she is traumatized and wounded; her appearance, however, does not display those truths. Unable to verbally communicate her true internal state, Melinda hates her body for not expressing that state physically.

Part 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ I used to be like Heather. Have I changed that much in two months? She is happy, driven, aerobically fit. She has a nice mom and an awesome television. But she's like a dog that keeps jumping into your lap. She always walks with me down the halls chattering a million miles a minute. My goal is to go home and take a nap.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Heather

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

While spending time at Heather's house, Melinda reflects on the other girl's shallow, vapid personality. This quote highlights the importance of Heather as a character within the novel. Not only does Heather force Melinda to actually interact with someone throughout the narrative, but she also represents both Melinda's past self and her current disillusionment. Like it or not, Heather reminds Melinda of the innocent, enthusiastic person she used to be.

Rather than increasing Melinda's positive feelings towards Heather, however, this association only makes the protagonist feel more annoyed and hostile towards her semi-friend. She sees her old self as vapid, naive, and idiotic, and attributes all those traits to Heather as well.

Beneath this anger, however, is a deep sense of sadness, pain, and envy. As we often see within the book, Melinda longs for the person she used to be, her anger at her past self masking how much she misses her lost innocence. This mix of emotions makes her feelings towards Heather extraordinarily complex, but also helps to explain why she spends so much time with the other girl.

Part 1, Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ The cheerleaders cartwheel into the gym and bellow. The crowd stomps the bleachers and roars back. I put my head in my hands and scream to let out the animal noise and some of that night. No one hears. They are all quite spirited.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

As a pep rally rages around her, Melinda experiences a

moment of raw anguish and isolation. This passage puts Melinda directly in contrast with the other students at her school. While they scream with school spirit and enthusiasm, she screams out of frustration and anguish. A non-conformist in the middle of a mob, it is easy to see why Melinda feels so out of place when she is around her fellow students. Traumatized and alone, she experiences something that should be fun—a pep rally—as a deeply threatening and hostile environment.

Importantly, Melinda's actions here also help us to understand her complicated relationship with speech and silence. Clearly, Melinda is in deep and constant pain; she is so lonely and damaged, however, that she is unable to express this pain to anyone. The chaos of the pep rally gives her the opportunity to voice her anguish without anyone hearing.

The phrase "some of that night" is particularly important, as it is a subtle reference to the night when Melinda was raped. She carries this experience around with her always, but has been unable to share that burden with anyone around her. Although screaming may provide a temporary outlet for her suffering, Melinda remains unable to escape the memory and trauma related to her assault, or to truly communicate her feelings about it.

Part 1, Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ I hide in the bathroom until I know Heather's bus has left. The salt in my tears feels good when it stings my lips. I wash my face in the sink until there is nothing left of it, no eyes, no nose, no mouth. A slick nothing.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Heather

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

After a humiliating encounter with Heather and the Marthas, Melinda's moment of anguish in front of the mirror perfectly encapsulates her self-hatred and deep depression. Melinda loathes herself so much that pain—the salt of her tears on her raw lips—feels good to her. Her assault, and her subsequent isolation by her peers, has left Melinda feeling worthless and invisible. She wishes to erase her face so that her appearance will match her internal devaluation—she will

be a "nothing" inside and out.

It is vital, too, that Melinda repeatedly washes her face in a clear effort to cleanse herself. She continues to feel guilt about her rape (a common sentiment for victims of sexual assault), and wishes to cleanse herself of those feelings. The novel often uses water to symbolize cleansing and rebirth, but here, Melinda wishes to use the restorative powers of water in order to completely erase herself.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ It is getting harder to talk. My throat is always sore, my lips raw. When I wake up in the morning, my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache. Sometimes my mouth relaxes around Heather, if we're alone. Every time I try to talk to my parents or a teacher, I sputter or freeze. What is wrong with me? It's like I have some kind of spastic laryngitis.

I know my head isn't screwed on straight. I want to leave, transfer, warp myself to another galaxy. I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me. My closet is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Melinda's father, Melinda's mother, Heather

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

As the school year progresses, Melinda notices alarming physical changes. What was previously an internal problem (Melinda's inability to talk about her assault) has now become a physical one. The parts of her body that allow her to speak (her throat, jaw, and lips), are becoming sore and difficult to use. By keeping her feelings and trauma bottled up, Melinda is harming herself both mentally and physically. That she relaxes somewhat around Heather, meanwhile, helps us to understand why she keeps the other girl around. Despite how annoying and shallow Heather can be, Melinda feels somewhat safe around her.

The second section of this quote deals directly with

Melinda's tortured feelings surrounding her sexual assault. She hates herself and her surroundings so much that she wishes "to leave" entirely. Her self-loathing stems from the fact that she feels stained and ruined by her trauma, and from her belief that she will never recover from what has been done to her. She has completely internalized these feelings, an action that causes both physical and emotional anguish.

At the end of the passage, Melinda calls her closet "a good thing" because it allows her to keep anyone else from hearing her tortured thoughts. What Melinda fails to understand, though, is that her torment is caused in large part by failing to share or communicate her inner pain. She believes that staying silent and alone is the only option, unaware that isolating herself is actually adding to her sense of trauma and depression.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ Cooking Thanksgiving dinner means something to her. It's like a holy obligation, part of what makes her a wife and mother. My family doesn't talk much and we have nothing in common, but if my mother cooks a proper Thanksgiving dinner, it says we'll be a family for one more year. Kodak logic. Only in film commercials does stuff like that work.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Melinda's mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of a disastrous Thanksgiving, Melinda reflects on why her mother cares so much about the holiday. While many teenagers feel hostilely towards adults—particularly their parents—Melinda articulates a deep cynicism here regarding her family. She believes that her mother's dedication to a ritual of togetherness and tradition (Thanksgiving) is in fact entirely deluded. That is, by focusing on appearances, such as the perfect Thanksgiving dinner, her mother is ignoring the family's broken and alienated reality.

Beneath Melinda's cynicism, however, readers are able to pick up important details about her mother. A hardworking and driven professional, Melinda's mother is clearly desperate to fulfill the traditional roles of "wife and mother." Seen in this light, her pointless efforts to cook the perfect

Thanksgiving dinner are not contemptible, as Melinda seems to believe, but deeply sad. Faced with a distant husband and a nearly comatose daughter, Melinda's mother puts her efforts into cooking a perfect Thanksgiving dinner because she doesn't know what else to do.

Part 2, Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Applesmell soaks the air. One time when I was little, my parents took me to an orchard. Daddy set me high in an apple tree. It was like falling up into a storybook, yummy and red and leaf and the branch not shaking a bit. Bees bumbled through the air, so stuffed with apple they couldn't be bothered to sting me. The sun warmed my hair, and a wind pushed my mother into my father's arms, and all the apple-picking parents and children smiled for a long, long minute.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Melinda's father, Melinda's mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Triggered by the scent of apples, Melinda remembers a beloved scene from her childhood. This quote stands out as an unusual one within the novel—it lacks Melinda's usual blend of cynicism and pain, instead representing a moment of positivity and beauty. Given Melinda's hatred of the way that she has been growing up lately, it makes sense that she would be extremely nostalgic for her earlier childhood, as is shown here. Importantly, this memory also represents a time of connection between Melinda and her parents, during which they were an actual loving family, instead of simply three people living in the same house.

It's also worth noting that both trees and sunlight figure heavily into this treasured memory—two important and positive symbols within the narrative. Trees represent strength and rebirth to Melinda, while the sun represents the gradual thawing of her inner sense of frozenness. That they both show up within this passage makes clear how important the memory is to her, while also explaining her positive associations with these symbols.

Despite the beauty and happiness contained within this passage, it is important to remember that to Melinda, this feeling of innocence and connection is completely lost. The

memory is a good one, but she believes that she will never feel happy or whole again—so although she is recollecting a blissful moment in her past, the very act of doing so is deeply painful to her.

Part 2, Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ I bet they'd be divorced by now if I hadn't been born. I'm sure I was a huge disappointment. I'm not pretty or smart or athletic. I'm just like them— an ordinary drone dressed in secrets and lies. I can't believe we have to keep playacting until I graduate. It's a shame we can't just admit that we have failed family living, sell the house, split the money, and get on with our lives.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Melinda's father, Melinda's mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Stuck with her parents during winter break, Melinda vocalizes her anger at both herself and her parents. She first calls herself a "disappointment" for being like her parents, whom she believes are dishonest and secretive. She then goes even further, calling her relationships with her mother and father (and theirs with each other) a sham, implying that they are "playacting" as a family instead of actually being one.

Beneath this venom and cynicism, however, it is important to understand Melinda's pain and loneliness. Her parents were unable to protect her from assault, and now they are unable to understand why she has become a shell of her former self. Melinda is deeply angry about this, believing that her parents' insufficiencies make them unfit to be parents.

Although she may seem like someone who pushes others away, what Melinda actually craves is connection and communication—and her parents seem unable to provide those things to her. Given this failure, the traumatized and desperate Melinda believes that it would be better to cut ties altogether to avoid any more pain and suffering.

“ I almost tell them right then and there. Tears flood my eyes. They noticed I’ve been trying to draw. They noticed. I try to swallow the snowball in my throat. This isn’t going to be easy. I’m sure they suspect I was at the party. Maybe they even heard about me calling the cops. But I want to tell them everything as we sit there by our plastic Christmas tree while the Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer video plays.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Melinda’s father, Melinda’s mother

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

On Christmas Day, Melinda’s parents reveal that they’ve noticed her newfound love of drawing, and give her various art supplies. Although Melinda generally takes a cynical and hardened attitude towards her parents, here she experiences a moment of warmth towards them.

The passage is significant because it makes clear how desperate Melinda is to tell her parents about her assault—so desperate that even the smallest thoughtful gesture almost sends her over the edge. The quotation is also rich in symbolism, as Melinda feels a “snowball” in her throat—an image of solid water, in contrast with the “tears” in her eyes. The snowball represents how frozen and motionless Melinda has felt for months, while the tears symbolize the possibility of thaw and release.

The Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer video, while a vivid detail, also acts as an important symbol here. In a bit of tragic irony, an emblem of childhood and innocence plays on the screen as Melinda contemplates telling her parents about her sexual assault. The childlike past that the video represents contrasts with the mature, difficult reality of Melinda’s present.

Part 2, Chapter 21 Quotes

“ I open up a paper clip and scratch it across the inside of my left wrist. Pitiful. If a suicide attempt is a cry for help, then what is this? A whimper, a peep? I draw little windowcracks of blood, etching line after line until it stops hurting. It looks like I arm-wrestled a rosebush.

Mom sees the wrist at breakfast.

Mom: “I don’t have time for this, Melinda.”

Related Characters: Melinda’s mother, Melinda Sordino (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

By now almost entirely unable to speak, Melinda escalates her self-harm, this time cutting shallow lines in her wrist with a paper clip. Even this attempt, though, cannot adequately communicate her pain. Indeed, Melinda mocks herself, calling her action “pitiful,” a “whimper” or “peep” for help at best. Neither her words nor her actions can truly express the deep emotional and mental pain that she harbors. Melinda says that she continues cutting “until it stops hurting,” a phrase that can refer to her wrist (which becomes numb), or to her emotional pain, which she is releasing through self-harm.

Note too that even during a time of peak emotional distress, Melinda thinks about plants, commenting that she looks as if she’s “arm-wrestled a rosebush.” Even in this dark moment, Melinda’s obsession with her art project remains—a glimmer of hope in a disturbing and bleak episode.

The end of the passage, meanwhile, only emphasizes what readers already know: that Melinda’s parents have no idea what has happened to her, and that they are only making it more difficult for her to communicate. Melinda’s mother sees her action not as a cry for help, but as a plea for attention. In a world of disinterested adults and hostile peers, it makes sense that Melinda remains silent; she has no reason to believe that anyone wants to hear what she has to say.

Part 3, Chapter 8 Quotes

“ I rock, thumping my head against the cinder-block wall. A half-forgotten holiday has unveiled every knife that sticks inside me, every cut. No Rachel, no Heather, not even a silly, geeky boy who would like the inside girl I think I am.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Rachel Bruin, Heather, David Petrakis

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

After a disastrous Valentine's Day, Melinda crumbles inside her closet. Through most of her narrative, Melinda acts as if she doesn't care about the opinions of her peers. This passage, however, makes clear how false that attitude actually is. While she may pretend to be hardened and cynical, Melinda in fact feels "cut" every time that someone rejects or mocks her. Rather than being apathetic, Melinda actually cares far too much. An intelligent and emotionally attuned person, she tries to protect herself from the world with hostility, but is unable to do so.

It is interesting, too, that Melinda calls herself "the inside girl I think I am." Always aware of the differences between interior and exterior, Melinda understands that she is far more sensitive and observant than she lets on. Her idea of herself is different from the face she shows to the world; yet even as she hides this softer side of herself, she is desperate for someone else to access it.

Part 3, Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ The next time you work on your trees, don't think about trees. Think about love, or hate, or joy, or rage— whatever makes you feel something, makes your palms sweat or your toes curl. Focus on that feeling. When people don't express themselves, they die one piece at a time.

Related Characters: Mr. Freeman (speaker), Melinda Sordino

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Freeman tries to encourage Melinda as she attempts over and over again to create a piece of art about a tree. He urges her to give herself over to an emotion—a hard task for someone who is in such pain that she has attempted to emotionally freeze herself.

However difficult Mr. Freeman's challenge is, he has also given Melinda a way to express herself. Although she cannot speak about her experiences, she may still be able to create art about them, expressing her pain through creation rather than through language.

Mr. Freeman's final warning—that people who don't express themselves "die one piece at a time"—rings all too true for the traumatized ninth grader. By failing to express herself, Melinda has harmed herself physically, socially, and emotionally. The dangers of silence and of frozenness are real, Mr. Freeman implies, and Melinda must fight against them if she hopes to become a functional person once more.

Part 3, Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ I stumble from thornbush to thornbush— my mother and father who hate each other, Rachel who hates me, a school that gags on me like I'm a hairball. And Heather. I just need to hang on long enough for my new skin to graft. Mr. Freeman thinks I need to find my feelings. How can I not find them? They are chewing me alive like an infestation of thoughts, shame, mistakes.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Melinda's father, Melinda's mother, Rachel Bruin, Heather, Mr. Freeman

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In a moment of peak anguish, Melinda once again uses a botanical metaphor to express herself, thinking of all the obstacles and difficulties in her life as thornbushes ready to rip off her skin. Although it is frustrating to see Melinda remain silent and isolated, passages such as this help readers understand why she does so. To Melinda, everything in her life is hostile and sharp, ready to rip her to shreds. She does not feel safe with anyone, and so she can never release the terrible burden of her guilt and trauma. She is trying her best to heal from her sexual assault—to allow her "new skin to graft"—but everything in her life is making it more difficult to do so.

This passage also makes clear Melinda's complicated relationship to emotion and appearances. Outwardly, Melinda is apathetic; she doesn't seem to care about school, friends, or life. Inwardly, however, Melinda is in constant torment, her guilt, shame, and regret eating her up inside. Given her inner pain, it makes sense that Melinda tries to remain as outwardly unfeeling as possible. If she ever lets out the powerful emotions inside of her, she is terrified of what will happen.

Part 3, Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ Slush is frozen over. People say that winter lasts forever, but it's because they obsess over the thermometer. North in the mountains, the maple syrup is trickling. Brave geese punch through the thin ice left on the lake. Underground, pale seeds roll over in their sleep. Starting to get restless. Starting to dream green.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:    

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrative progresses, Melinda's voice becomes slightly more hopeful. Emotionally frozen during the winter months, she begins to thaw as the weather turns towards spring. This passage illustrates the close relationship between Melinda's emotions and the changing of the seasons. The signs of spring—water thawing, birds returning, seeds growing—all have intensely symbolic and positive meanings for her. Water melts, just as her inward iciness melts as well. Birds fly free, just as Melinda hopes to one day be free of her trauma. Seeds grow from the cold ground, just like Melinda wishes to be reborn, and to come back from her trauma as strong as she was before.

Like the "restless" seeds that are "dream[ing] green," Melinda too is starting to become restless, dreaming her way out of her cold, frozen shell. To her, spring is a metaphor for renewal and rebirth, processes in which she hopes to take part as well. Her close association with nature makes the tree an excellent subject for Melinda's artwork. Just as she uses natural metaphors to describe her own internal journey, so too will she use a representation of her tree to express her hidden emotions.

☝☝ I open my mouth to breathe, to scream, and his hand covers it. In my head, my voice is as clear as a bell: "NO I DON'T WANT TO!" But I can't spit it out. I'm trying to remember how we got on the ground and where the moon went and wham! shirt up, shorts down, and the ground smells wet and dark and NO!— I'm not really here, I'm definitely back at Rachel's, crimping my hair and gluing on fake nails, and he smells like beer and mean and he hurts me hurts me hurts me and gets up and zips his jeans and smiles.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Andy Evans

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, at last, Melinda describes the details of her sexual assault. Her recounting makes clear the trauma at the root of her inability to speak: during the actual moments of her rape, Melinda was unable to cry out for help or in protest. It is this experience that has kept her from having a voice since. The description also helps illuminate the reasons for Melinda's guilt and self-loathing. She believes that, since she was unable to verbally or physically fight off her rapist, that she is partially responsible for her assault. This belief is common among victims of sexual assault, and has been crippling Melinda emotionally and mentally for months.

The idea that "I'm not really here" also helps us learn more about Melinda's character and her coping mechanisms for trauma. Throughout the novel she has longed to leave her body, her school, and her family. Readers learn here that she employed this tactic in the midst of her rape, attempting to separate herself from her own body. Despite being unable to do so at the time, she has essentially been trying to do the same thing ever since.

Part 4, Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ His lips move poison and she smiles and then she kisses him wet. Not a Girl Scout kiss. He gives her the notebook. His lips move. Lava spills out my ears. She is not any part of a pretend Rachele-chick. I can only see third-grade Rachel who liked barbecue potato chips and who braided pink embroidery thread into my hair that I wore for months until my mom made me cut it out. I rest my forehead against the prickly stucco.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Andy Evans, Rachel Bruin

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Melinda's worst nightmare comes true as her rapist, Andy Evans, begins dating her ex-best friend, Rachel Bruin. This passage offers an aching contrast between adulthood and childhood. In the present, Melinda sees a girl who has tormented her all year kissing the boy who violently raped her. Flashing back to the past, however, Melinda is unable to banish thoughts of her childhood with Rachel, or to stop remembering their lost innocence and former friendship. Her positive memories of Rachel are at war with her trauma surrounding Andy.

Even at this point, though, Melinda is unable to speak. Completely at war with herself, she remains motionless, her impulse to protect herself in conflict with her desire to tell the truth and protect Rachel.

Part 4, Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ This looks like a tree, but it is an average, ordinary, everyday, boring tree. Breathe life into it. Make it bend— trees are flexible, so they don't snap. Scar it, give it a twisted branch— perfect trees don't exist. Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting. Be the tree.

Related Characters: Mr. Freeman (speaker), Melinda Sordino

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

While encouraging Melinda to continue working on her tree project, Mr. Freeman articulates one of the central beliefs at the core of the novel: that rather than attempting to escape the flaws and traumas in her past, Melinda must instead try to incorporate those experiences into her life. Urging Melinda to "Be the tree," Mr. Freeman hints that, on some level, he understands that he is talking not just about the art project, but about Melinda herself. He is a wise and

empathetic teacher, and it makes sense that he would instinctively recognize his student's pain and her need to connect with others.

This passage also continues to support the idea of expression through art. Over and over, Mr. Freeman tells Melinda to put her feelings, her life, and herself into her artwork. Together, teacher and student work not just to create a satisfying final project, but to find a way for Melinda to find healing by creating a tree—a sentiment that is made clear within this quotation.

Part 4, Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ I am a deer frozen in the headlights of a tractor trailer. Is he going to hurt me again? He couldn't, not in school. Could he? Why can't I scream, say something, do anything? Why am I so afraid?

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Andy Evans

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

Even as she continues to heal and come out of her shell, Melinda still becomes frozen and powerless when she encounters Andy Evans. So traumatized that even the sight of him robs her of agency and speech, Melinda has no way to defend herself against him. She hates herself for these feelings, believing them to be a sign of weakness.

What Melinda does not understand, however, is that her silence and fear are born out of trauma. Her inability to speak or move comes from an instinct to protect herself from the person who has deeply and irrevocably hurt her. A vivid and tragic representation of trauma, this passage helps readers to understand just how terribly Andy Evans has harmed Melinda, and how damaging his presence is for her on an emotional, psychological, and physical level.

☝☝ When I close the closet door behind me, I bury my face into the clothes on the left side of the rack, clothes that haven't fit for years. I stuff my mouth with old fabric and scream until there are no sounds left under my skin.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Andy Evans

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

After having seen Andy Evans, Melinda literally retreats into her childhood, heading to the back of her bedroom closet to scream. It is of course symbolic that Melinda chooses to take out her frustration, rage, and fear while surrounded by "clothes that haven't fit for years." Forced into adulthood long before she was ready, Melinda buries herself in memories of the childhood to which she can never return.

Just as when she howls at the pep rally, Melinda specifically screams where there is no one to hear her, even stuffing old clothes in her mouth in order to silence herself. Even now, Melinda is still silencing herself, unable to believe that anyone will listen to or care about her pain and trauma. Rather than deal with that disappointment, she tries instead to isolate and muffle herself, choosing to be alone and in anguish rather than trust those who have previously let her down.

of her rape and her subsequent isolation.

This quote is especially significant because it is one of the first times that Melinda uses the word "rape" in the book. Although in a dark place, she is at last admitting to herself what actually happened the previous summer. By naming the event, she is beginning to take ownership of it.

Meanwhile, Melinda's feeling that Andy has somehow violated her mind makes a great deal of sense. By forcing himself on her, Andy has isolated Melinda from her friends, ripped her from her childhood, and thrown her into a deep depression. His physical violence towards her has left her mentally damaged and tormented, unable to escape the traumatic memories surrounding her assault.

Part 4, Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ I crouch by the trunk, my fingers stroking the bark, seeking a Braille code, a clue, a message on how to come back to life after my long undersnow dormancy. I have survived. I am here. Confused, screwed up, but here. So, how can I find my way? Is there a chain saw of the soul, an ax I can take to my memories or fears? I dig my fingers into the dirt and squeeze. A small, clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melindagirl I haven't seen in months. That is the seed I will care for.

Part 4, Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ I just want to sleep. A coma would be nice. Or amnesia. Anything, just to get rid of this, these thoughts, whispers in my mind. Did he rape my head, too?

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Andy Evans

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Sick and delirious, Melinda admits how exhausting it is to constantly deal with her anger, depression, frustration, and trauma day after day. Since she cannot communicate with anyone, the only people she can talk to are the "whispers in my mind," most of which are filled with self-loathing, shame, and regret. Being constantly at war with herself has taken its toll: Melinda longs to escape through "amnesia" or a "coma," desperate to stop reliving the traumatic memories

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Melinda returns to the scene of her rape and experiences a feeling of emotional release as she crouches by a tree. This passage represents one of the most intense instances of Melinda's identification with plants, trees, and nature. Recognizing that she has been frozen in place for months, Melinda here decides that she wants to come back, and to grow once more.

At first, Melinda wonders whether she can cut away her trauma and terrible memories, but quickly realizes that this is not a real option. Instead, she decides that she must nurture the seeds of the person she used to be, until she can slowly grow into someone else.

Communing with nature is a restorative act for Melinda. It helps remind her of who she is and who she wants to be, and

gives her hope for the future. Although she acknowledges that she is "screwed up," Melinda is more optimistic and sincere here than we have ever seen her before. Returning to the scene of her trauma has had a healing effect on her, and gives both the protagonist and the readers hope that she may indeed continue to heal in the future.

●● I reach in and wrap my fingers around a triangle of glass. I hold it to Andy Evans's neck. He freezes. I push just hard enough to raise one drop of blood. He raises his arms over his head. My hand quivers. I want to insert the glass all the way through his throat, I want to hear him scream. I look up. I see the stubble on his chin, a fleck of white in the corner of his mouth. His lips are paralyzed. He cannot speak. That's good enough.
Me: "I said no."

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Andy Evans

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:    

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

After Andy Evans attempts to rape Melinda a second time, she tells him no, and then defends herself with a shard of glass from a mirror in her closet. One of the most significant acts in the book, Melinda's defeat of Andy has huge narrative and symbolic implications.

Andy has entered Melinda's closet, the one place where she felt safe—even before attempting to physically assault her again, he has already violated her. Subsequently, although Melinda screams no, he continues to try to rape her, proving that he would have done so over the summer whether or not she protested.

Throughout the book, Melinda detests mirrors and her reflection, but here, however, a mirror becomes her most vital tool, as she uses a broken shard to threaten Andy. Although he has metaphorically broken her, Melinda is still able to fight back, using pieces of her own fractured identity to defend herself.

With his life in danger, Andy goes completely silent; as Melinda tells us, "He cannot speak." By raping her the previous summer, Andy took away Melinda's voice and her agency. Now, not only has she taken those things back, but she has temporarily silenced her assaulter, the man

responsible for her anguish and isolation. She has made him utterly powerless, and she uses this opportunity to utter the sentence that she has been longing to say for months: "I said no."

●● IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. And I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow. I look at my homely sketch. It doesn't need anything. Even through the river in my eyes I can see that. It isn't perfect and that makes it just right.

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino (speaker), Andy Evans

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:    

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Having finally created a tree that expresses her true self and her hidden trauma, Melinda is at last able to admit the truth to herself and to the readers, and explain what happened in clear terms. She at last cleanses herself of her guilt, acknowledging that her rape was not her fault, and that she will no longer remain frozen from the pain of the experience.

Creating art has indeed become a healing experience for Melinda, as a representation of her imperfect life, and her continued potential for growth. Although she has longed to escape throughout the narrative, Melinda now understands that flight is not possible; the only way she can continue living is to acknowledge her trauma and to continue growing as a person.

Melinda describes her tears as she finishes the sketch by saying that there is a "river" in her eyes. Throughout the novel, metaphors of freezing and ice have described Melinda's cold and static emotional state. Now, as she at last emerges, her "river" of tears represents the fact that she has thawed internally, and is ready to face the world again as a person with agency and a voice.

“You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you?”

The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up.

Me: “Let me tell you about it.”

Related Characters: Melinda Sordino, Mr. Freeman (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

As Melinda and Mr. Freeman look at her tree sketch, Mr. Freeman reveals that he has at least guessed that Melinda has been through a traumatic experience. Always the most empathetic and understanding adult in the book, he is about

to become the first person to whom Melinda fully tells her story. Given that his philosophy of art as self-expression has allowed Melinda to make her emotional journey, it makes sense that he should be the first to hear from her newfound voice.

Natural metaphors abound in this passage, as the last of Melinda's iciness melts away under Mr. Freeman's warmth and attention. The combination of fighting off Andy, making her tree, and Mr. Freeman's sympathetic ear have freed her from her frozen trauma. By "melting," Melinda is finally able to tell her story, and to reemerge into the world as a flawed but healing person who trusts others and is able to ease the burdens of her past by sharing them with those around her.

These are the final words of the novel—an optimistic ending for what is often a dark and upsetting book. By ending her narrative with Melinda telling her story to Mr. Freeman, author Laurie Halse Anderson is telling her readers that, just like Melinda's, their stories matter, and that there are those in the world who will listen to and understand them.



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.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1: WELCOME TO MERRYWEATHER HIGH

Melinda Sordino begins her first day at Merryweather High School in Syracuse, New York apprehensive and skeptical, and pessimistic. On the bus, she attempts to avoid the other students, who immediately begin to alienate and bully her. She notes that the same peers who are tormenting her used to be her friends in middle school; by the time the bus is full, she is the only student sitting alone.

As she enters school, Melinda comments that the school has changed the mascot from Trojans to Blue Devils because “Trojans” is too reminiscent of condoms. She then names the various cliques in the ninth grade as the students file in for an assembly, such as “Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, [and] Cheerleaders.” She adds, however, that she is an outcast with no one to sit with. She relates how she spent the last month of the summer watching cartoons by herself, rather than hanging out with her friends or even answering the phone. Without trendy clothes, an “in” hairdo, or any friends to speak of, she is entirely alone.

Melinda sees her old friends, with whom she used to be in a clique called the Plain Janes: Nicole the jock; Ivy the artist; and Rachel, Melinda’s former best friend (the fifth member of their group, Jessica, has moved to Nevada). Over the summer, the group split up, and all the girls except for Melinda have joined new cliques. Behind her, she hears Rachel laughing at her. Melinda recalls how Rachel taught her how to swim, “understood” Melinda’s difficult relationship with her parents, and didn’t make fun of Melinda’s childish **bedroom**. She wishes she could “tell” Rachel “what really happened,” but does not. As their eyes meet, Rachel mouths, “I hate you.”

At a school assembly, after hesitating too long as she looks for somewhere to sit, Melinda is reprimanded by Mr. Neck, her future social studies teacher. Another isolated student, who introduces herself as “Heather from Ohio” (but whom Melinda describes as a “wounded zebra”), asks to sit with her. Melinda doesn’t answer.

Melinda fears the idea of growing up, as well as the rejection of her peers. For her, something as ordinary as a school bus is torturous, filled with former friends and acquaintances who now go out of their way to reject her. The source of this change in her life is at this point unclear to the reader, which suggests the way that it is also unknown to her peers and repressed by Melinda.



Laurie Halse Anderson immediately establishes Melinda’s loneliness, but also her perceptiveness. The fact that she is an outcast makes her unhappy, but also allows her to see the truths about high school life that her peers miss. The subplot of the school mascot, meanwhile, strikes a humorous note in an otherwise unhappy section. It also reveals that, beneath her depression and apathy, Melinda is witty and perceptive.



Melinda’s unhappiness goes beyond the usual high school angst; her friends have rejected and abandoned her. For Melinda, the move to high school—a classic symbol of growing up—has brought about only pain and isolation. At the same time, however, she hates her bedroom for being too immature. Caught between adulthood and childhood, Melinda feels that she has no place in life.



Although Melinda is lonely, she shies away from the idea of friendship or connection. When Heather acts friendly to Melinda, she immediately reacts with suspicion.



As the assembly goes on, Melinda catalogues the top ten lies that teachers tell high school students, such as “We are here to help you,” “Guidance counselors are always available to listen,” and “These will be the years you look back on fondly.” When it ends, she cannot find her first class (biology), and ends up getting a demerit. She wryly comments that there are “699 days and 7 class periods” left until she graduates from highschool.

Melinda is incredibly cynical, but also smart and funny. She hides her intelligence, however, beneath her silence and defensiveness. She feels that the authority figures at her school are hypocritical, promising to help when they are in fact clueless about what really goes on in a high schooler's life.



PART 1, CHAPTER 2: OUR TEACHERS ARE THE BEST...

The school day continues and Melinda describes the periods. She names her English teacher Hairwoman because of her ridiculously frizzy orange-and-black hair. Hairwoman wastes time taking attendance, and tells her class that they must write in English journals every day. Melinda uses her freewriting time to mock Hairwoman. In social studies, meanwhile, Melinda is stuck with the bullying Mr. Neck. She comments that the school social studies curriculum is the same every year (American history from the Native Americans on), and adds that although the class is always supposed “to get right up to the present,” they inevitably “get stuck in the Industrial Revolution.” As Mr. Neck is rude to her, Melinda wonders whether he is a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Melinda's pattern of both alienation and perceptiveness continues. She mocks her teachers as a defense mechanism, but her comments are often astute and accurate. Although she is clearly intelligent, however, she has absolutely no interest in her classes. This apathy is a classic sign of depression; although Melinda is never formally diagnosed within the book, her behavior strongly implies that she is struggling with the mental disorder.



PART 1, CHAPTER 3: SPOTLIGHT

At lunch, Melinda doesn't know where to sit as all of her former friends pretend to ignore her. She discusses the social taboo of bringing a brown bag lunch from home, but is disgusted and bewildered by the food offered in the cafeteria. She thinks about sitting with Heather, but contemplates that she could also “crawl behind a trash can” or throw out her lunch and leave the cafeteria entirely. As she hesitates behind a tall boy she names Basketball Pole, Melinda gets hit by a spoonful of potatoes, and the entire cafeteria erupts in laughter. It is unclear whether she's been hit accidentally or on purpose, but regardless, she flees.

Melinda feels unsafe and watched everywhere she goes. While her friends abandon her, the authority figures who should be helping her either ignore her or outright bully her. No one understands her, or even attempts to do so; and the way that the novel doesn't reveal any of Melinda's background makes the reader feel her isolation even further. Even when she tries to be invisible, Melinda inevitably ends up humiliated and rejected by her peers. Feeling victimized and targeted, Melinda believes that she has no choice but to isolate herself—it is the only way to keep herself safe.



As Melinda tries to run away, Mr. Neck stops her. She is unable to explain why she is leaving, and Mr. Neck gives her a demerit, calling her “trouble.”

Throughout the book, Mr. Neck bullies and singles out Melinda, acting in a way that is unfair and unprofessional.



PART 1, CHAPTER 4: SANCTUARY

After lunch Melinda has art, which she calls a “dream.” In contrast to Hairwoman and Mr. Neck, her art teacher Mr. Freeman is friendly and open-minded; his classroom, meanwhile, is full of **warmth and light**. Even the radio is playing Melinda’s “favorite station.” A dark spot, however, is Melinda’s former friend Ivy, who refuses to even look at her. This makes Melinda particularly sad because Ivy is a talented artist. Mr. Freeman explains to the class that art will teach them to survive in a way that “words” and “numbers” can’t. He tells them that only art will teach them “how to survive” in the real world, and scrawls the word “SOUL” on the chalkboard, urging his students to “touch that part of you that you’ve never dared to look at before.” Melinda finds Mr. Freeman odd, and tunes out his speech; she comments, however, that the clay streaks his hands leave on the chalkboard look like dried **blood**.

Mr. Freeman tells his class that each of them will be focusing on only one object for the entire year, and has them pick pieces of paper out of a giant, hollow globe. He explains to them that the globe is itself a work of art, even though it has a hole in it because of an especially powerful kick from his soccer-playing daughter. He says that his students must learn how to get their object to express an emotion, and for the first time that day, Melinda is excited. She gets a **tree**, and though she believes that the assignment will be too easy, Mr. Freeman tells her that the tree is her “destiny.” They will begin, he says, by sculpting clay.

This passage introduces the art room, which will become a “sanctuary” for Melinda over the course of the novel. In contrast to the rigidity and unfriendliness that she finds everywhere else, the art room is a place of warmth, sunlight, and creativity, and is one of the few places that Melinda feels genuinely safe and accepted. Even within this safe space, however, Melinda sees darkness, in the forms of Ivy and the clay that looks like “dried blood” on the chalkboard. No matter where she is, Melinda cannot escape the nightmare that is constantly going on within her own mind.



The tree, and Melinda’s attempts to make art, will become major symbols within the novel. As Melinda struggles to find her voice, she simultaneously attempts to make art about a tree that also expresses emotion. Her belief that the assignment will be easy is ironic, considering the importance that it will soon take on within her life and her narrative. Mr. Freeman’s comment that the tree is Melinda’s “destiny” heavily foreshadows its significance.



PART 1, CHAPTER 5: ESPAÑOL

Melinda sits in Spanish class, bored once again. She detachedly mocks her Spanish teacher’s attempts at immersion—to communicate with the class without speaking any English at all. The teacher attempts to mime words (Melinda calls it a “class in charades”), before finally writing a sentence on the board for the class to translate. They attempt to do so, incorrectly, but do not finish before the end of the period.

Although this subplot of the Spanish teacher’s failed attempt at “immersive” teaching is comical, it also represents another instance in which an adult is unable to communicate with high schoolers. Throughout the book, in fact, Anderson inserts moments in which communication fails, implying that all the characters—not just Melinda—have trouble connecting with each other.



PART 1, CHAPTER 6: HOME. WORK.

Two weeks go by “without a nuclear meltdown,” Melinda reports. The talkative Heather has been attempting to befriend her, while all her other former friends of the past nine years, especially Rachel, continue to ignore and even bully her. Melinda describes being bumped in the hallways, and having her books thrown to the floor. She tries not to think about it, and tells herself that the bullying can’t go on forever.

In Melinda’s mind, a life of numbness and unhappiness is all that she can expect. She does not hope to regain her friends; only that eventually, everyone will leave her alone. This longing for invisibility is a deeply troubling one, and speaks to how damaged Melinda is.



Melinda begins to discuss her home life, which mainly involves avoiding her parents and ordering takeout. She says that, in general, her family communicates only through notes: her mother leaves her money and instructions about what to eat, while she writes down whenever she needs “school supplies or a ride to the mall.” She focuses in on her mother, a workaholic who runs a struggling department store called Effert’s in the city. Melinda describes the bad neighborhood in which her mother works, and compliments her bravery.

As she eats dinner on her family’s white couch, Melinda relates how she turns the cushions one way to make a mess while she has meals, and the other way to make them appear pristine for her parents. When her father comes home, Melinda flips the cushions so that “everything looks the way he wants to see it” and runs upstairs so that she doesn’t have to interact with him.

In her **bedroom**, Melinda describes how out of place she feels in it, having decorated it with her friends when she was in fifth grade. She describes its rose decorations and pink walls, and recounts the different ways that Rachel, Ivy, Nicole, and Jessica decorated their rooms when they were in fifth grade. The only things that she feels truly belong are her stuffed-rabbit collection from her childhood and her canopy bed (which she didn’t remove even when Nicole teased her). Despite her hatred of and discomfort in the room, Melinda decides that she doesn’t want to try to redecorate because doing so would cause her parents to argue.

As her father pours himself a drink and microwaves leftovers, Melinda decides to nap rather than doing her homework. She asserts that she is powerless against the “serious nap rays” emanating from her bed, and describes a kind of half-sleep that she can fall into, and where she can “stay for hours.” Instead of calling out to her father, she simply turns on the radio so that he knows she is home.

As she rests, Melinda bites her lips and looks in the **mirror**, disgusted by what she sees. She is particularly horrified by her **mouth**, which she says looks like it “belongs...to someone I don’t even know.” Her father, meanwhile, listens to the local news, flipping from channel to channel only to hear the same stories. Melinda describes her appearance, from her “muddy-circle eyes” to “black-dash eyebrows” to “piggy-nose nostrils.” She compares herself to a dryad, a tree goddess of ancient Greek mythology, but concludes that she definitely does not have “a dryad face.” She then takes down her **bedroom** mirror and puts it “in the back of my closet, facing the wall.”

Melinda’s workaholic parents are uncommunicative and distant both to Melinda and to each other. It is unsurprising, therefore, that their daughter associates adulthood with silence and coldness. That they connect with each other only through notes is a clear symbol of how fractured the family is.



Although Melinda’s family pretends to be happy and functional, they are in fact incredibly dysfunctional and isolated. Melinda believes that she, like the couch, must pretend to be pristine and undamaged even if she is a wreck underneath.



Even in her own room, Melinda feels depressed and unsafe, as she remembers her friendships with girls who will no longer speak to her. The room is frozen in time, meant for a child, just as Melinda has frozen herself as she attempts to escape adulthood. A symbol of immaturity, Melinda hates her room even though she continually retreats to it, making clear her conflicted feelings about her childhood, and her future as an adult.



The half-sleep that Melinda describes is a symptom of depression, a mental illness that often causes deep apathy and listlessness. Melinda’s inability to even say hello to her father further signals the lack of connection between them, while her failure to do her homework emphasizes her immature irresponsibility and general apathy.



*Although Melinda’s wounds are mostly internal, her bitten-up mouth symbolizes her wounds in a visible and external way. Of course, Melinda herself is responsible for her mutilated lips, since she constantly bites and picks at them. The reason for her hatred of her mouth is not yet explained, though in a novel titled *Speak* it is possible to guess that she feels that she failed to express herself, that her mouth failed to speak. She hates not just her mouth, but her own appearance, a feeling that makes clear her deep self loathing. Her removal of the mirror, meanwhile, is highly symbolic; she detests herself so much that she can’t even bear to look at her own reflection.*



PART 1, CHAPTER 7: OUR FEARLESS LEADER

Melinda hides in a bathroom and watches as a student who is cutting class outwits the incompetent Principal Principal. As the two miscommunicate and the student escapes, Melinda mentally mocks the hapless administrator. She laughs as Principal Principal walks away from the interaction, clearly trying to understand what he did wrong.

Melinda thinks that adults know little about the lives of high schoolers, and is contemptuous of their attempts to try. As an outsider, she is able to observe the actions of others rather than participating; her isolation, therefore, makes her more perceptive.



PART 1, CHAPTER 8: FIZZ ED

Melinda describes gym with loathing, recounting how she has to change in a bathroom stall and how Heather wears her gym clothes under her school clothes. She goes on to discuss her former friend Nicole, who is athletic and confident. Nicole, Melinda asserts, has a nice locker because she's on the soccer team, and is comfortable enough to change bras in the locker room. She comments that Nicole must be strong, in order to not care what others say about her exposed body.

While Melinda and Heather are both clearly uncomfortable with their bodies, Nicole is the epitome of confidence and grace. Comfortable with herself and sure of her abilities—and physically strong—she is everything that the self-loathing, closed-off, hesitant Melinda is not.



As the gym class plays field hockey on a muddy, cloudy day, an unenthusiastic Melinda continues to describe Nicole's athletic skills, and good looks, the favoritism she receives from the coaches, and her friendliness. She marvels at the ease with which Nicole plays field hockey, and reflects that Nicole can do "anything" involving sports. She also notes somewhat bitterly that even boys watch Nicole "to learn to play better," although "[i]t doesn't hurt that she's cute." Despite being jealous, however, Melinda can't hate Nicole, who is a genuinely kind person, even helping out the hapless Heather. "It would be so much easier," Melinda says, to hate Nicole if she were "a bitch."

Melinda's detailed description of Nicole makes it clear how jealous she is of her former friend. She is most obsessed with how effortlessly Nicole seems to succeed. Since even getting out of bed in the morning is a huge task for Melinda, it is easy to understand why she would be incredibly envious of someone who seems to excel without even trying.



PART 1, CHAPTER 9: FRIENDS

Melinda encounters Rachel in the bathroom, and scornfully describes how her former best friend has changed her name to “Rachelle” and is trying to fit in with the pretentious foreign exchange students. She notes Rachel’s new ability to swear in French, her “black stockings with runs,” and her new decisions not to shave under her arms (which Melinda claims makes her look like a young chimpanzee), and wonders how they were ever best friends. Although Melinda attempts to engage in conversation as Rachel smudges mascara under her eyes (in order to look “exhausted” and artsy), Rachel refuses to even speak with her. Melinda reminds herself to act like **ice** in order not to feel anything. Despite her attempts, however, she imagines shaking Rachel by her neck and screaming at her; she wonders why Rachel didn’t try to find out the truth, and decides that this makes her a bad friend. As Rachel leaves with an exchange student friend whom Melinda names Greta-Ingrid, Melinda notices that Rachel is ‘smoking’ a candy cigarette, and knows that it is because Rachel has asthma, and can’t smoke real cigarettes.

Melinda longs for a friend—not a real, close friend, she explains, but a “pseudo-friend” so that she doesn’t look so isolated all the time. In her English journal for the day, she claims, “Exchange students are ruining our country.”

This passage represents one of the few instances in which Melinda actually attempts to converse with someone. Her effort is for nothing, however, as Rachel responds to her hostilely and nonverbally. This exchange reinforces Melinda’s idea that she will forever be an outcast, and that communication is useless and futile. It is important, here, to note the differences between Melinda’s external actions and her internal thoughts. Although Melinda attempts to act cool and nonchalant to Rachel, her interior thoughts make clear her deep frustration and feelings of helplessness. Her comment that Rachel is a bad friend for not finding out the truth, meanwhile, is a complex one: while Rachel is undoubtedly acting like a bad friend, Melinda has made no effort to communicate with her about the mysterious “truth.”



Melinda wishes for the appearance of a friend rather than an actual friend, which demonstrates the depth of her isolation and defensiveness. She doesn’t actually want to reveal her inner thoughts or vulnerabilities.



PART 1, CHAPTER 10: HEATHERING

Melinda goes to Heather’s house, which is pristine and perfectly decorated. They are greeted by Heather’s talkative mother, who attempts to learn more about Melinda. Melinda comments that “it’s nice that she cares.” Since Heather’s bedroom is still being decorated, the two girls go into the basement. Heather runs on the treadmill and contemplates what clubs to join in order to improve her social standing; she thinks the International Club and the Select Chorus would be good choices, although she’s also contemplating joining the musical or tutoring at the elementary school. She asks Melinda about her friends from last year, and inquires what Melinda wants to do, but receives no answer. Instead, Melinda shoots down her suggestions, eats popcorn, and watches TV.

Melinda has decided to make Heather her pseudo-friend, yet makes no real effort to open herself up. This relationship is all about appearances for her, rather than real connection. Melinda also demonstrates her obsession with appearances as she notes the details of Heather’s seemingly perfect house, and feels envious about her involved mother (in contrast to Melinda’s absent mother). Her lack of communication with Heather, meanwhile, makes obvious the problem with their friendship: Melinda wants someone to make her feel less lonely, yet is completely unwilling to engage in any real way.



As Heather lectures her about being more involved, saying that ninth-graders need to become a part of their high school community, Melinda remembers how she used to be “happy” and “driven” like Heather. Now, however, she finds her fellow student’s pep and chatter annoying. When Heather proposes that they make a list of their goals, Melinda inwardly comments that her only goal “is to go home and take a nap.”

Melinda once again displays the apathy that is characteristic of depression. Although she remembers how motivated, happy, and active she used to be, she sees no way of healing or of regaining her former innocence. This feeling is at the root of Melinda’s depression: she feels that she will always be damaged, and so sees no point in making an effort.



PART 1, CHAPTER 11: BURROW

Melinda has a difficult day after being lectured by Hairwoman over her missing homework (the teacher even threatens to meet with her parents), and then failing to find study hall in the library. After Melinda almost cries, a kind librarian writes her a late pass. As a thank you for the librarian’s kindness, she checks out a stack of books, and adds that she “might even read one.” Melinda then evades Mr. Neck (also after missing homework), and stumbles upon an old janitor’s **closet** in the Senior’s Wing (where freshmen never go).

Melinda thinks of figures of authority as obstacles to be avoided rather than people who can help her. This is part of the reason that she has remained silent: she believes that no one, least of all an adult, can understand her pain. Her discovery of the closet, meanwhile, is an important moment in the book. While she has been emotionally isolated in the past, she now finds a way to physically isolate herself.



Noting the **closet’s** bad smell, stained armchair, desk, and “cracked mirror,” Melinda realizes that it is abandoned, and decides to turn it into her “burrow.” She briefly describes the new lounge where the janitors spend their time, and how they stare and whistle at passing high school girls. She steals a pad of late passes from Hairwoman so that she can use them to cut class while hiding in the closet.

Like a wounded animal, Melinda intends to “burrow”—to create a safe space for herself in order to hide from those who wish to hurt her. This safe space is a double-edged sword; while it protects Melinda from peers and authority figures, it also allows her to completely disengage from those around her.



PART 1, CHAPTER 12: DEVILS DESTROY

Melinda plans to use the distraction of the Homecoming pep rally in order to clean up her **closet**; she describes how she brought sponges from home, and wants to add in a blanket and even potpourri. Heather, however, dressed in the school colors, forces her to attend the rally. Melinda decides that she may not hate the rally, since she has someone to sit with. Just as Melinda begins to relax, however, a student behind Melinda recognizes her as “the one who called the cops at Kyle Rodgers’s party.” Melinda describes how a “block of **ice**” has suddenly frozen her section of the bleachers as everyone turns to look at her. Another girl reveals that her brother was arrested and lost his job because of his arrest at the party. Although Melinda is screaming in her head, she is unable to make a sound. She wishes that she could tell everyone what “really happened,” but acknowledges that she can’t even admit what happened to herself. Even Heather does not defend her, worried that Melinda will hurt her social climbing scheme. As the crowd cheers for the pep rally, Melinda screams in pain, letting out “the animal noise and some of that night.”

This passage is the first instance in which Melinda’s peers confront her directly about Kyle Rodgers’ party, a mysterious but clearly significant incident in Melinda’s past. It is vital that, although the reader has spent a great deal of time in Melinda’s mind, we only begin to learn about the party through the words of others; Melinda has remained so silent about that night that she cannot even discuss it internally. At the pep rally, although Melinda wishes desperately to defend herself, she finds herself completely mute. A good friend might defend her but Heather, betraying her shallowness, fails to do so. Isolated and attacked, Melinda cries out in pain, but her voice goes completely unheard—a clear metaphor for her silence and powerlessness.



Melinda describes the pep rally, from the band to the cheerleaders to the back-flipping Blue Devils mascot to the “hulking” football players themselves. She mocks their coach, whom she names Coach Disaster. As she sits, the students around her bully and abuse her; one pushes her knees into Melinda’s back, while the girl with the arrested brother pulls Melinda’s hair. As Coach Disaster finishes speaking, Principal Principal introduces the cheerleaders.

Even as she is tormented by memories and students alike, Melinda still manages to be sharp and sardonic, proof of her impressive willpower. It is easy to understand, in this moment, why Melinda isolates herself, and why she is so depressed. Her peers seem to genuinely hate her, and to actively wish to torment her.



PART 1, CHAPTER 13: CHEERLEADERS

With sarcasm and bitterness, Melinda describes the school’s cheerleaders. She notes their simultaneous promiscuity and purity, and marvels at the fact that they are hailed as role models even as they sleep with the entire football team. These girls exist in two different realities, she realizes: in one they are perfect, gorgeous role models, while in the other they throw wild parties and “get group-rate abortions before the prom.” She ponders how happy they must be, and how “cute” they are, and compares their perfection with her own failures.

Even as Melinda is scornful of the cheerleaders, she is also jealous of them. Afflicted by trauma and depression, Melinda feels that she is somehow broken and defective. She does not understand that people can look perfect even if their lives are imperfect. Her envy of the cheerleaders is much like her envy of Nicole; she believes that they are everything that she is not.



As the rally ends, someone knocks Melinda down three rows of bleachers. She fantasizes about creating a clique called the Anti-Cheerleaders, which will hang out underneath the bleachers and “commit mild acts of mayhem.”

Once again, Melinda maintains her dark sense of humor even as the world treats her harshly.



PART 1, CHAPTER 14: THE OPPOSITE OF INSPIRATION IS...EXPIRATION?

Since the pep rally, Melinda has used watercolors to paint **trees** that have been struck by lightning. Mr. Freeman has not commented on them, however, and Melinda is not satisfied. She recounts that her other classmates have been experiencing problems too (especially Ivy, whose subject is clowns, although she fears and hates them). Mr. Freeman responds to their complaints by telling them that great artists do not complain, and then ranting about school board budget cuts that have kept him from buying new art supplies. As he does, Melinda doodles a tree, and laments the fact that Mr. Freeman won’t give her any guidance. She criticizes her doodle, and wonders why Mr. Freeman, who seemed like “such a cool teacher,” is forcing the class to complete such a “ridiculous assignment.”

Melinda’s desire to draw lightning-struck trees clearly signifies the way that she feels—violated, barren, and dead. Her struggle to create a satisfactory piece of art mirrors her struggle to express her emotions and to find a voice to which people will listen. Her frustration that Mr. Freeman won’t offer her any help, meanwhile, shows her immaturity. Melinda believes that authority figures are fundamentally unhelpful, yet still expects Mr. Freeman’s guidance.



PART 1, CHAPTER 15: ACTING

Although she wants to sleep during her Columbus Day vacation, Melinda instead goes over to Heather's house, because Heather begged her and there's "nothing on television anyway." At the house, Heather's mother asks Melinda to bring over more friends (Melinda mocks this request internally, commenting that Rachel would probably "slit my throat" on the "new carpet"). She notes Heather's artificially perfect room, and wishes that her own **bedroom** reflected her personality. As Heather blathers about joining the musical and paints her nails, Melinda thinks about what a good actor she herself is, describing the expressions and actions she fakes every day, from a shy smile for teachers to an apathetic shrug for her parents to a false wave to imaginary friends when students point at and whisper about her.

After Melinda tells Heather that they cannot join the musical because "We are nobody," Heather begins to cry about how unfriendly and exclusive everyone is at Merryweather High. She accuses Melinda of being "no help," and calls her negative. She adds that Melinda only pretends not to care about people talking about her behind her back. Rather than comforting Heather, Melinda focuses on the fact that Heather has spilled green nail polish all over her brand new carpet, trying and failing to clean up the stain. Heather apologizes, chalking up her tears to PMS, and telling Melinda that she's "the only person I can trust." When she sees the nail polish spill, however, she begins to cry once again. Melinda, unable to deal with Heather's emotions, and nursing a terrible stomachache, leaves "without saying goodbye."

Melinda's decision to go over to Heather's house signifies her conflicted feelings about her pseudo-friend; she constantly makes fun of Heather, yet also uses her in order to avoid feeling lonely. Meanwhile, Melinda is proud of her ability to fool authority figures, and does not seem to understand that her fake smiles are emblematic of her own inability to communicate. She continues to make no effort to connect with Heather, but holds on to their friendship because it keeps her from feeling pathetic. Yet even though she mocks Heather internally, she is jealous of her too, as emblemized by her envy over Heather's bedroom.



Although Melinda usually considers Heather to be overly perky, energetic, and talkative, this passage makes clear that Heather too is feeling isolated and alone at Merryweather High. She may seem clueless, but she clearly understands that Melinda is incredibly unsatisfactory as a friend. Just as concerned with appearances as Melinda is, Heather quickly attempts to revert to her cheery demeanor, with mixed results. Melinda, meanwhile, has no idea how to deal with emotions that are not her own. It is as if her depression and her mysterious trauma are keeping her from feeling empathetic towards the lonely Heather.



PART 1, CHAPTER 16: DINNER THEATER

Melinda's parents scold her for her low grades and poor attitude. She imagines her mother as a psychotic Glenn Close, and her father as Arnold Schwarzenegger. She calls the entire conversation "performance art," believing that her parents are only pretending to care about her for show. Although they threaten and cajole her, Melinda refuses to speak to them, instead excusing herself from the table. In their daughter's absence, her parents begin attacking each other, as Melinda in her bedroom drowns them out with music.

As her parents yell at her, Melinda disengages completely. This passage clearly shows how incompetent Melinda's parents are at dealing with her, but also how unwilling Melinda is to open up to her parents in any way. This dynamic is an incredibly dysfunctional one, and rises not just from Melinda's depression, but also from her parents' troubled relationship with each other.



PART 1, CHAPTER 17: BLUE ROSES

Melinda discusses biology class, which is taught by Ms. Keen, whom Melinda believes could have been a famous scientist instead of a high school teacher. Trying to pay attention after the previous night's argument with her parents, Melinda notes that the class even gets to use real microscopes, rather than "plastic Kmart specials." She also describes her lab partner, the brilliant David Petrakis, whom she comments will be "cute when the braces come off." Melinda recounts David's dismay when she almost breaks a microscope, and describes her classmates' mockery of Ms. Keen's clothes.

Biology is one of the few subject that Melinda finds interesting and worthwhile—a fact that will become increasingly significant once the class starts studying plants (an incredibly important symbol in Melinda's narrative). David Petrakis, too, may start out as a stereotypically brilliant nerd, but reveals greater depths as the plot continues.



PART 1, CHAPTER 18: STUDENT DIVIDED BY CONFUSION EQUALS ALGEBRA

Melinda next discusses algebra, to which she arrives quite late (with the help of a forged late pass). As she ignores her teacher, Mr. Stetman, she imagines various disasters striking her school. Although she used to be good at math, testing at the top of her class, Melinda refuses to put effort into learning algebra, despite Mr. Stetman's great passion for it. She recalls how motivated and driven she used to be, but essentially decides that there's no point in trying to learn algebra.

In algebra, Melinda once again recalls how smart and motivated she used to be—she also reveals that she used to excel as a student, a fact that only makes her new apathy more disturbing and uncharacteristic.



When Mr. Stetman calls on Melinda, she tries not to answer, using one of her fake smiles. Mr. Stetman, however, forces Melinda to go up to the board with Rachel to do the problem. Melinda's "head explodes" with the sound of sirens; she calls the event "a real disaster." As Melinda mentally mocks her former best friend's clothes (even while she criticizes her own, calling them "Dumpster togs" and realizing that she needs to wash her hair), Rachel glares at her, before doing the problem on the board. Melinda bites her lip and imagines eating herself alive, forgetting that she is supposed to sit down. The class laughs at her.

This moment is a nightmare for Melinda—not only must she stand in front of a room of peers who hate her, but she must do so with Rachel, who has betrayed her more than anyone else. Melinda's upset and discomfort transform, however, into self-hatred. Her wish for invisibility becomes even more disturbing, as she imagines eating herself alive, a thought that reveals just how deep Melinda's self loathing goes.



PART 1, CHAPTER 19: HALLOWEEN

On Halloween, having been told by her parents that she is too old to trick-or-treat (she doesn't want to in any case), Melinda retreats to her **bedroom**. As she watches the trick-or-treaters, and listens to her parents' squabbling, she remembers dressing up as witches with her friends the year before—she describes buying wigs, trading clothes, and renting "black satin capes lined in red" with Rachel. In short, she comments, "We rocked." The memory is a happy one, but ends on a disturbing note: at midnight, the girls lit a candle and held a candle to a mirror to see their futures. Melinda, however, couldn't see anything. Meanwhile, this year, Rachel will be going to an exchange student party. In the present, Melinda decides to spend the night reading *Dracula*.

Halloween is yet another emblem of childhood for Melinda. She remembers last year's holiday not only because she was with her friends, but because she felt innocent, free, and powerful—in contrast to how damaged and powerless she feels now. As always, however, Melinda finds darkness within a happy memory, recalling her inability to see her own future. This recollection has deep significance: Melinda believes that she has no real future, but instead is doomed to stay frozen, traumatized, and isolated for the rest of her life.



PART 1, CHAPTER 20: NAME NAME NAME

Melinda reports that the school board has changed the Merryweather High mascot from the Devils to the Tigers, and comments that the Ecology Club is planning a protest because tigers are an endangered species. Mr. Neck, meanwhile, is furious about the protest, believing that it shows insubordination and a lack of school spirit.

After the Spanish teacher calls on her, the students make fun of Melinda because she has the word for “pretty,” “linda,” in her name. In Spanish, they tell her that she is not pretty, and call her “Me-no-linda” for the rest of the period. Melinda inwardly seethes.

Melinda develops a darkly comic theory about Kyle Rodgers’ party: she decides that aliens have abducted her, and that they are torturing her in order to see her reactions. Every terrible event that has happened to her since the party, from her mysterious trauma to her alienation by her peers, is simply an experiment that the aliens are performing on her. She comments that “[t]he aliens have a sick sense of humor.”

Even in the midst of her depression, Melinda still manages to be observant and funny about the ridiculous world of high school. Mr. Neck, meanwhile, demonstrates his bad temper, an attribute that will get him into trouble later in the book.



Once again, Melinda’s peers act in a way that is unkind and inhumane. As far as Melinda is concerned, this is the kind of world that she will exist in for the rest of her life.



Melinda’s desire to disappear takes on a new form: she imagines that she has been taken to a different planet, and that none of the events she’s experiencing are real. This fantasy reveals Melinda’s detachment from her own life, which makes so little sense to her that she feels it must not be real.



PART 1, CHAPTER 21: THE MARTHAS

Melinda mockingly describes the Marthas, the clique that Heather is trying to join. It is composed of three upperclassmen whom she refers to as Meg ‘n’ Emily ‘n’ Siobhan. She mocks their uniform-like preppy outfits, and their tyrannical rules, describing their obsession with Martha Stewart, and with various community service arts-and-crafts projects.

Heather’s first project as a freshman probationary member is to decorate the faculty lounge for a Thanksgiving party. She pleads with Melinda to help, and although Melinda is disappointed with the shabbiness of the room, she agrees. She tries to help Heather, even engaging her in conversation, as Heather babbles about how amazing the Marthas are, and how much happier she is at school now.

As the Marthas enter, Melinda exits. But she watches as the Marthas make fun of her **lips** and then force Heather to leave, pretending that they themselves decorated the lounge.

The clique that Heather wishes to join is one of conformity and fake cheerfulness. Although Melinda may mock them, however, she is of course incredibly jealous that Heather may have found a place for herself at Merryweather High.



This moment signals a break in Melinda’s apathy—she may constantly mock Heather, but she immediately helps when Heather needs it. Although Heather appears to be happy and excited, Melinda, as always, is skeptical about any positive emotion.



Although the Marthas may pretend to be do-gooders, they are in fact cruel, petty high school girls who take advantage of Heather and make fun of Melinda for no reason.



Alone in the bathroom, Melinda cries. She comments that the “salt in my tears feels good when it stings my lips.” Afterwards, she washes her face and looks in the **mirror**, imagining that she can scrub her face until nothing is left.

Melinda may be detached and defensive, but the words of her peers can still deeply wound her. Once again, she responds to bullying by wishing to disappear, then confronts her own reflection in a mirror and despising what she sees.



PART 1, CHAPTER 22: NIGHTMARE

On an unspecified date between Halloween and Thanksgiving, Melinda is horrified to see IT in the hallway flirting with a cheerleader. As IT passes her, he winks. Melinda feels as if her “lips are stitched together,” but is thankful for this feeling, because it keeps her from vomiting. She comments that he is her “nightmare and I can’t wake up.”

This passage marks the first appearance of the as-yet unnamed IT, a male student who sits at the center of Melinda’s trauma—and thus a clue to what that trauma was. So unable is she to communicate, however, that she cannot even think his name, let alone describe her connection to him.



PART 1, CHAPTER 23: MY REPORT CARD

Melinda reports her grades to the reader; they are generally poor, except for a B in biology and an A in art. She also gives herself a B in a subject she calls “Plays Nice” (she will continue to make up subjects for each following report card).

Even as she receives mediocre grades, Melinda maintains her sense of humor, giving herself a grade in an imaginary subject. This moment also makes clear, however, her lack of seriousness about her bad grades.



PART 2, CHAPTER 1: GO ___!

The Ecology Club has prevailed, and defeated the Tiger mascot. In an assembly about the mascot, the students use various politically correct arguments to tear down any and all mascot suggestions. They are finally left with four options: Bees, Icebergs, Hilltoppers, and Wombats.

The subplot of the school mascot continues, full of ridiculousness and miscommunication. The options from which the students can choose may be politically correct, but they are also absurd.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2: CLOSET SPACE

Melinda’s parents try to force her to stay after school for extra help from her teachers, but she responds by hiding in her **closet**. As she redecorates, she covers its **mirror** (which she hates) with a **poster of Maya Angelou** (author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*), whose books the school board has banned. During Melinda’s time in the closet, she imagines that the poster is watching her as she cleans, reads, and watches “the scary movies playing on the inside of my eyelids.”

Although Melinda doesn’t know who Maya Angelou is, she still sees the poster as a strong, positive female influence—an appropriate role for the famous author. As the source of Melinda’s trauma is revealed over the course of the book, Maya Angelou will come to serve as even more of a symbol, as she experienced similar trauma as a child. Even the poster and the safe space of Melinda’s closet, however, still cannot save her from her own imagination, which constantly torments her with terrifying images and thoughts.



Noting that “[i]t is getting harder to talk,” Melinda describes how her throat is sore, her **lips** raw, and her jaw clenched. Although she can sometimes talk around Heather, she finds herself unable to speak around authority figures. Acknowledging that there is something wrong with her, Melinda wishes that she could either escape her life or confess “the guilt and mistake and anger” that she has been feeling since Kyle Rodgers’ party. She acknowledges, however, that she will never be able to “dump the memory.” She is grateful for the **closet** because it allows her to hold onto her thoughts without letting anyone else “hear them.”

Melinda’s unwillingness to talk about her depression or her mysterious trauma has now taken on a physical form, as if the actual body parts that enable her to talk have started to become damaged and defective. Melinda, however, doesn’t see a point in communicating. Although she wishes to tell someone what happened to her, she believes that nothing will enable her to feel whole again. Rather than admitting that something is wrong with her, she prefers to isolate herself.



PART 2, CHAPTER 3: ALL TOGETHER NOW

Melinda’s Spanish teacher finally speaks in English, yelling at the class to stop pretending not to understand her so that they can escape doing homework. Melinda chooses five verbs to conjugate for her homework in order to avoid going to detention: they include “to translate,” “to flunk,” “to hide,” “to escape,” and “to forget.”

The theme of adults miscommunicating with high schoolers continues as Melinda’s Spanish teacher lays down the law with her students. Melinda’s choices of verbs are highly symbolic, revealing her fears (flunking) and her desires (hiding, escaping, and forgetting).



PART 2, CHAPTER 4: JOB DAY

Merryweather High holds Job Day, which Melinda mercilessly mocks. After taking an aptitude test, she is given a bewildering array of options that include “forestry” and “mortuary science.” Heather, meanwhile, is delighted to be told that she should become a nurse; she plans her life right then and there, and Melinda marvels at her certainty. She can’t think about a career until she “get[s] out of ninth grade alive.”

Job Day, of course, is a somewhat ridiculous event to Melinda because she doesn’t truly believe that she has a future. This lack of ambition or forward-thinking is only more apparent when Melinda compares herself to the driven, over-enthusiastic Heather.



PART 2, CHAPTER 5: FIRST AMENDMENT

Mr. Neck furiously begins a rant against immigrants, whom he claims have kept his son from getting a job as a firefighter. As he fumes, Melinda doodles an apple **tree**, and thinks about the linoleum block that she is trying to carve in art class. She notes that when she carves, there is no way to correct mistakes.

Mr. Neck’s unprofessionalism reaches new heights as he expresses deeply racist views. Melinda is completely disengaged from this incompetent authority figure having decided—rightly—that much of what he says is worthless.



After Mr. Neck claims that “America should have closed her borders in 1900,” the class debates, until one student suggests that Mr. Neck’s son didn’t get the job because he didn’t deserve it. Mr. Neck reacts with fury and cuts off debate. Melinda continues to doodle the tree, calling her work “a cheap, cruddy drawing.” She is so intent on the tree that she fails to notice David Petrakis has stood up in the middle of class to protest Mr. Neck’s bigotry and bullying, calling the lesson “racist, intolerant, and xenophobic.” After Mr. Neck refuses to listen to him, David walks out of the room without saying a word. Melinda admires his silence.

As Melinda continues to doodle and daydream, a debate rages around her. When Mr. Neck forbids the students from communicating their views, however, David Petrakis steps in. In contrast to the silent and defensive Melinda, David is determined to stand up for what he believes. When Melinda doesn’t speak, it is because she is isolating herself. When David doesn’t speak, however, it is because he is fighting for his right to be heard.



PART 2, CHAPTER 6: GIVING THANKS

Although she is incredibly stressed out by her job and the upcoming winter holidays, Melinda's mother insists on cooking a turkey for Thanksgiving (despite the fact that this has led to culinary disasters many times before). After working all night on plans for her store, she forgets to defrost the **bird**, and then attempts to hurriedly **unfreeze** it by pouring hot water on it. Melinda notes that although her family has little in common, her mom believes that cooking on Thanksgiving helps to hold them all together.

The chaos continues as the turkey floats in the sink in a bath of warm water, and Melinda's mother deals with a crisis at work. Melinda refers to the floating turkey as a "turkeyberg" and comments that she feels as if she is on the *Titanic*. Her father, meanwhile, buys donuts so that the family will have something to eat. Melinda attempts to drink orange juice, but cannot because of her "scabby lips." As Melinda's father watches TV, her mother attempts to boil the turkey in order to defrost it, and Melinda retreats to her **bedroom**.

Melinda hides in her **bedroom** and reads magazines as her parents fight. When she emerges, she sees her father chopping the frozen **bird** apart with a hatchet, attempting to hack it into pieces so that they can finally cook it. Her mother, meanwhile, watches disapprovingly from a window. Later, while Melinda's mom leaves to deal with a crisis at her store, her father washes the turkey with detergent and hot water; it has become dirty from the hatchet, and from falling on the ground. He attempts to be jocular, but quickly loses his temper as he fails at turkey cooking (Melinda, meanwhile, watches TV). When she reenters, her father is boiling the turkey in a disgusting soup; the bones sit next to him on the cutting board. The two decide to order pizza instead of eating a turkey dinner, and Melinda's father buries the soup and bones next to their dead dog.

PART 2, CHAPTER 7: WISHBONE

Melinda decides to make "a memorial for our turkey," which she said was "tortured to provide...a lousy dinner," so she digs up the bones and brings them to art class. Mr. Freeman, thrilled by her idea, allows Melinda to take time off from the **tree** to work on the **bird**.

The Sordino family's terrible Thanksgiving is comical, but also indicative of their deep problems. Convinced that making a perfect Thanksgiving will fix her dysfunctional family—that a healthy family is a function of how it looks on "special" days rather than how it behaves on all days—Melinda's mother insists on making a turkey, blindly ignoring how futile her goal is. This willful ignorance is indicative of her attitude as a wife and a mother.



Melinda's description of her family's various Thanksgiving mishaps are largely amusing, but she cannot fully hide how much her family's problems upset her. Even drinking orange juice is difficult because of her damaged lips. She eventually goes to her bedroom, both to isolate herself and so that she doesn't have to see her parents fighting with each other. She hides from herself and them.



Melinda's father's decision to chop the turkey with a hatchet only increases the day's absurdity and dysfunction. Like Melinda's mother, her father is too stubborn and blind to realize that the turkey is unsalvageable. Both are so concerned with appearances that they keep trying to have a traditional family meal even when it is clearly impossible. This attitude mirrors the way that they act towards Melinda, yelling at her over and over again even though this technique obviously does not produce results. The day ends, meanwhile, with an actual burial of the turkey bones—a scene that is both morbid and comic.



This passage and the events that follow symbolize an important moment in Melinda's narrative—for the first time, she is able to use art to express her feelings of isolation and frustration.



After several attempts, Melinda decides to skip her next class in order to work on her **bird** artwork, and Mr. Freeman agrees. He is working on his own piece, a mural depicting all the members of the school board in hell. Ivy also stays after in order to work on her clown project. She even smiles and raises her eyebrows at Melinda, who is too flustered to say something back.

Although Melinda is creating a dark and disturbing piece of art, this process is the first time she is expressing her feelings in an open way, and that in turn actually brings a moment of lightness and hope, as Ivy—who used to ignore her—acts friendly towards her. Unused to this kind of interaction, Melinda doesn't even know how to react.



Inspired, Melinda glues the bones together like “a museum exhibit.” She makes knives and forks look as if they are “attacking the bones,” and places a Lego palm tree and a Barbie doll within them. Mr. Freeman is delighted and praises the work, as does Ivy. Although he asks her to describe her piece to him, Melinda is unable to do so, and so Mr. Freeman describes it for her. Despite her silence, Melinda is pleased; she makes the Barbie the **bird's** head, turns the fork and knife into its legs, and puts tape over the Barbie's mouth. Mr. Freeman says that he observes “[p]ain” in her work. Before he can say anything else, Melinda leaves the room.

Melinda has taken a symbol of freedom—a bird—and transformed it into a work of art about being trapped and attacked. The Barbie doll head clearly symbolizes Melinda herself—its taped mouth demonstrating her silence, and its turkey bone prison demonstrating how dead, alone, and victimized she feels. A Barbie also symbolizes childhood and appearances, two more objects of Melinda's obsession. Although the work of art clearly communicates Melinda's negative emotions to Mr. Freeman, she is unable to verbally discuss them with him.



PART 2, CHAPTER 8: PEELED AND CORED

In biology class, Melinda is studying fruit. The students are instructed to dissect an apple, and while David Petrakis dissects his specimen perfectly next to her, the smell causes Melinda to flash back to a happy moment in her childhood, when she visited an apple **tree** orchard with her parents. She remembers her father holding her mother, and the **warmth** of the **sun** on her hair. To the dismay of David, she bites her apple, but then goes on to successfully dissect it, even noticing that one of the **seeds** has a sprout growing from it. Ms. Keen gives Melinda extra credit, as “David rolls his eyes.” Melinda concludes, “Biology is so cool.”

A routine class activity—dissecting an apple—becomes a memory-filled experience for Melinda. She recalls a purely happy memory in which she and her parents all felt connected. This recollection is closely associated with both sunlight and trees, two positive symbols in Melinda's life. The memory reveals Melinda's deep nostalgia for her childhood innocence, but ends on a positive note, when she finds a seed—a symbol of life and rebirth—within her apple.



PART 2, CHAPTER 9: FIRST AMENDMENT, SECOND VERSE

A week away from winter break, the students are rebellious, and David Petrakis is fighting for his freedom of speech in Mr. Neck's social studies class. As Melinda watches, David turns on a tape recorder every time Mr. Neck speaks, in order to document anything racist or bigoted that the teacher might say. Mr. Neck gives a non-offensive lecture on the beginning of the American Revolution, but glares at David as he does so. Melinda is impressed by David's bravery.

David's fight for his freedom of speech is the opposite of Melinda's inability to speak. He even uses Mr. Neck's words against him, ensuring that the teacher doesn't continue his bigoted, hateful tirades. To Melinda, David is an emblem of assertiveness and courage—qualities that she believes she doesn't possess.



As she waits for her guidance counselor in the school office, Melinda eavesdrops on a conversation between a secretary and a PTA volunteer, and learns that the Petrakises' lawyer has threatened to sue the school district and Mr. Neck. The next day, David has also set up a video camera in the back of the class in order to record Mr. Neck's dirty looks. Melinda calls David her "hero."

Once again, Melinda's status as a semi-invisible outsider allows her to see and hear things that others do not—in this case, the gossip about David's fight with Mr. Neck. As David continues to stand up to the teacher, Melinda is even more impressed by his refusal to be victimized or bullied.



PART 2, CHAPTER 10: WOMBATS RULE!

Heather persuades Melinda to go to the Winter Assembly so that she does not need to sit alone (the Marthas have yet to invite her to sit with them). She gives Melinda bell earrings as a Christmas present, and Melinda notes that she will now have to buy Heather something—perhaps a friendship necklace. She comments that the bell earrings are a useful present because shaking them allows her to drown out Principal Principal's voice as he gives a speech to the student body.

In a rare moment of friendship, Melinda actually likes the present Heather has given her. The reason she enjoys the bell earrings, however, is that they allow her to ignore the boring speech of Principal Principal—yet another example of her disengagement, and lack of respect for authority figures.



Principal Principal announces that 32 people have voted for the Wombats, while most of the other votes are "write-ins or ineligible." Melinda mentally mocks the name, and is delighted when Raven Cheerleader and Amber Cheerleader are upset about the new mascot (they don't know how to rhyme it).

In yet another example of the absurdity of high school, only a tiny fraction of students have actually voted for a new mascot. Melinda, however, enjoys the ridiculousness of the Wombat because it will make the cheerleaders' lives harder.



PART 2, CHAPTER 11: WINTER BREAK

With both her parents at work, school out, and two days till Christmas, Melinda's mother tells her (via note) to put up the Christmas tree. Melinda drags her family's fake **tree** out of the basement, cleans it up, and begins to hang the ornaments. She comments that Christmas is only fun if you have a small child. Christmas makes her nostalgic for her own childhood, and she recalls the time when her family used to buy a real tree, drink hot chocolate by the tree, and put up ornaments together before she "figured out the Santa lie."

As usual, Melinda is alone. She is even more bothered by her isolation than usual, however, because of the nostalgia for childhood and innocence and joy that Christmas brings. She associates the holiday with a happier time when she felt connected to her parents. As usual, Melinda mourns for her lost childhood, believing that she will never feel that innocent, happy, or free again.



Melinda speculates that if she hadn't been born, her parents would probably be divorced by now. She reflects that they must be disappointed in her, since she's "not pretty or smart or athletic." She calls their relationships a sham, and wishes that they could stop "playacting" and simply go their separate ways, since they have "failed family living."

Melinda's thoughts turn cynical and dark as she considers the dysfunctional state of her own family. Self-hating as always, she blames herself and what she perceives of as her mediocrity for her parents' unhappiness.



After trying and failing to contact Heather, Melinda decides to pretend to be her friend instead, wondering what Heather would do if her “house didn’t feel like Christmas.” She bundles up and heads out into the **snow**, where she is surrounded by **trees**, bushes, and **ice**. As she plays in the snow, making a snow angel, Melinda remembers first grade, when her family lived in a smaller house and her parents were happier; her mother worked at a jewelry counter and “was home after school,” while her father had a more lenient boss and “talked all the time about buying a boat.” She reflects that then, she used to believe in Santa Claus.

A wind rustles the branches above Melinda’s head, and she suddenly feels panicked, her “heart clanging like a firebell.” The spell of the **snow** is broken, and she complains as it melts on her back. She takes holly and pine off of nearby **trees** and bring them in to make a centerpiece. She wishes that her family could borrow a child for the holidays.

On Christmas, the family exchanges gifts; among Melinda’s are a TV for her room, skates, and a sketch pad with charcoals because her parents have noticed her drawing. Touched by the fact that they’ve noticed, she begins to cry, and is tempted to tell them about her trauma at the party. As her parents wait for her to speak, Melinda feels a “**snowball**” in her throat. *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer* plays in the background.

Melinda remembers a portion of the night of the party: how she snuck home later that night, but neither of her parents were in the house; in fact, her mother didn’t return until 2 AM, and her father was out until dawn. She wonders what they had been doing on the night of the party, and decides that she cannot tell them what happened to her. The family sits in silence watching Christmas movies until Melinda’s parents leave. Melinda realizes that she has not even said “Thank you” for the paper and charcoals.

PART 2, CHAPTER 12: HARD LABOR

Melinda’s parents decide that she can’t simply sit around the house during her Christmas vacation. She tries to work for her mother’s store, refolding shirts in the stockroom. The other employees view her with suspicion because she’s the boss’s daughter, and Melinda ends up reading rather than working. She realizes that her mother is upset because the store didn’t do well during the holidays, and feels guilty that she didn’t try to fold more shirts.

Although Melinda usually disdains Heather, here she actually tries to embrace her friend’s positivity and optimism. Although her environment is snowy and icy (usually a negative symbol within the book), Melinda enjoys being surrounded by nature, and engaging in activities (like making a snow angel) usually reserved for children. Once again she remembers her own childhood, and mourns for her lost innocence.



Melinda’s memory of her past happiness transforms into a small panic attack, triggered by the rustling of branches overhead (a negative association that is explained later). Her creation of a centerpiece is a small effort to regain the feeling of her childhood Christmas.



What should be a positive experience—realizing that her parents have paid attention to her interest in art—becomes negative. Unable to believe that her parents have actually noticed her, Melinda actually thinks about reaching out to them in turn, but finds that she is unable to do so.



At last, Melinda reveals a tiny portion of her traumatic night at the party, sharing the fact that her parents were mysteriously absent when she returned home (and even implying that they may have been unfaithful to each other). Ultimately her desire to communicate fails her; she cannot trust her parents, and so cannot tell them the truth about her experience.



Melinda’s parents once again try to combat her apathy in an ineffective and incompetent way. Melinda acts immaturely and irresponsibly, goofing off when she should be helping her mother. Later, however, she feels guilty about her actions, marking her conflicting feelings towards her mother and towards acting grown up.



The next day Melinda goes to her father’s insurance office, but is angry about how much easier his life seems than that of her mother, who is exhausted and will soon have to fire many of her employees. Her father, meanwhile, “gets to work with his feet up,” speak to his friends, and order out for lunch. She wishes that her father had to fold shirts, and that she were napping or watching TV or “even going to Heather’s house.”

Confronted with the differences between her parents’ workplaces, Melinda firmly sides with her mother—yet another sign of how broken the Sordino family is.



Furious with her father, Melinda is given the task of closing calendars into envelopes by licking them. She cuts her tongue on one of the flaps, bleeding everywhere. As she feels the pain, she suddenly sees IT’s face in her head. Her father, meanwhile, is furious about how many calendars she has ruined with her **blood**. Melinda comments that at the end of vacation she is actually happy to go back to school.

As Melinda bleeds, IT’s face flashes before her, implying that she somehow associates him with blood, vulnerability, and pain. Her father, meanwhile, is completely clueless, caring more about ruined calendars than he does about his own daughter.



PART 2, CHAPTER 13: FOUL

The unit in Melinda’s gym class is basketball, and she unexpectedly discovers that she has an amazing knack for foul shots. Even Nicole is impressed. Her teacher Ms. Connors attempts to recruit her for the basketball team, but Melinda isn’t eligible because of her terrible grades. Although the teacher questions her about doing better in school, Melinda doesn’t answer her. She is scornful about the idea of joining the team, but enjoys the feeling of succeeding.

Melinda doesn’t quite know what to make of her uncanny ability to make foul shots. She is so unused to success and approval that she is unable to react appropriately when they occur. She may enjoy excelling, but she makes no attempt to follow through on her new skill, or to connect with her excited and impressed gym teacher.



Ms. Connors and the boys’ Basketball Coach tell Melinda that she will get an A in gym if she coaches one of the players, Brendan Keller (whom she has nicknamed Basketball Pole), to make a foul shot. (The boys’ basketball team has been doing especially terribly this season). She shrugs in agreement, but decides that she won’t show up.

Even the promise of an A in a class can’t break through Melinda’s apathy. Although she has a clear talent for basketball, she has no desire to use it, even to improve her grades.



PART 2, CHAPTER 14: COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES

Back in the art room, Melinda describes Mr. Freeman’s popularity and coolness: the students are allowed to eat in his class, and to listen to music. She describes his room as “blooming,” and recounts how some students stay there during activity period and after school. A reporter has even come by to write about his irreverent mural. Melinda, meanwhile, cannot figure out her **tree**. Having ruined multiple linoleum blocks, she describes the tree outside her house, “a strong old oak with a wide scarred trunk” and leaves that reach up to the **sun**. Although she can imagine the tree perfectly, she thinks that the trees she carves look dead. She wishes she could quit, but feels compelled not to.

It is clear from this passage that many students, not just Melinda, consider Mr. Freeman’s room a safe space. Melinda is impressed and excited by her teacher’s success, but also compares herself negatively to him, believing that she will never actually be an artist. Despite her pessimistic attitude, however, Melinda refuses to give up the project. For once, she actually follows through (unlike with her basketball skills), a fact that emphasizes the importance of this project to her.



Melinda recalls how Principal Principal came by to inspect the room yesterday, but how the students hid their food and turned off the radio. Mr. Freeman, meanwhile, continued his school board mural. Melinda contemplates becoming an artist “if I grow up.”

Despite her discouragement, Mr. Freeman is clearly a role model for Melinda. Her comment about “if I grow up,” however, strikes a dark note. Melinda believes that she is so frozen and traumatized that she will never actually grow up, or perhaps, even more darkly, she has a sense that she won’t survive into adulthood.



PART 2, CHAPTER 15: POSTER CHILD

After receiving a note from Heather, Melinda goes to her house to find her sobbing about disappointing the Marthas at a Valentine’s Day event for a local children’s hospital—apparently she didn’t properly stuff Valentine’s pillows. Heather continues complaining about the Marthas, but Melinda stops listening, only to find out that she has unknowingly agreed to create artwork for the school’s Canned Food Drive. Although she is annoyed, when Heather begs, Melinda is unable to refuse her.

Once again, Melinda demonstrates her conflicted feelings towards Heather. On one hand, she finds Heather annoying and her upset inane. On the other, she inevitably agrees to help Heather whenever the other girl needs it. It seems that Melinda cannot fully decide whether or not to put effort into her friendship with Heather.



PART 2, CHAPTER 16: DEAD FROGS

Melinda’s biology class with Ms. Keene is scheduled for a frog dissection, and David Petrakis is thrilled (he is considering becoming a doctor). Melinda is nauseated by the smell, and watches in horror as David pins the frog’s hands and feet, and waits for Melinda to slice “her” open. The dissection triggers Melinda’s trauma; suddenly she can “feel the cut, smell the dirt, leaves in my hair.” Overwhelmed by her traumatic memory, she faints, and hits her head on the table.

Another routine biology activity—dissecting a frog—becomes traumatic for Melinda. She identifies with the frog’s vulnerability, powerlessness, and violation, and she flashes back to a mysterious memory related to Kyle Rodgers’ party. Ultimately this memory proves so overwhelming that Melinda blacks out—a clear sign of its power over her.



Melinda needs stitches, and is taken to the hospital by her mother. As the doctor shines a light into her eyes, she wonders whether the examination will reveal the mess within her brain. Melinda wishes only for sleep, desperately trying to put her trauma out of her mind. “The whole point of not talking about it,” she explains, “is to make it go away.” She knows, however, that it won’t, and wonders whether brain surgery might help.

Despite her desperate wish for invisibility and unconsciousness, Melinda cannot escape from her traumatic memories. Her silence, a coping mechanism, does no good; even if she doesn’t talk about it, she still thinks about it constantly. Her desire for medical intervention makes even clearer how tortured Melinda is by these memories.



PART 2, CHAPTER 17: MODEL CITIZEN

Melinda reports that Heather has gotten a job as a model at a local department store (though Melinda believes that Heather’s father may have gotten the job for her). The Marthas, meanwhile, are impressed.

As is typical for her, Melinda is cynical about Heather’s good luck. Always the outsider, she also notices how much Heather’s modeling helps her social status.



Melinda accompanies Heather to a bathing suit shoot, and Heather's mother asks whether she too wants to be a model. Embarrassed by her scabbed **mouth**, Melinda does not answer (Heather, meanwhile, tells her mother that Melinda is "too shy"), but admits to herself that she does want to be a model. She wants to put on gold eye shadow, look like "a sexy alien," and be seen as untouchable.

Heather's modeling rekindles Melinda's shame over her own appearance. Her fantasy about being a model, meanwhile, signals her hatred of herself, and her wish to be someone else. It also symbolizes her wish to be powerful and "untouchable" instead of powerless and vulnerable.



Reflecting that she likes food too much to model, Melinda scoffs at Heather's obsessive dieting. She watches as Heather attempts to model a swimsuit in a freezing cold building (and reflects that the goose-bumped Heather looks a lot like the Sordino family's Thanksgiving turkey), and as a photographer creepily commands her to act sexy. Melinda comments that her throat is sore, and reports that although she has not bought golden eye shadow, she did buy black and red nail polish called Black Death to match her **bloody**, bitten nails. Next, she sarcastically decides, she will buy a shirt in "tubercular gray."

In contrast to Heather's apparently model-worthy looks, Melinda finds herself disgusting. She doesn't believe that she even deserves gold eye shadow, and instead decides to buy nail polish that will act as a physical manifestation of how damaged she is.



PART 2, CHAPTER 18: DEATH BY ALGEBRA

Mr. Stetman is still determinedly trying to teach his class algebra; Melinda admires him, but refuses to learn or pay attention, even though he is trying to get the class interested through "Real-Life Application[s]" of algebra. A problem about guppies gets off track, and the class begins to debate animal rights. Melinda, meanwhile, watches the **snow** fall outside the window.

The students of Merryweather High remain disruptive and ridiculous. Melinda, meanwhile, stays as disconnected and disengaged as always. She makes no attempt to understand algebra, or even to watch her teacher.



PART 2, CHAPTER 19: WORD WORK

Hairwoman, meanwhile, has been assigning her class essays. After a boring assignment called "Why America is Great" that the whole class turned in late, she has started to choose different topics, such as "The Best Lost Homework Excuse Ever." She has also been using modern topics (such as the Internet) to teach her students about grammar. Although she's amused by these developments, Melinda complains that words are hard.

This passage represents one of the few instances in which connection between adults and high schoolers succeeds. Hairwoman has realized that she can engage her students by using topics that are interesting to them. The intelligent Melinda appreciates her techniques, even as she apathetically complains about the work.



PART 2, CHAPTER 20: NAMING THE MONSTER

Although she can only draw them in her closet (rather than in art class where people watch her), Melinda works hard on Heather's posters for two full weeks, drawing "basketball players shooting cans through a hoop" with a caption that reads, "BRING A CAN, SAVE A LIFE." She reflects that she could stay in her closet "forever." Heather, meanwhile, has another modeling gig, and asks Melinda to hang the posters.

Although Melinda is tentatively reaching out to the school community by drawing posters, she still feels self-conscious all the time, an emotion that drives her to isolate herself in her closet.



As she is putting a poster up in the metal shop, IT comes in. Melinda freezes, feeling as if “flecks of metal” are slicing through her. When he sees her, he whispers, “Freshmeat” in her ear. Terrified by his presence and his scent, Melinda drops her supplies and runs out, nauseated and petrified. She later lies to Heather, saying that she put the poster supplies away (when in fact she lost them when she ran out of the metal shop).

What should be a positive moment—Melinda is sharing her posters with the school—becomes instantly terrifying because of IT. Powerless, frozen, and silent. Melinda is utterly unable to defend herself against him. She hates herself for her cowardice, not understanding that she is clearly traumatized.



PART 2, CHAPTER 21: RENT ROUND 3

Melinda’s guidance counselor calls her mother to report her terrible grades. Melinda sarcastically comments that she should get the counselor a thank you card. Her parents once again scream at her over dinner as Melinda attempts to ignore them, instead conjugating irregular Spanish verbs, daydreaming, and looking at the **snow** outside. She calls her parents Mount Dad and Mount Saint Mom, watches them erupt, and wishes that the storm would bury her house. Her parents question her bad attitude and behavior and ground her, but Melinda doesn’t speak a word, believing that “[t]hey don’t want to hear anything I have to say.”

As usual, Melinda’s parents use the worst possible techniques to try to communicate with her. Melinda, however, is completely disconnected with them, refusing to talk to her parents because she believes that they are incapable of listening. She views them as hypocrites who only pretend to care about her. Once again, she imagines disappearing (though this time in her fantasy her whole house disappears with her).



Melinda does her homework and shows it to her parents. Afterwards, however, she writes a runaway note and goes to sleep in her **bedroom** closet. Her mother finds her, gives her a pillow, and closes the door, not even attempting to speak to her. In the closet, Melinda uses a paper clip to scratch her wrist, calling her self-harm a “[p]itiful” suicide attempt, and a “whimper” for help. She watches as “little windowcracks of **blood**” appear, and doesn’t stop scratching until “it stops hurting.” When her mother sees the wrist, she acts dismissively once again, telling her daughter, “I don’t have time for this, Melinda,” and adding that “suicide is for cowards.” Melinda does not respond.

Although Melinda attempts to play the good student for an evening, even this effort proves too much for her. Melinda’s decision to sleep in her closet symbolizes a complete regression to childhood, while her self-harm once again indicates the depth of her self-hatred and her loneliness. Though this behavior is clearly a desperate call for attention and understanding, Melinda’s mother reacts in a wholly dismissive fashion, seemingly unable to understand that there is something deeply wrong with her daughter. Melinda’s parents seem to act as if Melinda’s behavior is directed against them—possibly because her parents are constantly angering each other—rather than a sign of a real need for help.



PART 2, CHAPTER 22: CAN IT

Melinda has started to sit with Heather at the edge of the Martha table for lunch. The Marthas have gone shopping, and Heather has not been invited; Melinda feels nervous for her. The Marthas scold Heather for her poor contribution to the food drive (a bag of canned beets), her failure to collect enough cans, and her ugly posters (in fact created by Melinda). Heather cleans up after the Marthas, and does not defend Melinda’s posters.

Although Melinda’s decision to sit with the Marthas should mean that she is reconnecting with her high school community, it actually only makes her feel more isolated. She watches the Marthas bully Heather and mock her own posters, feeling completely alone and victimized as she does so.



The Marthas suddenly get excited as Andy Evans—whom Melinda identifies as IT—comes into the cafeteria. Emily reveals that he called her last night, while Siobhan scoffs that “he sleeps with anything,” while Emily retorts that he’s “gorgeous” and “rich,” and only “the itsiest bit dangerous.”

Andy Evans walks over and begins to flirt with Emily while standing behind Melinda. Melinda tries to lean into the table, deaf to his words and utterly paralyzed. She feels as if the lights have dimmed and the cafeteria has become cold. He reaches down and twirls her ponytail, and Melinda runs to the bathroom to throw up and splash **icy** water on her face. Heather does not follow her.

At last, Melinda names IT, and the Marthas reveal how popular and attractive he is. Clearly, however, something “dangerous” lies beneath his charming and charismatic appearance.



Melinda’s trauma reaches its peak as Andy Evans comes to her table, making it clear the terrible power that he has over her. To make matters worse, he seems to know how terrifying he is to her, and to relish this opportunity to violate her personal space.



PART 2, CHAPTER 23: DARK ART

The school is in the depths of winter, and Mr. Freeman is in trouble after having given A’s to all of his students. He is so depressed that he has stopped working on his mural, instead sitting dejectedly on his stool. In the freezing cold art room, Melinda starts a new linoleum block, commenting that her last **tree** looked as if it had died of a fungal infection.

Melinda gashes herself with her chisel, getting **blood** on the linoleum; all the students turn to stare at her. She refuses to go to the nurse, and Mr. Freeman disinfects her chisel. Instead of giving it back to her, however, he uses it to slash the canvas of his mural, “ruining it” as all the watching students “gasp.”

Mr. Freeman’s misfortunes make it clear that even the most confident and capable characters within the world of the novel can still be victimized and bullied. Melinda, meanwhile, remains determined to carve her tree.



Once again, blood is a powerful and important symbol within the world of the novel. Just as Melinda damages herself, so too does Mr. Freeman damage his painting.



PART 2, CHAPTER 24: MY REPORT CARD

Melinda reports her terrible grades, even worse than the first quarter. She even gives herself a D in a made up subject called Attitude.

Melinda is clearly in decline, but cannot seem to care. Her own terrible grade in her made up Attitude subject again reflects both her humor and her apathy.



PART 3, CHAPTER 1: DEATH OF THE WOMBAT

Principal Principal announces that Merryweather High will be represented by the hornets rather than the wombats, because the mascot costume will take money away from the prom budget. Melinda imagines opposing teams making flyswatters and cans of insecticide for halftime shows. She notes that she is “allergic to hornets. One sting and my skin bubbles in hives and my throat closes up.”

The school mascot saga continues as the animal changes yet again. In this moment of comedy, however, Melinda darkly notes that hornets make her throat close up, symbolizing how mute and silent she feels she must be within the world of high school.



PART 3, CHAPTER 2: COLD WEATHER AND BUSES

Melinda misses her bus because of the winter darkness, but her mother refuses to drive her to school, telling her to walk through the **snow** instead. As she hikes through the streets, Melinda notes the beauty of the wintry town.

After deciding to go to a bakery called Fayette's for donuts, Melinda sees Andy Evans (IT, as she calls him) in the parking lot. She freezes on top of an **icy** puddle and hopes that he won't notice her. She compares herself to a rabbit that freezes in front of a predator. Noticing her, Andy grins like a wolf and offers her a bite of his donut. Melinda runs away, asking, "Why didn't I run like this before when I was a one-piece talking girl?"

As she runs, Melinda remembers what she was like when she was "eleven years old and fast." She imagines burning through the sidewalk, melting **snow and ice** all around her. She decides to cut school.

Melinda's mother remains typically unsympathetic and disinterested, even though inability to get out of bed is one of the classic signs of depression.



Even Melinda's peaceful winter walk becomes a nightmarish experience when Andy Evans yet again targets her. Despite her terror, Melinda can do nothing to combat him. Her mention of the "one-piece talking girl" is a reference to her old self, before she was silent and broken.



Melinda's experience of running triggers her nostalgia, while her fantasy of melting the snow contrasts to her previous frozenness when she saw Andy Evans.



PART 3, CHAPTER 3: ESCAPE

Reveling in her freedom, Melinda walks down main street, despite the **icy** weather. She feels as if her insides are freezing. Just as she's about to head off to school, she decides instead to board a bus and go to the mall.

Melinda decides to shop for spring clothes because none of her clothes from last year fit. She wonders how she could shop with her mother without talking to her. She sits in a shaft of sunlight, taking off her winter clothes and imagining that she is a **bird**. Real birds sing above her, trapped by the mall ceiling (although no one quite knows how they got in). Melinda enjoys the **warmth** of the **sun** as she watches the birds fly.

Contemplating whether she should tell someone about what happened to her on the night of the party, Melinda wishes to be in fifth grade again, when life was easy and simple. A mall guard watches her, and Melinda realizes that she is too old to be loitering. She finds the bus stop, and waits for the end of the school day to go home.

Melinda reacts to freedom in a childish fashion, choosing to cut school. This decision reflects the constant push-pull within her between growing up and remaining immature.



Melinda's visit to the mall is highly symbolic, as she transitions from the cold town to the warm mall, filled with sunlight and birds (both of which Melinda associates with happiness and freedom). She feels safe and content in this environment.



Even within the mall, however, Melinda cannot escape thoughts of her trauma. Rather than engage with them, she chooses instead to wish for fifth grade, a time of lost innocence.



For the next four days, Melinda sets her alarm early and makes it to school, all the time wishing that she could “scream.” She decides that she should cut school every once in a while.

Melinda views her trip to the mall as a time of healing and safety—she believes that cutting school occasionally will help her to keep attending it the rest of the time.



PART 3, CHAPTER 4: CODE BREAKING

Melinda mocks Hairwoman’s choice of earrings, and reports that her English class has started to study symbolism in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s [The Scarlet Letter](#). Melinda wonders why Hawthorne didn’t simply say what he meant, but secretly enjoys the work. She thinks of it as breaking a code, and unlocking literary secrets.

Discussions of symbolism are particularly appropriate in this novel, which is, itself, filled with symbols, from Melinda’s lips to mirrors to birds to trees. Considering how symbolic Melinda’s life is, it makes sense that she enjoys the act of analyzing them.



Melinda wonders whether Hester ever tried to say no (presumably to her lover Reverend Dimmesdale’s sexual advances). She imagines living in the woods with Hester and wearing an S on her chest “for silent, for stupid, for scared...for silly. For shame.”

Melinda identifies with the victimized and isolated Hester, and imagines having a companion in her solitude. She also implies that she believes Hester may have been raped.



Hairwoman attempts to engage the class in a conversation about the symbolism of glass within the novel, and Rachel (whom Melinda now calls Rachel/Rachelle) responds that she doesn’t believe in symbolism. To Hairwoman’s dismay, Rachel claims that Hawthorne didn’t actually intend to put hidden meaning into his work; the two argue, and in revenge, Hairwoman assigns a 500-word essay on symbolism. The whole class is angry at Rachel; “That’s what you get for speaking up,” Melinda comments.

Although Hairwoman had previously been succeeding in communicating with her class, here it becomes clear that her ability to do so is limited. Rachel’s questioning of her authority is obnoxious and incorrect, but Hairwoman reacts in an ineffective way. Rachel’s refusal to believe in symbols is refuted by the very book in which she exists—Speak—and also itself symbolizes Rachel’s inability to recognize the “symbol” of Melinda’s changed behavior and how it shows that something actually happened to Melinda to make her behave as she is.



PART 3, CHAPTER 5: STUNTED

Rather than give his students grades, Mr. Freeman is evaluating them every week in a painted list on his wall. Next to Melinda’s name is a question mark. Her **tree**, she reports, is “frozen.” She claims that a kindergartner could do better, and that she doesn’t even know how many linoleum blocks she’s ruined. When Mr. Freeman suggests she use “a different medium,” she tries purple finger paints, but to no avail.

Melinda’s quest to create a tree continues, and though she is constantly discouraged, she still will not give up. Her remark that her tree is “frozen” is particularly telling, since she, too is frozen, unable to develop since the night of her trauma – the implication is that she can’t create the tree because she can’t really access her own self. The question mark by her name, too, represents her uncertainty about her own future.



Melinda looks at a book of landscapes brimming with **trees and plants**. She recalls that Mr. Freeman hasn't said anything good to her since her turkey **bird** sculpture, and reports that Mr. Freeman has spent much of his time staring at a canvas "so blue it's almost black" because of his fight with the school board. When Ivy asks him about the color, he describes it as "Venice at night, the color of an accountant's soul...the blood of Imbeciles. Tenure...The heart of a school board director." While some teachers believe that Mr. Freeman is having a breakdown, Melinda believes that he is "the sanest person" she knows.

Both Melinda and Mr. Freeman appear to be having creative crises. As she struggles to make the tree, he struggles with the oppressive forces of the school board. Unlike all other adults in the novel, Mr. Freeman is honest with his students, telling them how despairing and discouraged he feels. Melinda admires his ability to communicate, and appreciates his openness.

PART 3, CHAPTER 6: LUNCH DOOM

Commenting that a high school cafeteria is a place meant for "Teenage Humiliation Rituals," Melinda sits with Heather, but not at the Marthas' table; instead they sit close to the courtyard. Melinda imagines the snow behind her, and feels the wind through her shirt. She ignores Heather, instead listening to the ambient noise of the cafeteria and pretending that it is a giant hornet hive. She snaps back into focus, however, when Heather tells her that she doesn't think that they should be friends anymore because Melinda is too depressed. In fact, she believes that Melinda needs "professional help," and adds that the two of them were never really friends anyway. Melinda tries to think of a clever or mean response, but is unable to do so. She knows that Heather is choosing her own social status over their friendship. Realizing that Heather is her only real friend, Melinda tries to salvage the relationship, but is unable to do so as Heather becomes increasingly condescending and insulting, telling Melinda that she has "a reputation." She ends by telling Melinda that they can't sit together anymore and walking back to the Marthas without looking back.

Friends betraying other friends is a common enough occurrence in high school, but to Melinda, Heather's abandonment is nothing short of devastating. It is important to remember that Melinda has been abandoned by her closest friends as the book opens, and that she still is deeply traumatized by that betrayal. Although she does not feel nearly as strongly about Heather as she did about Rachel, Melinda still considers Heather her only tie to the rest of the school. Heather's decision, meanwhile, is understandable—Melinda is a deeply depressed person, and puts little effort into their friendship—but the way she communicates with Melinda is unforgivably insensitive. She shows no empathy for or understanding of Melinda's condition, and appears concerned only with how Melinda is affecting her own image.



PART 3, CHAPTER 7: CONJUGATE THIS

Melinda facetiously conjugates the verb "to cut class" as she skips Spanish class.

Melinda responds to Heather's betrayal in the only way she knows how: by disengaging even further from the school community.



PART 3, CHAPTER 8: CUTTING OUT HEARTS

On Valentine's Day, Melinda sees various displays of affection, and remembers the different phases of Valentine's Day (from elementary school to middle school to high school). At school, she finds a valentine on her locker; at first she believes that it's a prank; then she worries that it's from Andy; last, she wonders if it's from David Petrakis. Unable to even open the envelope because she's so confused and nervous, she walks away from her locker.

It is understandable that Valentine's Day—a holiday all about connection and companionship—is deeply anxiety-inducing for Melinda. The valentine on her locker, rather than cheering her up, only makes her more upset. As usual, Melinda is unable to react to seemingly positive events, since she is convinced that good things don't happen to her.



As Ms. Keen teaches a class about the literal **birds** and bees, Melinda frantically wonders whether David has sent her the card. She chews her thumbnail so hard that she begins bleeding. As David passes her a tissue to blot the **blood**, Melinda notes that it doesn't even hurt. All that hurts is seeing other people flirting in the classroom, their "small smiles and blushes" flashing "like tiny sparrows."

Melinda writes a note that says "Thanks!" to David. "You are welcome," he writes back. It is unclear if these notes refer to the valentine or to the tissue. As class continues, David and Melinda begin to draw a picture of Ms. Keen as a **bird** (a robin) together. Melinda tries to make a **tree** for the bird, and is pleased with the results. When David's hand brushes hers at the end of class, however, Melinda rushes out of the room, terrified about the card.

At last mustering up her courage, Melinda opens the card, calling it "a white patch of hope"; it is from Heather to thank her for understanding their friendship breakup. She has included in the envelope the friendship necklace that Melinda decided to get for her for Christmas. Melinda begins to have a panic attack; she hears "a cracking inside me," rushing to her **closet**, biting her own wrist, hitting her head against the wall, and sobbing. She has no friends, "not even a silly, geeky boy who would like the inside girl I think I am."

The symbol of blood returns to the novel once more, as Melinda hurts herself in response to the mysterious valentine. Melinda knows, however, that the emotional pain of having no one to spend Valentine's Day with is far worse than the physical pain from her thumb.



Melinda makes a tiny effort to reach out to David, having convinced herself that he has written her the valentine. Rather than communicating verbally, however, the two connect over a drawing. The tiniest bit of physical contact, however, immediately makes Melinda terrified and skittish.



For Melinda, the valentine has come to symbolize a hope for connection. She is devastated, therefore, to find that it is just the opposite—a well-meaning but cruel note from Heather. Melinda also reveals that she has indeed bought a friendship necklace for Heather; a clear but now pathetic attempt to reach out to the other girl. Completely overcome by her emotions, Melinda physically hurts herself in order to deal with her emotional pain.



PART 3, CHAPTER 9: OUR LADY OF THE WAITING ROOM

Melinda cuts school once again, and after falling asleep on the bus, ends up at Lady of Mercy Hospital. She moves from room to room, marveling that the "hospital is the perfect place to be invisible." She watches as people grieve in the heart-attack floor waiting room, and rejoice in the maternity ward (although when too many people ask her questions there, she has to leave). She ends up in the hospital cafeteria eavesdropping on a group of doctors. Afterwards she moves to an adult surgery wing, and then steals a hospital gown; she imagines going to sleep in a hospital bed, and comments that "[i]t is getting harder to sleep at home."

After seeing a patient bleeding at the neck, Melinda returns the gown. There is nothing wrong with her, she thinks. "These are really sick people, sick that you can see." Having decided that she doesn't belong in the hospital, she leaves to take the bus home.

Melinda's trip to the hospital feels like a somewhat random occurrence, but in fact is a significant event within the novel. In the hospital, she sees a place of healing, calm, and understanding, unlike the fraught, hectic, and threatening world of high school. She feels safe there, ignored by all around her, and even wishes that she could be a patient.



While the patients at the hospital have visible wounds and treatable traumas, Melinda's damage is internal. She believes that this fact invalidates her own psychological scars, and leaves the hospital feeling ashamed. No one else in the novel has recognized Melinda's mental illness, and so Melinda herself also does not recognize it as legitimate, instead blaming herself for her behavior in a cycle of increasing despair.



PART 3, CHAPTER 10: CLASH OF THE TITANS

After having her absences reported, Melinda and her parents have a meeting with Principal Principal, as well as the guidance counselor. Her mother holds back curse words as her father checks his beeper. Melinda, meanwhile, drinks water; she imagines that her cup is made out of lead, and wishes that she could eat it, poisoning herself. As Melinda refuses to talk, her parents berate her, and Principal Principal attempts to find out what is wrong (although not before getting her name wrong). Her mother accuses her of acting mute to get attention, and Melinda scoffs at the idea that her mother would ever listen to or believe the truth.

Melinda's father recalls the "sweet, loving little girl" who Melinda was "last year," and threatens Principal Principal. As her mother snaps at him, the guidance counselor asks if the two have marital issues, and they both respond furiously.

Melinda imagines her parents and the guidance counselor performing a song-and-dance routine about her. She giggles, and her parents immediately snap at her. The guidance counselor mentions that Melinda is friends with the Marthas and Principal Principal (who has been doodling a hornet) reacts positively, asking Melinda if these girls are her friends. Melinda is in disbelief: "Do they choose to be so dense? Were they born that way? I have no friends. I have nothing. I say nothing. I am nothing," she thinks.

PART 3, CHAPTER 11: MISS

Melinda is forced to attend Merryweather In-School Suspension (MISS); her guidance counselor, has created a contract for Melinda to sign requiring her to behave well, and when she cuts class, MISS is her punishment. Mr. Neck is supervising Melinda along with two other students, one of whom is a skinhead, and the other of whom is a pyromaniac. The punishment becomes a nightmare, however, when Andy Evans (whom Melinda now calls Andy Beast) enters the room and sits down next to her. Melinda freezes, worried that if she moves, the world will "shatter." She imagines that she is a rabbit again, and contemplates that she is "getting seriously weird in the head."

When Mr. Neck is preoccupied, Andy blows in Melinda's ear, and she fantasizes about killing him.

The authority figures in Melinda's life continue to be completely oblivious to her trauma and her depression. Her parents act rudely towards each other and the guidance counselor; Principal Principal does not even know who she is; and the guidance counselor is simply incompetent. Melinda feels disdain for all of them, and is even more convinced that she can never tell them what is truly wrong with her.



Once again, the novel emphasizes how much Melinda has changed over the past year. Rather than attempting to find out what is truly wrong, however, Melinda's parents attempt to blame everyone but themselves.



As she usually does during stressful and upsetting situations, Melinda disengages completely, pretending that a musical is taking place in front of her. The adults, meanwhile, continue to miscommunicate, and to completely miss the clear signs of Melinda's isolation and depression. Melinda's wish to be invisible reaches its peak: she now believes that she is nothing.



Detention, already an unpleasant experience, becomes horrifying for Melinda when she finds that she is trapped with Andy Evans. Once more, her pattern continues: although she is completely melting down internally, she remains silent and still on the outside. Melinda compares herself to a rabbit because, like a rabbit she is powerless in the face of a terrible predator.

Andy takes the opportunity to once again violate Melinda's personal space; although violent within, she remains powerless and frozen.

PART 3, CHAPTER 12: PICASSO

Melinda feels useless in art class, and Mr. Freeman tells her that her “imagination is paralyzed.” He invites her to read about Picasso, whom he calls “A Great One.” She is pessimistic, but comments that looking at books will be more useful than watching the **snow** outside.

After beginning her assignment skeptically, Melinda is bewitched when she gets to Cubism, marveling at the way that Picasso slices up the world and rearranges it. She wonders what the world looked like to Picasso, and even wishes that he had gone to high school with her. She does not, however, find a picture of a **tree**.

Inspired, Melinda draws “a Cubist **tree**” which looks like “glass shards” and “**lips** with triangle brown leaves.” Mr. Freeman is pleased and impressed.

Mr. Freeman believes, correctly, that Melinda's frozen art work is indicative of how frozen she is internally. Yet even so, in art class, unlike her other classes, Melinda still feels compelled to engage, and chooses looking at the book instead of disengaging and staring at the snow.



For someone like Melinda, who feels that she is broken and fractured, the work of Picasso is inspirational. He painted the outside world in a fragmented and dissected way, mirroring how Melinda feels internally.



In creating a Cubist work, Melinda begins to express her emotions; she can create a drawing that looks as broken as she feels. The image she creates, which connects her lips (and therefore her silent voice) to shards of glass foreshadows the broken mirror that will help her find her voice at the end of the novel.



PART 3, CHAPTER 13: RIDING SHOTGUN

Melinda is playing the part of a “good girl,” going to class and even paying attention. She even admits that it “feels good” to understand her teachers. Her guidance counselor convinces her parents that she needs a reward, and so her mother takes her shopping.

Rather than go to the mall together (an activity that they both hate), Melinda’s mother decides that her daughter will take the bus to her store, Effert’s, to shop. As Melinda waits, a blizzard begins, pelting her with **snow and ice**. Mr. Freeman pulls up and offers her a ride, even mentioning that he’d love to meet her mother, but dropping the idea when he sees Melinda’s “eyes widen in fear.” As she begins to thaw and **melt**, he praises her Cubist sketch and the “growth” in her work. Melinda, however, believes that her “**trees** suck.” He responds that she is too hard on herself, and Melinda actually replies back, saying that she cannot put emotion into her art because she doesn’t know what to feel. He tells her that next time she draws a tree she should think about emotion rather than trees. He says that it is necessary for people to express themselves, or else end up dead inside. Throughout the ride, they pass roadkill several times.

Although Melinda believes that she is simply keeping up appearances by going to classes, a bit of her intelligence and drive peeks through; goofing off in class isn't something she does because she enjoys it, but rather because she feels the need to defend herself.



The conversation that Melinda has with Mr. Freeman is a pivotal moment within the novel. As she feels herself physically thawing, Melinda begins to thaw emotionally as well. Almost unintentionally, she is able to verbally express to Mr. Freeman her feeling of being lost, and her own emotional confusion. Mr. Freeman, meanwhile, continues to emphasize that she can express herself in non-verbal ways. He warns Melinda against becoming dead inside, and the multiple dead animals that they pass on the road only serve to emphasize the dangers of death and oblivion.



As they approach Effert's, Melinda chews a scab on her thumb. She thanks Mr. Freeman awkwardly, and he responds by telling her that she can talk to him whenever she needs. As she leaves, he tells her, "I think you have a lot to say. I'd like to hear it." She doesn't respond.

Of all the adults in Melinda's life, only Mr. Freeman maintains faith in her. He wants her to confide in him, but will not push her to do so. Even this gentle prodding, however, makes Melinda skittish and defensive again.



PART 3, CHAPTER 14: HALL OF MIRRORS

Melinda enters Effert's, only to find that her mother is on the phone. She grabs a pair of jeans and begins to lament the indignity of adolescence, and ridiculing her own "canoe feet" and "wet, obnoxious anklebones." Mocking the unfashionable Effert's, Melinda tries on two pairs of jeans that are too small before settling on a huge pair of jeans and a giant sweatshirt.

Melinda's mother, as usual, is uninterested in her daughter. Melinda, meanwhile, is miserable because of how much she's grown—yet another symbol of growing up. Her decision to wear giant clothes is a defense mechanism, meant to make herself even more invisible, and perhaps even more specifically to downplay and obscure her body from the rest of the world.



Examining herself in a three-way **mirror** at the store, Melinda adjusts it so that she can see "reflections of reflections, miles and miles of me." She is disgusted by her appearance, and manipulates the mirror so that she looks like "a Picasso sketch," her face and body broken into different "dissecting cubes."

Considering how much she loathes her appearance, this infinite series of reflections is a nightmare for Melinda. By making herself look like a Cubist work of art, though, she feels that she has made her reflection display her jagged, broken inner state.



Remembering a movie in which a badly burned woman had to be given new skin, Melinda puts her scabbed mouth close to the mirror, and "[a] thousand bleeding, crusted **lips** push back." She wonders what it would be like to have new skin, revealing that she feels as if hers has been "burned off," or torn off by the "thornbushes" that are her fighting parents, the horrible Rachel, her repressive school, and the faithless Heather. She tells herself that she just needs to wait for her "new skin to graft," but feels as if she is being eaten alive by her own emotions—her "thoughts, shames, mistakes." She resolves to stay away from her closet, make herself normal and to forget everything else.

Melinda feels so wounded and raw that it makes sense for her to identify with a burn victim. Although she tries her best to protect herself by remaining disconnected, every negative interaction with her parents and her peers cuts Melinda to the core. Her own emotions, too, seem to be against her, constantly attacking her and making her feel worthless and disappointing. Although she may attempt to repress these thoughts, she is ultimately unable to do so.



PART 3, CHAPTER 15: GERMINATION

Melinda studies for a biology test about **seeds**, and finds herself interest in the topic, noting the different ways that seeds grow (they even get eaten and expelled by **birds**), and the many perils that await seeds in the world. "It's amazing anything survives," she concludes, describing how tricky it is for a seed to germinate. Lastly, she describes in great detail how seeds grow and bloom. She feels optimistic that she is going to do well on the test.

Because Melinda already feels strongly emotionally attached to seeds, plants, and trees, it makes sense that she enjoys studying for a biology test on the subject, her connection with the topic breaking through her apathy. She identifies with the seeds, believing that she, like they, must try to survive in a perilous and unfriendly world.



PART 3, CHAPTER 16: BOLOGNA EXILE

Since she is friendless, Melinda has begun to bring brown bag lunches to school in order to avoid the cafeteria as much as possible. When she writes a note to her mother asking for supplies to make bologna sandwiches, she comes home to find a fridge full of her favorite junk foods. She considers talking to her mother and father (whom she calls Them), but worries that she will say the wrong thing.

Melinda tries to read as she eats alone, but can't concentrate because of the noise. She pretends to be a scientist experimenting on and observing all of her fellow students. She watches as the Marthas interview a new member, and wonders if they are laughing at her; imagines Heather fat and middle aged; and observes Rachel, who is wearing harem pants and a headscarf because she "is experimenting with Islam" sitting with an Egyptian exchange student named Hana. She also sees other students who are losers like her, but notes that she is the only person who is completely alone.

Since Heather's betrayal, Melinda has completely given in to the idea of being isolated. Rather than being a good sign, her desire to talk to her parents instead proves how alone she really is.



This passage represents both the best and the worst parts of Melinda's isolation. A perceptive and sensitive person, Melinda is able to astutely observe various high school dynamics and to comment on them in an intelligent and insightful manner. At the same time, however, being alone and isolated is deeply detrimental to her mental health, and only fuels her jealousy and self-hatred.



PART 3, CHAPTER 17: SNOW DAY—SCHOOL AS USUAL

Eight inches of **snow** have fallen in Syracuse, but Melinda does not have a snow day. Hairwoman reminisces about the energy crisis in the 70s, when school was closed for a whole week. Like many other teachers at Merryweather, she is sick with a midwinter cold that Melinda calls "teacherflu."

As the class discusses **snow's** symbolism in Hawthorne, Melinda mentally asserts that snow symbolizes "[c]old and silence." She contemplates the fury of a blizzard compared to the calm of snow on the ground, which "hushes as still as my heart."

The environment around Melinda is cold, dull, and depressing. Even her fellow teachers and students are feeling the pain of the Syracuse winter.



The discussion of snow is appropriate, considering both the snow outside and Melinda's internal frozen state. Her heart is "still" and silent because she continually represses her own memories and emotions.



PART 3, CHAPTER 18: STUPID STUPID

Melinda goes to her **closet** after school rather than ride home on the bus with her peers. She greets her **poster of Maya Angelou**, her Cubist **tree**, and her turkey-bone **bird** sculpture, and curls up for a nap. Sleeping at home has gotten even more difficult; in fact, she has begun to sleep walk to the kitchen door in an unconscious attempt to escape her house.

Melinda's insomnia is yet another symptom of her depression, and of how unsafe and uneasy she feels in her house. Her closet feels more home-y than her actual home, as it is filled with things that she cares about and that reflect her personality.



Waking up, Melinda realizes that she has slept until the final basketball game of the season. She intends to go straight home, but instead gets caught up in the excitement, standing at the door of the gym and watching as the team wins. The cheerleaders cry, the coaches hug, and even Melinda begins to clap. Still wanting to be a part of the community, Melinda dawdles at the door until she's spotted by David Petrakis, who invites her to accompany him and his friends to his house for pizza.

Melinda freezes at the idea of a party, and excuses herself immediately, mentally commenting that she doesn't "have a good track record with parties." Feeling torn as she walks home, Melinda wonders if she has multiple personalities. An argument rages in her head, with a voice she calls Melinda One asserting that she should have gone to the party after all. She reminds herself, however, with a voice she calls Melinda Two, that the world is unsafe, and that David could have been trying to lure her to his house. Hating the feeling of being split, Melinda wonders, "If I kick both of them out of my head, who would be left?"

PART 3, CHAPTER 19: A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

After the game, Melinda can't sleep, so she climbs out of her window onto the porch roof, comparing the stars to "fat white **seed**." She notes that the slush has turned to ice, but believes that spring is coming soon; underneath the soil, she says, seeds are getting "restless" and are "[s]tarting to dream green."

Looking up at the moon, Melinda recalls that it "looked closer back in August." She flashes back to Kyle Rodgers' end-of-the-summer party, a cool party for upperclassmen and cheerleaders into which Rachel had snuck Melinda and the rest of their friends by blackmailing her upperclassman older brother. She recalls the farm where the party took place, and how babyish she felt around the upperclassmen (unlike Rachel, who immediately fit in). Feeling insecure, Melinda drank three beers and wandered away from the crowd into the pine **trees**.

This moment embodies Melinda's conflicted attitude about her self-isolation. Although she feels that it is her only option, she is in fact deeply lonely and unhappy. Her longing for other people, and for a community, is so strong that she even gets uncharacteristically excited about a basketball game.



Although she is undoubtedly drawn to David Petrakis, Melinda's trauma is instantly triggered by the idea of a party. The argument she imagines in her mind, meanwhile, is a clear reflection of her internal turmoil. On one hand, she wishes to be as innocent and free as she used to be; on the other hand, she believes that the only way to protect herself is to be defensive and guarded from any and all possible threats.



The scene starts out hopefully: Melinda compares the stars to seeds, and senses that spring is coming. Both these observations are symbols of hope, and of rebirth.



But looking at the moon makes Melinda remember the sky at the fateful party in August. Just as the earth is thawing, so too is the giant wall that Melinda has put up between herself and her traumatic memories. She recalls how young and innocent she was at the party, but for once does not judge herself. The language she uses is vivid and immediate, making obvious how deeply the memory is imprinted in her brain.



Suddenly a senior (Andy Evans) walked out of the trees, called Melinda beautiful and asked her to dance. Drunk, dizzy, and excited, she danced with him, and was unable to tell him to stop when he began groping her; when he kissed her, she found it hard to breathe, and began to fantasize about dating him, imagining how wonderful it would be to start high school with an older boyfriend to guide and protect her. She remembers him asking, “Do you want to?” but recalls that she did not say anything in reply. Melinda’s memories become more fragmented; she remembers abruptly being on the ground with Andy on top of her. Clouds covered the moon. She tried to say no and made excuses to leave, and opened her mouth “to breathe, to scream,” but he ignored her and covered her mouth with his hand and his lips. Although her head was screaming no, Melinda couldn’t make a sound as Andy undressed and raped her. Instead, she tried to imagine being back and safe at Rachel’s house as Andy hurt her, zipped up his jeans, and smiled.

Her memories still blurry, Melinda recalls dialing the phone and calling 911. Seeing her **reflection** in the window, she was struck dumb—her face is streaked with tears, and her lips are bruised. As she tried to talk to the operator, someone grabbed the phone from her, and screamed that the police were coming. Melinda’s memories become even hazier—she sees Rachel’s angry face, feels a slap on her face, and remembers crawling through a **forest** of legs.

Melinda recalls silently walking home to her empty house. She reminds herself that it is winter and she is on her roof. Noticing that there is **blood** on the **snow**, she realizes that she’s bitten through her **lip** and will need stitches, causing her mother to be late for work. She reflects that she hates winter, and wonders why anyone chooses to live in Syracuse.

PART 3, CHAPTER 20: MY REPORT CARD

Melinda relates another report card—her grades are worse than ever, and she gives herself an F in the imaginary subject Social Life.

From her description, it is clear that the pre-party Melinda is very different from the character we know; she is optimistic, innocent, trusting, and excited by the world around her. The description also makes obvious, however, the traumatic event that left her depressed and traumatized. In contrast to the clear narrative she told before, here her recollections become fractured and broken, as is often the case with trauma victims. In this passage, we also learn the cause of Melinda’s muteness: her inability to say no or to call out for help as Andy Evans raped her. Although she was internally protesting, Melinda was unable to speak as she was violated, a fact that is emblematic of the silence and shame characteristic of many rape victims.



This memory also helps to explain Melinda’s hatred of mirrors: after her rape, she saw her reflection and couldn’t even recognize herself, an experience that signifies the negative personality changes she undergoes because of her trauma. Even when speaking to the 911 operator, she is unable to say what exactly has happened to her, a pattern that continues until the present day.



Melinda’s distrust of her parents is understandable; from her point of view, they weren’t there during her time of need. Her memory is so powerful that she unintentionally hurts herself, her physical pain mirroring the pain of recollecting her trauma.

Melinda’s academic decline continues, as she wryly notes her total isolation by giving herself an F in Social Life.



PART 4, CHAPTER 1: EXTERMINATORS

Upset by a cheer that goes, “The horny, horny hornets,” the PTA is trying to eradicate the hornet as the school mascot. The Honor Society, meanwhile, attempts to save the hornet, arguing that the students have suffered “psychological harm” because of the “year’s lack of identity.” Melinda reacts with apathy.

The subplot of the mascot continues, as the unruly students of Merryweather begin fighting to keep their hornet identity. Melinda, occupied with far more serious concerns, finds their passion ridiculous. The way in which the Honor society so freely throws around ideas of “psychological harm” suggests how mental illness is often treated as a joke, even as Melinda’s actual mental trauma goes unrecognized by all around her.



PART 4, CHAPTER 2: THE WET SEASON

Melinda reports that spring is close, and lists various signs. She notes that the seniors are about to find out their college acceptances and rejections, and that David Petrakis is writing a computer program to track the results, so that he can analyze the students who get into good schools—his goal is to get into Harvard.

The college process is far from Melinda’s mind, considering that she doesn’t even know if she’ll make it through ninth grade. David, in contrast, is already thinking about his future, his drive a reminder of how harmful her apathy really is to her future.



Comparing herself to a dog, Melinda comments that she has been going to classes and passing tests. Andy Evans (or Andy Beast as she calls him), meanwhile, has joined the International Club and has begun to hang out with Rachel and Greta-Ingrid.

Melinda may be acting like a good student and daughter, but she is as detached as ever. Andy’s presence in Rachel’s life, meanwhile, creates major conflict within Melinda.



Noting that Easter has come and gone, Melinda remembers how her mother used to make an Easter Egg hunt in the house for her, and how before her grandparents died, the family would go to church. This year, however, Melinda ate lamb chops with her parents and drew faces on hard-boiled eggs as her father complained about yard work. She vaguely wishes that they had gone to church, recalling the “pretty” Easter songs.

Another holiday brings about even more childhood nostalgia for Melinda. She compares her unhappy, disconnected family with the warm, loving environment she remembers in the past; yet another sign of how conflicted she feels about growing up.



PART 4, CHAPTER 3: SPRING BREAK

Spring Break has come and gone, and Melinda feels as if her house is shrinking. She goes to the mall and decides against spending the \$10 in her pocket on French fries. As she watches the mall goers, she comes across Ivy, who is sketching children’s faces as they get them painted like tigers and leopards. Ivy, however, is drawing them as clowns. Ivy once again praises Melinda’s bird sculpture; in response, Melinda bites her lip. They begin to discuss Melinda’s tree, and Ivy encourages her. Melinda draws a tree in Ivy’s sketchpad, and Ivy shows her how to sketch leaves; Ivy tells Melinda that she’s getting somewhere, and Melinda agrees.

Her chance meeting with Ivy brings about a rare positive interaction in Melinda’s life. Although Ivy compliments her, Melinda is unsure about how to respond to her—as always, she is so surprised by kindness that she does not know quite how to react to it. Their collaboration on Melinda’s tree, however, symbolizes the beginning of a connection between them (similarly to the drawing of the tree that she made with David). For once, she is optimistic about her artistic process.



PART 4, CHAPTER 4: GENETICS

Melinda zones out as Ms. Keene discusses the last unit of biology: genetics. She thinks about her parents' genes and families (her father's relatives bet on football and smoke cigars, while her mother's relatives mostly grow "rocks and poison ivy"), and remembers when she used to pretend that she was a princess, believing that her parents had abducted her from a faraway King and Queen. After she accidentally mistook a rental car her father was taking to the airport for a royal limousine come to take her away, she realized that she didn't actually want to go away from her own mother and father. She scans the window for limos, chariots, or carriages, commenting, "Now, when I really want to leave, no one will give me a ride."

Rather than pay attention, Melinda sketches "a willow **tree** drooping into **water**" to tape on the inside of her **closet**; she considers moving in there "full-time." She realizes that her leaves look good—"Ivy was right." David, meanwhile, is drawing a family tree; Melinda decides to draw a family stump. She comments that she got her "I don't want to know about it' gene" from her father and her "I'll think about it tomorrow' gene" from her mother. After Ms. Keene announces that they will have a quiz tomorrow, Melinda wishes that she'd paid attention, that she'd been adopted, and that David wouldn't be annoyed when she asked to copy his notes.

Melinda reports "10 More Lies They Tell You in High School," including "You will use algebra in your adult lives"; the last lie is, "We want to hear what you have to say."

As is often the case in Melinda's biology classes, she begins to daydream and to think back to her childhood. This time, she flashes back to a less-than-happy memory in which she became upset over the prospect of losing her mother and father. In the present day, however, this memory is ironic to Melinda because she would do anything to be taken away from her family and her life, and yet is trapped within it.



As her biology class discusses family and genetics, Melinda can only think about all the bad attributes that she has received from her parents, once more signaling her disdain for and disconnection from them. She wishes yet again to withdraw, and thinks wistfully of her closet, which is filled with things that she actually cares about.



As always, Melinda is a sharp and astute observer. Her cynicism, however, makes her distrust everything around her, while her belief that her voice is worthless keeps her silent and isolated.



PART 4, CHAPTER 5: MY LIFE AS A SPY

Melinda is horrified to discover that Rachel and Greta-Ingrid have gone to the movies with Andy, and now are adoringly following him around everywhere. She listens in disgust as Rachel babbles about her date, and begins to worry about Rachel in spite of herself, terrified that Andy will hurt her former friend in some way. Although she is still furious with Rachel, calling her "a witch and a traitor," she also acknowledges that Rachel doesn't know what happened.

Melinda follows Rachel and her friends to the foreign language wing, and watches as Andy flirts with Greta-Ingrid and Rachel. Rachel eventually ends up on Andy's lap, and when the two say goodbye, they kiss. Melinda calls his **lips** "poison." Despite her anger, Melinda is paralyzed with memories of her friend in third grade.

Melinda's deep anger with Rachel clashes with the love and protectiveness that she still feels for her former friend. Amazed by how deceiving appearances can be, she must remind herself that Rachel has no way of knowing Andy's true nature



Melinda continues to feel conflicted and horrified about Rachel's new relationship with Andy. Her childhood memories, usually nostalgic, now urge her to do something to protect her friend.



PART 4, CHAPTER 6: THIN ATMOSPHERE

Retreating to her **closet**, Melinda works through her options, wondering how to warn Rachel away from Andy, and discarding option after option, fearing that no one will believe her no matter what she says. She suddenly feels suffocated by her closet's bad smells (despite the potpourri that she's brought in), and imagines that the **poster of Maya Angelou** wants her to tell Rachel. Still suffocating, she takes off her sweatshirt and wishes for **cold**.

Melinda looks at the walls of the **closet**, which are filled with pictures of **trees**. She categorizes them into different periods, and notes that she is getting better at drawing them, but that their presence makes the closet feel smaller. She idly wonders whether a janitor would help her move her closet belongings to her **bedroom**, to make it feel "more like home." She imagines the **poster of Maya Angelou** telling her that she needs to help Rachel, even if her friend won't listen. Finally, she disguises her handwriting and writes a note to Rachel saying that Andy Evans "is not what he pretends to be," and that he "attacked a ninth-grader." She adds, "P.S. Tell Greta-Ingrid too," and signs the note, "A Friend."

PART 4, CHAPTER 7: GROWING PAINS

Melinda opens by calling Mr. Freeman "a jerk" because he is criticizing her **tree**. Although she's annoyed, she does agree with him. Despairing, she decides that real artists like Ivy belong in Mr. Freeman's art room, but she does not—nor does she belong with the Marthas or in her **bedroom**. People stare as Melinda throws out her linoleum block; Mr. Freeman gives her Kleenex and a pep talk as she lays her head on the table and cries. He encourages her to make an imperfect tree, one with character and flaws—"Be the tree," he says. Encouraged, Melinda agrees to try one more time (even as she mocks Mr. Freeman's advice) to "carve life into my flat linoleum square."

Melinda remembers that she played a **tree** in a second-grade play because she was bad at being a sheep. She recalls how stretching her arms made her sore, and wonders if "trees are ever told to 'be the screwed-up ninth-grader.'"

Melinda once again uses her closet as a safe space, desperately trying to calm her mind and to attempt to figure out what she should do. For the first time, however, she feels that the closet is too small, signaling how upset and troubled she is but also seems to symbolize how she feels the need not to hide but to communicate. Once again, the poster of Maya Angelou (who in her book [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#) discusses her rape as a child) acts as a call to action, telling Melinda that she can no longer be passive since her friend is in danger.



Looking at her various objects within her closet seems to calm Melinda, giving her the strength to attempt to communicate with Rachel. Still, she cannot bring herself to engage Rachel directly, choosing instead to distance herself from her rape by calling it an "attack" and by acting as if it happened to someone else. Of course, delivering the information in note form only increases her distance from it.



Although Melinda tries to appear emotionless and apathetic, this is one of the instances in which she breaks down in public; the stress of her isolation, Rachel's relationship with Andy, and her desire to finish her tree have overwhelmed her. Mr. Freeman, meanwhile, reveals an important message within the novel: imperfections actually add character and texture to an individual. Melinda does not grasp what Mr. Freeman means, but will grow to understand by the end of the book.



Melinda realizes that she has yet another childhood memory associated with trees, and feels sad about the lack of connection between the child she was then and the person she is now.



PART 4, CHAPTER 8: GAG ORDER

David Petrakis's lawyer has prevailed over Mr. Neck, which means that David has begun to take over social studies class with "drawn-out, rambling opinions." The rest of the class is happy that Mr. Neck is distracted from the rest of them. The teacher announces that all students who have failed his tests must write an extra-credit essay, and Melinda chooses to focus on the suffragettes, American women who fought for the right to vote. She becomes interested in the topic, excited by the idea of protesting for women's rights.

Melinda is proud of her report, calling it "the best report ever," and even hands it in on time. Mr. Neck, however, knowing that Melinda refuses to speak, tells her that she needs to deliver it orally to the class in order to get credit. Melinda is silent.

Melinda's suffragette report represents a rare instance in which she actually gets excited about school. The reason is obvious; a powerless, voiceless woman, Melinda identifies with women of the past who struggled to gain power and make their voices heard.



Melinda's excitement about her report is ruined when Mr. Neck decides to cruelly pick on her. Yet again, an authority figure within her life has disappointed and betrayed her.



PART 4, CHAPTER 9: NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

Melinda is enraged that Mr. Neck is forcing her to read her report just to bully her, and asks David Petrakis to help her come up with a plan. When she is supposed to speak her speech, she instead reveals a note she's written on the blackboard saying that just as the suffragettes fought for the right to speak, she is fighting for the right to "stay silent." David, meanwhile, hands out copies of Melinda's report to the whole class. A furious Mr. Neck gives Melinda a D, and she ends up back in MISS, sarcastically reflecting that she "forgot about how the suffragettes were hauled off to jail."

In MISS, still furious, Melinda wonders why adults presume to know what is going on inside of her. She describes her internal state as, "Flashes of lightning, children crying...squirming under the weight of doubt, guilt. Fear." She is grateful that at least Andy is not present this time.

Melinda's silent protest is one of the first moments in which Melinda actually dares to stand up for herself. Although she does not speak, she does fight back against the bullying, unfair Mr. Neck. This protest also solidifies her connection with David, who appears to be a true and genuine friend. Although she is punished for her bravery, Melinda continues to identify with the suffragettes.



More than ever, Melinda feels misunderstood and victimized by all the adults in her life. Her description of her internal state is a disturbing one, but an incredibly vivid portrait of a mind struggling with depression, trauma, and anxiety.



PART 4, CHAPTER 10: ADVICE FROM A SMART MOUTH

Melinda tells David Petrakis that Mr. Neck gave her a D on her report. He comments that her parents should also sue; she doesn't tell him that her parents don't even know about this latest disciplinary trouble yet. To Melinda's surprise, David agrees that he is furious at Mr. Neck, but argues that the teacher has a point—David says that the suffragettes fought to speak, but Melinda shouldn't be fighting to stay silent. He tells her that she can only make a difference if she speaks up, and that he's only lecturing her because he likes her.

Although David Petrakis is something of a know-it-all, he has a point: although Melinda has stood up against Mr. Neck, she still insists on remaining silent, essentially ensuring that her voice will never be heard. Of course, his mention of his incredibly supportive parents also reminds Melinda of her own parents' obliviousness and disconnectedness.



David awkwardly flirts with Melinda, saying that he might call her; Melinda appears receptive, telling him that she doesn't know whether or not she'll answer. When he leaves, however, she reflects that she'll explode if she touches her, and therefore can't date him.

David's flirtation provides Melinda a moment of hope for future human connection. She is so traumatized by her rape, however, that she is also completely unnerved by that possible connection.



PART 4, CHAPTER 11: THE BEAST PROWLs

Melinda stays after school to practice creating chalk drawings of her tree, while Mr. Freeman goes off to a faculty meeting. Melinda feels safe in the art room, until Andy suddenly enters and turns the lights off. Melinda feels like a rabbit once again, and imagines her heart running away from her and leaving **bloody** footprints on her drawing. She inhales his cologne as he turns on the lights, wondering if this is simply a "repeating nightmare" from which she will never wake up. He asks her if she's seen Rachel, but Melinda doesn't respond. He walks towards her and sits on her drawing, smudging it. He continues to ask why she won't speak, and Melinda clenches her jaw so hard that she feels like her teeth are "crumbl[ing] to dust." She wonders if he's going to hurt her again, and cannot understand why she's unable to "scream, say something" or "do anything."

With every interaction, Andy Evans seems to get bolder and more bullying, whereas Melinda grows more frightened and powerless. This violation is even worse than the others, because it occurs in Melinda's safe space, the art room. She once again imagines herself as a rabbit, demonstrating how vulnerable she feels, and physically hurts herself by clenching her jaw. Melinda understands that she should be able to at least verbally defend herself, but yet again finds herself completely unable to do so. It is as if she is replaying the night of her rape over and over, forever failing to call out for help.



Rachel comes in, saying that she's been waiting for Andy outside. She wears a necklace with **mirrors** on it. Andy gets up, ripping Melinda's paper in the process. Ivy, meanwhile, walks in and senses that something is wrong. Andy and Rachel leave, and Ivy comments that Andy's a "creep" and "trouble with a capital T."

Wherever he goes, Andy damages and destroys things that Melinda cares about (in this case, her drawings). While Rachel is oblivious to his true evil, Ivy's low opinion of him is proof that others in the school see past his charming, handsome mask.



Melinda doesn't respond; instead she walks straight home, hides in her own **bedroom** closet, buries her face into clothes from her childhood, and screams into the "old fabric" until "there are no sounds left."

Melinda's breakdown in her old clothes is highly significant; no matter how much she tries to revert back to her innocent childhood, her trauma will always follow her.



PART 4, CHAPTER 12: HOME SICK

Melinda decides to pretend to be sick, only to find that she actually does have a fever. She tells her mom that she doesn't feel well. Her mother responds that if she's talking, she really must be sick.

Even when she doesn't intend to be mean, Melinda's mother is still brusque and insulting.



PART 4, CHAPTER 13: OPRAH, SALLY JESSY, JERRY, AND ME

Feverish and partially delirious, Melinda imagines her life as a talk show, and wonders if she was in fact raped. She decides that Oprah would say that she was, because she was only 13, and because Andy put his hand over her mouth; it doesn't matter that she was drunk. She imagines Oprah's co-hosts, Sally Jessy and Jerry, sympathizing with her, offering her tissues, and begging her to tell someone.

Much like the poster of Maya Angelou, the imaginary Oprah cast allows Melinda to voice positive things that she herself can't say. Significantly, the Oprah passages are the first time that Melinda uses the word "rape," signaling that she has begun to accept and understand what happened to her, and to see it as something that someone did to her rather than something that she caused to happen to herself.



Feeling even sicker, Melinda wishes for a coma or amnesia to get rid of her trauma. "Did he rape my head too?" she wonders. In order to escape, she watches *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and falls asleep.

Unable to stop thinking about her trauma, Melinda feels that Andy has violated both her body and her mind. She reverts to childhood once more, symbolized by Mr. Rogers.



PART 4, CHAPTER 14: REAL SPRING

Melinda reports that it is May at last, and that it's finally stopped raining—the **sun** is out, and the weather **warm**. On a Saturday, with her mom at work and her dad asleep, Melinda decides to garden, raking aside layers and layers of moldy, decomposing leaves from the bushes in her front yard. She notices that her house is the only one on the street without a perfect lawn. After an hour, she succeeds in removing all of the leaves, noting that Ms. Keene would be proud of her. She imagines seeing **plants** growing with their new access to the sun.

As the weather begins to thaw, so does Melinda. Her decision to do actual work symbolizes one of the first times that she has actually taken initiative within the novel. Although she can't fix her family, she can at least fix their lawn. Of course, this passage is also significant because of Melinda's close emotional connection to plants. As she herself begins to grow again, she imagines the plants growing as well.



Melinda's father comes out and is impressed by her work. He tries to encourage her, but she doesn't answer. They both look at the **plants** in the yard, and as a cloud covers the **sun**, Melinda shivers. He points out that the tree in their **yard** is sick, and will need to be taken care of. Melinda wishes that she'd stayed in the house, "stayed in my room. Stayed in my head."

For a moment, it appears that Melinda and her father will actually have a positive interaction, but Melinda feels unable to do so. The change in the weather mirrors the change in her mood, once again emphasizing Melinda's close connection to nature.



Her father offers to take her to the hardware store, but Melinda refuses—too many people for her taste. As he leaves, she imagines "rak[ing] the leaves out of my throat," and asks him if he will buy some flower **seeds**.

Although Melinda cannot imagine actually going to a hardware store, she does manage to ask her father for something—a huge step, considering their usual lack of communication.



PART 4, CHAPTER 15: FAULT!

Melinda's gym class has moved on to a tennis unit, and Ms. Connors pairs Melinda against Nicole to do a demonstration for the class because she used to take lessons at her parents' fitness club. The match gets more and more serious, with the two girls trying harder and harder to win. Melinda plays aggressively, calling herself "tough enough to play and strong enough to win." Although Nicole beats her by a few points, Melinda is still proud of her achievement.

Just as Melinda showed a talent for basketball, here she proves that she has a knack for tennis as well. For once, Melinda puts an effort in and feels good about herself. This episode shows a glimmer of how motivated Melinda used to be, and even provides hope that she may regain her old sense of drive once more.



PART 4, CHAPTER 16: YEARBOOKS

Yearbooks have come out, Melinda reports, signifying the end of the year. She watches students, especially cheerleaders, as they compete to get the most signatures. She notes with disgust that the yearbook photographer, Todd Ryder, only takes good pictures of people who suck up to him. Melinda has only one picture in the yearbook—it is taken from behind, and she's wearing a giant winter coat. She decides not to buy a yearbook.

Melinda once again feels disgusted by and detached from normal high school rituals, such as yearbooks. She finds the hypocrisy of Todd Ryder appalling, and decides to disengage from the tradition entirely.



PART 4, CHAPTER 17: HAIRWOMAN NO MORE

Hairwoman has gotten a buzz cut, and Melinda wonders what has caused the transformation. She discusses the final essay—a choice between "Symbolism in Comics" and "How Story Changed My Life"—and mentally asks whether Hairwoman has published a novel or "found a good shrink." She wonders if Hairwoman will be teaching at summer school.

Melinda displays her sense of humor and perceptiveness as she notes the new and improved attitude of Hairwoman. The interesting essay topics, meanwhile, imply that Hairwoman has again found an effective way to communicate with her students.



PART 4, CHAPTER 18: LITTLE WRITING ON THE WALL

While Ivy and Melinda are working in the art room, Ivy accidentally gets magic marker on Melinda's shirt. Melinda comments that anyone else probably would have done this on purpose, but that she and Ivy have "sort of been friendly" recently.

Both David and Ivy give Melinda the sense that she may one day have friends again; even the usually pessimistic Melinda cannot help but be hopeful about her connection with Ivy.



The two girls try to wash the shirt in the bathroom. As Melinda waits in a stall wearing her bra while Ivy scrubs the shirt, she reads the graffiti on the walls. Despite feeling exposed and cold, Melinda musters her courage and asks Ivy what she meant about Andy Evans being trouble. Ivy responds that she's heard rumors about his sexual aggression. Melinda borrows a marker from Ivy and begins a list: Guys to Stay Away From; under the heading, she writes Andy's name. Ivy is pleased.

Physically exposed (she is wearing only her bra), Melinda somehow finds the courage to emotionally expose herself to Ivy as well by asking about Andy. Her bravery then continues, as she writes Andy's name on the bathroom wall. Although this is a small step, Melinda is finding the ability to indirectly talk about her trauma, if not to speak at least to communicate anonymously.



PART 4, CHAPTER 19: PROM PREPARATION

Melinda comments sarcastically about the ridiculous behavior surrounding Senior Prom, and reacts in disbelief when she hears the Rachel's mom is letting her go to the prom with Andy. She decides that Rachel must have ignored her note, and wonders whether she showed it to Andy. Continuing to worry about Rachel, she decides that she needs to stop thinking about the topic.

In another turn of events, Heather has showed up at Melinda's house, to Melinda's mother's delight. Feeling self-conscious about her babyish **bedroom**, Melinda listens as Heather cries about how awful it is to be working as a slave for the Marthas. Melinda contemplates making her leave because it will "hurt too much when my room is empty again." Heather goes on to tell Melinda that she was smart to leave the Marthas when she did, ignoring the fact that she in fact ditched Melinda for the Marthas.

Heather finally gets to the point: she wants Melinda to help her decorate the Holiday Inn ballroom, where prom is going to be held, in a single afternoon. When Melinda doesn't respond, Heather assumes that she has said yes; she responds gleefully, and even offers to help Melinda redo her **bedroom**. Melinda responds that she doesn't want Heather to redecorate her room, and that she will not help her with prom. She doesn't say what she's thinking—that Heather betrayed her and deserves to fail—but adds that she needs to **plant** over the weekend, and doesn't need help redecorating. Melinda asks Heather to leave, and Heather storms out, not even saying goodbye to Melinda's mother.

PART 4, CHAPTER 20: COMMUNICATION 101

Feeling empowered by standing up to Heather, **planting** marigolds, and asking her mother if she can redecorate her **bedroom**, Melinda attributes her newfound confidence to the spring weather. She decides to talk to Rachel.

Finding Rachel in study hall, Melinda engages her in conversation; when Rachel reports that she'll be going to France that summer, Melinda recalls that her former best friend has wanted to travel since they were little, and reminds her of when they pretended to be characters in the children's book *Heidi* together. The two share a nervous laugh.

Melinda tries to be detached and cynical about prom, but ultimately fails because of her worry about Rachel. Insecure and self-loathing as always, she becomes convinced that Rachel must have found her warning note ridiculous and attempts to remain passive and disconnected.



Melinda is conflicted about the visit from Heather; although she is still furious over Heather's betrayal, having someone—anyone—in her room reminds her of what it was like to have friends. Heather, as usual, shows a complete lack of self-awareness, demonstrating how cruel and immature high schoolers can be.



Ever clueless and insensitive, Heather believes that Melinda will help her with prom decorations as she has so many times before. She tries to be nice, but only insults Melinda's bedroom in the process. Melinda, however, just as she stood up to Mr. Neck and wrote Andy's name on the bathroom wall, now finds the courage to say no to Heather. Even though this choice means that she will still be isolated and alone, she refuses to help her unfaithful former friend.



Melinda's planting is particularly significant here; as her plants grow, Melinda grows as well. Her request to redecorate her room, too, shows that she is beginning to grow up, and to communicate.



Although the conversation between Rachel and Melinda is strained, it also reveals just how much history the two girls share with each other. They haven't spoken in months, yet are still bound together by memories.



Seeing the initials R.B. + A.E. (Rachel Bruin + Andy Evans) on Rachel's notes, Melinda asks Rachel about the senior; Rachel responds happily, until Melinda asks what the two will do when Andy goes to college, and notes that they've been going out a very short period of time. Rachel sharply asks her what she wants.

After being scolded by the librarian for talking, the two girls begin to pass notes, with Rachel "melt[ing]" and asking if Melinda likes anyone. The conversation moves on to Kyle Rodger's party; Rachel says that she's not angry at Melinda anymore, but adds that she shouldn't have called the police. Melinda considers not telling Rachel anything, but then sees that her former friend has also written Andy's initials on her own forearm.

Melinda writes a note explaining that she was raped at the party "under the **trees**", adding that she "was stupid and drunk," and then "was just too scared" to speak to the police, even though she'd called them. Rachel asks why Melinda didn't tell her, and Melinda reveals that nobody knows. Rachel, upset and concerned, frantically asks Melinda (via note) if she is ok; "kinda," Melinda responds. Finally, Rachel asks about the identity of the rapist; when Melinda replies that it was Andy Evans, Rachel responds with fury, yelling at Melinda that she's a jealous, sick freak. Rachel storms out to go throw up in the nurse's office.

PART 4, CHAPTER 21: CHAT ROOM

A discouraged Melinda waits in the high school lobby, too upset by her conversation to go home. Suddenly Ivy shows up, and asks if she can show Melinda something. Together they walk to the bathroom together, and Melinda sees that many other girls have added to her writing on the wall about Andy, calling him a "creep" and a "bastard," and saying that he should be arrested for his sexual aggression and his lack of respect for women. Melinda feels as if she could fly like a **bird**.

PART 4, CHAPTER 22: PRUNING

On a **warm** and **sunny** Saturday morning, Melinda watches as arborists come to cure the sick **tree** outside her house by trimming off its dead branches. The scene becomes horrific, however, as Melinda imagines that the tree's sap is like blood, and that the chainsaw being used to cut the branches is killing it.

Melinda finds the courage to ask Rachel about Andy, yet still cannot bring herself to tell Rachel the truth. It is clear that Rachel is completely fooled by Andy's charisma and good looks, and has no idea of what he is actually like.



As the girls move from one form of communication (speaking) to another (writing notes), Rachel begins to open up to Melinda. Although this makes Melinda miss their old friendship terribly, she knows that she can't let Rachel continue her relationship with Andy without warning her. It is interesting that Rachel writes Andy's initials on her forearm, a spot close to where Melinda has been cutting herself (which one might describe as a more extreme and negative form of marking herself in a way that references Andy).



This is the first time that Melinda tells someone that she was raped. Although Rachel at first responds in an ideal fashion, full of concern for Melinda's welfare, she turns vicious and cruel when Melinda reveals that Andy was her rapist. Considering how difficult it was for Melinda to tell Rachel the truth, this is an incredibly discouraging way for the conversation to end. Unfortunately, many rape victims are met with skepticism and disbelief.



At one of Melinda's lowest points, Ivy provides her with hope. Seeing other girls' hatred of Andy Evans makes Melinda realize that she's not alone. Andy didn't target her because she was stupid, or because she deserved to be targeted. Rather, he is a predator who has hurt many women before her. This realization gives Melinda a feeling of freedom—marked by her thoughts of being like a bird—as she escapes from a large amount of her self-hatred.



Melinda identifies with the tree, just as she did with the dissected frog. Although she intellectually knows that the arborists are saving the tree, she cannot help but feel violated by their actions.



Disgusted by her father, who is pretending to know more about the tree-pruning process than he does, Melinda takes her bike out and rides away, although she doesn't remember the last time she was on a bike.

As usual, Melinda finds her father ridiculous and hypocritical. Her decision to ride her bike again shows her newfound energy and initiative.



Melinda bikes to the barn where the party took place, and walks to the **tree**-filled spot where she was raped. Her heart pounds as she stands on the spot, crouching by a **tree's** trunk and feeling its bark. She feels as if she has been "under**snow**" for a long time, and wonders how she can ever be revived. Reminding herself that she has "survived," she wonders whether she can cut out the sick part of her soul with a chainsaw. Putting her fingers into the dirt, she imagines a "small, clean part of me" that is waiting "to **warm** and burst through the surface." She imagines that her old self is like a seed that she must cultivate.

Melinda's decision to revisit the place where she was raped represents a huge step forward for her. Months ago, she couldn't even admit to herself what happened; now she is standing on the spot where her trauma took place. As Melinda communes with the plants and the ground, she imagines herself as a seed peeking through the snow. Although a terrible event took place on this spot, Melinda is able to reclaim it using images of healing, fertility, and rebirth.



PART 4, CHAPTER 23: PROWLING

Starving from the exercise of riding her bike when she gets home, Melinda eats a large lunch and then gets to work gardening for the entire afternoon. Her mother and father are impressed, and because of the **warm** night, the family eats together on the patio without a single fight.

Melinda's moment of healing seems to affect her whole family. For once, her parents do not bicker with each other, giving Melinda (and the reader) hope that her family may connect after all.



After napping, Melinda takes the bike out at night, riding by Heather, Nicole, and Rachel's houses. It is prom night, and she imagines Rachel's parents waiting up for their daughter. Feeling like a **bird**, Melinda contemplates never sleeping again.

Reveling in her new feeling of freedom, Melinda still remains an outsider. She observes her former friends' lives, but makes no effort to be a part of them.



PART 4, CHAPTER 24: POSTPROM

On Monday morning, Melinda hears all about prom drama. In addition to various scandalous pieces of gossip, she learns that Heather is not in school that day because everyone hated her decorations so much. Melinda imagines that the Marthas are furious. Rachel, meanwhile, broke up with Andy in the middle of prom because he was groping her during a slow song. Afterwards she danced with another boy for the rest of the night and burned all of Andy's gifts, leaving the ashes by his locker. He, meanwhile, got too drunk at a party and "passed out in a bowl of bean dip."

Although Rachel may have rejected Melinda's confession, it is clear that doubts about Andy lingered in her mind on prom night. Melinda's attempt to communicate was, in fact, more effective than she thought. Melinda even enjoys her role as an outside observer, taking pleasure in hearing about drama without participating in it. The outcome of prom for Andy seems like a comedic comeuppance for him, but this sense of Andy's arc in the story possibly coming to an end with his embarrassment at prom only makes what comes in the next chapter more intense.



Melinda comments that gossip is the only point of going to class. She imagines high school as “one long hazing activity” during which students prove that they are tough enough to be adults.

Although she is doing better, Melinda remains cynical about high school. Her attitude towards adulthood, however, has become far more positive.



PART 4, CHAPTER 25: PREY

On a **warm** day in algebra class, Melinda realizes with a start that she doesn't want to hide in her **closet** anymore. After class she watches as Rachel ignores Andy, and as Greta-Ingrid insults him.

As Melinda continues to heal, her need to return to an isolated, safe space begins to fade. She can once again engage with and exist in the outside world.



After school, Melinda goes to her **closet** to collect her belongings, including **the poster of Maya Angelou** and the **bird** sculpture. She opens the door to let in fresh air, and tries to get her tree pictures off of the wall. The school is relatively deserted. As Melinda turns off the light and goes to leave, Andy Evans appears. He pushes her back into the closet, turns on the light, and shuts the door.

Of all Andy Evans' violations of Melinda since her rape, this is by far the most dramatic and terrifying. Her closet is a safe, private space where she is hidden from everyone. His entrance makes that illusion of safety completely meaningless, once again robs Melinda of any power or agency, and puts Melinda in extreme physical danger.



Andy accuses a horrified Melinda of lying to Rachel about having been raped. He tells her that she “wanted it,” and that she's been “spreading lies” because she's jealous and ugly.

Sexist, cruel, and manipulative, Andy plays on Melinda's worst fears and insecurities in order to destroy her emotionally. He does so instinctively, like the predator that he is.



Feeling assaulted by even his words, Melinda tries to leave, but he locks the **closet** door. Calling her a “strange bitch” and a “freak,” Andy grabs her wrists. Although Melinda imagines the **poster of Maya Angelou** telling her to scream, Andy commands her not to, telling her that she “didn't scream before,” that she's jealous, and that he knows what she wants. He then begins to try to rape Melinda a second time. Traumatized and terrified, Melinda narrates a series of vivid and fragmented physical sensations, such as feeling his wet **mouth** on her face, his body against hers, and his teeth on her neck.

As Andy attempts to rape Melinda a second time, her mind disintegrates into images and impressions, just as it did the first time that he raped her. It is clear from Andy's words, meanwhile, that he wishes to hurt Melinda at any cost. He mocks her silence, and implies that she enjoyed her rape. Meanwhile, even in the midst of this violent event, the poster of Maya Angelou still acts as a positive influence, urging Melinda to use her voice.



As Andy lets go of Melinda's wrists to give himself a free hand (presumably to unzip his fly), Melinda at last unfreezes. She screams "NNNOOO!!!" and pushes Andy off of her, into the sink. He reacts violently, punching her in the face. She continues to scream and to fight him off, desperately trying to get to the door and throwing her potpourri and her books at him. As he pins her by the throat against the **closet's** sink, Melinda imagines that her fists are like useless "rabbit paws." Feeling his body crushing her, and groping desperately "for a branch, a limb, something to hang on to," Melinda finds a block of wood—the base of her **bird sculpture**. She uses it to break the **mirror** behind the **poster of Maya Angelou**. Grabbing a shard of glass, she holds it to his neck, pushing until she draws a drop of **blood**.

Wishing that she could "hear him scream," Melinda realizes that Andy's "**lips** are paralyzed. He cannot speak." She tells him that she said no, and he nods. Suddenly there's a pounding on the door; Melinda opens it to reveal the entire girls' lacrosse team, led by Nicole. One of them runs to get help.

After having replayed her trauma for months on end, Melinda is actually physically reliving it. This means, however, that she can at last change the narrative, and she does so, finding her voice and screaming for Andy to stop. Her use of the bird sculpture to slice through the Maya Angelou poster and shatter the mirror, meanwhile, is a highly symbolic action. The base of the turkey sculpture becomes like the branch of a tree, something to hold onto and help her, while the mirror—which she hated because it showed her broken self back to her—in actually breaking becomes a weapon that she uses to defend herself, to reclaim her own agency. Andy's blood, meanwhile, symbolizes that he, at last, is vulnerable and weak.



Melinda and Andy have now switched places; at her mercy, Andy finds it impossible to speak. The arrival of the girls lacrosse team, meanwhile, ensures that everyone will know about Andy's true violent, misogynistic nature, and also suggests a kind of connection between women, a strong support group that supports Melinda.



PART 4, CHAPTER 26: FINAL CUT

Mr. Freeman won't hand in his grades, Melinda reports. She takes advantage of the delay to work on her **tree** one more time; as she does so, Mr. Freeman uses white paint to cover his grade wall with a mural: a sunrise. Melinda turns up the radio so that she doesn't have to hear her peers saying goodbye to each other.

"My **tree** is definitely breathing," Melinda reports. She tries to create an imperfect tree with initials in its bark, and a sick lower branch. Her favorite part to carve, though, is the new growth at the top. As students leave, Melinda comments that she's in no rush because she's going to be attending summer school.

Even though her circumstances have changed, Melinda still removes herself from her peers. This is a conscious choice, however, rather than a kind of punishment. Mr. Freeman's mural, meanwhile, symbolizes the idea of a new beginning.



After months of thinking her tree was "frozen," Melinda at last feels that it is alive, just as she herself now feels unfrozen and alive. She has embraced Mr. Freeman's idea of imperfection, and creates a tree that is damaged, but still strong and growing—a clear metaphor for her own development as a person.



Seniors walk in to say goodbye to Mr. Freeman, and Melinda calls them “girls” only to correct herself to “women.” One of the seniors is Amber Cheerleader, and Melinda realizes that she may have misjudged her. As the seniors notice Melinda, one of them says that she hopes Melinda is okay. The lacrosse team has told the school about Andy’s rape attempt, and Melinda wryly notes that suddenly, at the end of the school year, she’s popular. Her hand, cut by the glass from the **mirror**, was stitched up at the hospital, and Rachel is trying to reach out to her. It is unclear whether Melinda has responded.

Melinda’s sudden popularity proves how fickle high schoolers are. While just days ago they isolated her, they now embrace her, since the truth about Andy has been made public and her behavior is suddenly explainable—though there may also be a suggestion that her popularity stems from her schoolmate’s guilt at their treatment of her. Melinda’s distance from the school allows her to see all this clearly, but also calmly. She remains somewhat distant, but this distance seems different, one of thinking out her next move rather than a traumatized reaction she can’t escape.



Melinda decides that her **tree** is missing something, and uses chalk and **water** to draw **birds** above it (although the bandage on her hand makes this difficult). As she does so, she acknowledges that she cannot escape what happened to her: “IT happened.” Andy Evans raped her when she was drunk, young, and vulnerable, but it was not her fault, and she can continue to grow despite the experience.

Birds, symbols of freedom and innocence throughout the book, now complete Melinda’s drawing. As she finishes her work, she is at last able to verbalize her trauma, and in doing so, she begins to move past it. It is obvious that her development as an artist is closely linked to her development as a person.



Although there is “a **river**” in Melinda’s eyes, she can see that her tree is perfect in its imperfection. Mr. Freeman comes to look at the tree, and Melinda studies the bruises on her own arm from Andy’s attack. Mr. Freeman commands her not to cry in the studio because the salt from her tears will ruin his art supplies; he tells her that he’s giving her an A+, and asks, “You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you?”

Although Melinda spent most of the book frozen, she now experiences a “river” in the form of her tears. She has truly put her emotion into her work, and is now experiencing a feeling of relief and release as a result. Although she is still damaged (both internally and externally), she at last has faith that she will heal.



Melinda imagines the tears “dissolv[ing] the last block of **ice** in my throat,” and feels herself **melting**. She imagines the ice melting into a puddle of sunlight. “Let me tell you about it,” she responds.

In a moment that unites many of the novel’s core symbols and themes, Melinda at last begins to tell the most trustworthy person in her life the story of what happened to her. She is once again able to speak.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Hoyt-Disick, Gabrielle. "Speak." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 4 Sep 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hoyt-Disick, Gabrielle. "Speak." LitCharts LLC, September 4, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/speak>.

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

MLA

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. Farrar Strauss Giroux. 2011.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux. 2011.