

Tell Me Three Things



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JULIE BUXBAUM

Julie Buxbaum received her undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and then went on to earn a law degree at Harvard Law School. Though she worked in the legal field for a while, she quit so she could write her first novel, *The Opposite of Love*, in 2009. Though her first two novels were intended for adults, Buxbaum realized that she enjoyed writing for teens much more after she published her first young adult novel, *Tell Me Three Things*, in 2016. *Tell Me Three Things* was inspired by several events in Buxbaum's life. Like the protagonist, Jessie, Buxbaum lost her mother when she was 14 years old. She was inspired to write the novel after the birth of her second child, as she contemplated the fact that her mother was never going to see who she became as an adult. At one point in her life, Buxbaum also received an anonymous encouraging email, just as Jessie does. Buxbaum currently lives in London with her husband and children, and she continues to write young adult novels.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tell Me Three Things centers around Dad's remarriage after Jessie's mom dies of cancer. In the past several decades, it's become slightly less common for people to remarry after losing a spouse (though the likelihood that someone will remarry goes up with age). It is, however, more common for men to remarry than it is for women, and men tend to do so more quickly. It's also fairly common for men to run into opposition from friends and family members who believe that they're moving on and remarrying too quickly, which Dad and Jessie struggle with in their relationship. Jessie also voices a number of other fears and observations that allude to statistics surrounding remarriage and blending families, such as the fear that a person remarried for money, and that in the aftermath of losing a spouse, men are more likely to struggle to get through day-to-day routines, especially concerning housework, alone. In terms of Jessie's experience, her life is ruled by standardized testing and anxiety surrounding college admissions, which reflects the realities of growing up in mid 2010s America. She and her classmates worry specifically about the PSAT test, which high school students take as both a practice for the SAT and to try and qualify for the National Merit Scholar program and accompanying college scholarships.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jessie and Ethan in particular are well-read teens; they read

and love classic novels like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, unspecified works by Jean-Paul Sartre (who's most famous for his philosophical essays like *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*), and they speak specifically about Jessie's mom's love of Gertrude Stein, specifically the book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and the poem "Sacred Emily." They also read T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* for their English class. Some writers and critics suggest that it's possible to trace the prevalence of well-read teenage protagonists of young adult novels to John Green's novels, such as *Turtles All the Way Down* and *Paper Towns*. *Tell Me Three Things* also shares broad similarities with other young adult novels that tackle blended families, such as Susin Nielsen's *We are All Made of Molecules*, as well as with those featuring young protagonists dealing with the loss of a parent. Deceased or otherwise absent parent figures are a common occurrence in young adult literature in particular and show up in a variety of subgenres, from more realistic fiction like in Nicola Yoon's *Everything Everything* to fantasy novels like the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Tell Me Three Things
- **When Written:** 2015
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** Los Angeles, California and Chicago, Illinois
- **Climax:** Jessie learns that Ethan is SN.
- **Antagonist:** Gem and Crystal; it's also possible to read Dad as an antagonist.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

New Year's Resolutions. Buxbaum only quit her legal job and wrote her first novel because she made a New Year's resolution to do so. This is the only resolution she's ever kept.

The Kids Are All Right. Buxbaum says she loves writing for teens because they're very enthusiastic and responsive fans and readers.



PLOT SUMMARY

It's been 733 days since 16-year-old Jessie's mom died, and

about a month since Dad moved Jessie from Chicago to California to live with his new wife, Rachel. A week after starting at her new school, Jessie receives an email from an anonymous boy calling himself Somebody Nobody, or SN, offering to help her navigate Wood Valley. Jessie refuses. She wonders who he is and thinks through her first day. She must've appeared desperate; she embarrassed herself by admitting that she had spent her summer working. Then, a blond girl named Gem was the first person to speak to Jessie. She asked, "what are you looking at?"

A week later, in English class, a boy named Ethan asks Jessie to be his partner for their project on *The Waste Land*—but then informs her that he's going to do the project alone and put her name on it. Dejected, Jessie texts her best friend from Chicago, Scarlett. Scarlett encourages Jessie to reach out to SN. SN is happy to help and tells Jessie to befriend Dri Sanchez. He also confirms that everyone is rich. Angry, Jessie decides that she can't let Ethan do their *Waste Land* project alone.

When Rachel announces a family dinner, Jessie thinks back to her arrival in California. She thought Rachel's house was beautiful, but it's huge and pristinely white—and Mom isn't there. Jessie is also sleeping in a guest room, which makes her feel like an interloper. At dinner, Dad announces that he got a job at a local pharmacy counter. Rachel's son, Theo, is enraged, because he considers this job embarrassing. Later, Theo joins Jessie on the deck, rolls a joint, and says he smokes because his dad ran 12 miles a day and still died of lung cancer. He also shares that a kid died of a heroin overdose last year. That night, Jessie slips downstairs for tea, but she catches Dad and Rachel looking at a photo album on the couch. It makes Jessie feel like everything is broken.

At school, Jessie steels herself against Gem's bullying, reaches out to Dri, and approaches Ethan about their English project. He agrees to work together. That night, Jessie and SN message back and forth. He's at a party but insists it feels unimportant, unlike talking to Jessie. Things begin to look up when Jessie lands a job at Book Out Below!—a small bookstore owned by the mother of a Wood Valley senior, Liam. Jessie gets the job because Liam hits Jessie in the head with his guitar on accident and feels bad. Meanwhile, Jessie texts Scarlett and learns that Adam Kravitz asked Scarlett to homecoming. He's the first person Jessie kissed, but she gives Scarlett her blessing. Jessie sits with Dri and her friend Agnes at lunch the next day. After Liam comes up to schedule work with Jessie, Dri shares that she's madly in love with him. She makes Jessie promise to text her if Liam says anything cute. During Jessie's training session, Liam mentions his band. Dri texts Jessie that Liam is part of Oville, a local band with some drama. When Liam invites Jessie to a party at Gem's house, where the band is playing, Dri insists they have to go.

When Jessie meets Ethan to work on *The Waste Land*, she can't ignore that she has a huge crush on him. They discuss *The*

Waste Land as they walk; Ethan puts on his **sunglasses** and looks even more unreachable. He shares that he has most of the poem memorized, since he reads poetry when he can't sleep. Later, as Jessie and SN text, they start a game in which they each share three things. SN's third thing is that he likes Jessie. Jessie feels the same way, but she also feels weird—SN could be anyone. To earn Jessie's trust, SN shares that his sister died a year ago. He admits that he counts the days, hours, and minutes since she died. At about the same time, Liam texts Jessie asking about work, Ethan texts Jessie about *The Waste Land*, and Scarlett texts Jessie a picture of her homecoming dress.

On Friday night, Jessie hangs out with Dri and Agnes. They discuss Agnes's first time having sex. She had sex at theater camp just to get it over with, but her partner remembered halfway through that his religion forbade premarital sex. Agnes asks if the experience counts, and Jessie insists it does. Jessie confides in them about SN. When Jessie gets home, she joins Theo outside their parents' bedroom and listens to them fight. When Rachel screams for Dad to leave and not come back, Jessie and Theo run away. They wonder if their parents will divorce, but Jessie finds that she doesn't want that—she'd have to start all over again. Jessie is terrified that she and Dad will have to leave. While Jessie's at work the next afternoon, Scarlett texts asking if she should have sex with Adam after homecoming. Jessie is shocked. Back at Rachel's house, Jessie joins Dad on the deck but doesn't ask about the fight. Dad nearly cries and says that his relationship with Mom was never hard. Jessie has no idea what's going on. The next morning, SN admits that his mom abuses prescription drugs. Jessie meets up with Ethan after school and they go to Starbucks to work on their project. There, Jessie discovers that Ethan is also in Oville, and she's confused when Ethan implies that he's not a fan of Liam. That evening, Jessie and Theo share wine and Theo insists that their parents are dumb: they thought they could just replace their dead spouses.

Jessie heads to Gem's mansion with Dri and Agnes for the party. Ethan ignores Jessie, but Liam drunkenly greets her. Right before the music starts, Dri says something cryptic about a kid named Xander dying and almost breaking up the band. After the first set, Liam returns to talk with Jessie, and Gem tries to get him away. Jessie sees a boy named Caleb texting at the same time as she gets a message from SN, which makes her think he's SN. Gem returns to Jessie, calls her names, and tells her to leave Liam alone. In the morning, Jessie jokingly asks SN to visit her at work and heads downstairs. Dad tries to talk with her, but he's shocked that Jessie would seriously think that his fight with Rachel means they'll have to leave. At work, Caleb walks in. Jessie feels disoriented; Caleb doesn't seem like he'd be SN, but clearly he is. She invites him to have coffee. Later, SN seems confused and as though he's ignoring that he visited her earlier.

During Jessie's next study session with Ethan, Ethan offers his condolences for Jessie's mom. Jessie's feelings for him grow. They also discuss Oville; Ethan notes that Caleb writes some of the band's songs. Jessie wonders if the Oville boys all talk about her. All night, Jessie tries to make herself like Caleb since he's SN, but she can only think about Ethan. The next day, Jessie reveals her crush to Dri and Agnes. Right after, as she walks into English class, Gem calls Jessie names and trips her in front of their teacher, Mrs. Pollack. After class, Mrs. Pollack asks Jessie if she did anything to provoke Gem and notes that since Gem's dad is a major donor to the school, she can't punish Gem. Jessie is ready to drive to Chicago when Liam catches her and asks her to work. Jessie realizes she can't go anywhere. She still texts Scarlett and asks if she can move into Scarlett's basement. Scarlett is thrilled, but says the couch down there is dirty—she and Adam have spent a lot of time there. Jessie ignores Dad's texts asking to talk.

Giving Day rolls around. Jessie and Theo drive together to the Habitat for Humanity worksite and as soon as they get out of the car, Gem "runs into" Jessie. Theo calls her out and tells her to leave Jessie alone. Jessie tries to talk to Caleb but he ignores her after suggesting they have coffee on Thursday. When she later learns that Gem's dad sponsored lunch, Ethan insists she has to eat and can't give Gem the satisfaction of Jessie going hungry. On the drive home, Jessie thanks Theo for his help. He says that Gem has been horrible to him since they were little and tells Jessie a bit about his dad. He also warns Jessie that Ethan's brother is into "heavy shit," so Ethan might not be a good romantic partner. Jessie doesn't care. When they get home, Jessie finds Rachel in her room. She's angry about this until Rachel gives Jessie a plane ticket to Chicago for the weekend; Scarlett's parents called, worried. Scarlett is thrilled and asks if they can hang out with Adam and throw a little party. Jessie is less excited about this, but agrees. Ethan agrees to move their *Waste Land* study session from Friday to Monday.

When Thursday rolls around, Jessie's too nervous about her date to eat. Agnes isn't convinced that Caleb is SN and at lunch, Dri notices that Gem and Liam aren't sitting together. After school, Caleb cancels their date since Liam just broke up with Gem because of Jessie. Jessie is confused, especially when SN then texts her to celebrate her upcoming trip. She doesn't want to tell him how much he hurt her feelings. On the plane, Jessie thinks about how good it'll be to get Scarlett's take on everything, but when Jessie arrives, Scarlett is angry and upset. She accuses Jessie of not listening at all since she left. The party that night is disastrous. Scarlett and Adam disappear, presumably to have sex, and Jessie messages SN while she's drunk and calls him out on canceling their coffee date. She wakes up the next morning in Scarlett's bed. Scarlett really just wants to talk about Adam—they haven't had sex yet because Scarlett is too afraid, and Scarlett needs advice. Scarlett makes it clear that she does want to hear about Jessie's life; she just

needs Jessie to listen to her too. To demonstrate, she goes through Jessie's new messages, in which Dri and Agnes confirm that Caleb's sister is alive—he's not SN. Scarlett thinks he's Liam.

Jessie isn't sure where home is as she takes off. Theo picks her up at the airport, curious to hear her take on everything, but she has nothing to say. Theo does share why Jessie shouldn't date Ethan: his older brother Xander, the Oville singer, overdosed on heroin. Everything starts to make sense and Jessie starts to suspect that Ethan is SN. They plan to meet on Wednesday. On Monday, during Jessie and Ethan's study session, Jessie offers Ethan her condolences for Xander. Ethan mentions that Liam is going to ask Jessie out. When she says she doesn't want him to, he suggests she say no. On Tuesday morning, Theo talks Jessie into making up with Dad. Mrs. Pollack apologizes to Jessie for her poor handling of Gem's bullying, and Dad stops in to visit Jessie at work. He apologizes for his bad behavior and tells Jessie mom would be proud of her. Scarlett also texts that she and Adam had sex and it went well. Jessie is thrilled. At Rachel's house later, Rachel tells Jessie that she should decorate her room how she wants and apologizes for ignoring her. Jessie suggests they put out pictures of Theo's dad.

The next day, Jessie waits at a restaurant to finally meet up with SN—but Liam, Ethan, and Caleb all show up. Jessie is confused until Ethan pulls out his phone, and she receives a text from SN. *Ethan* is SN. Liam is enraged, but he and Caleb leave. Jessie and Ethan sit, talk, and hold hands for several hours. Jessie feels at home in L.A. for the first time, especially when Ethan kisses her.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jessie Holmes – Jessie Holmes is the novel's 16-year-old protagonist. Two years ago, Jessie's mom died and about a month before the novel begins, Jessie's dad remarried and moved Jessie from Chicago to Los Angeles. Jessie initially hates Los Angeles. She was happy and comfortable in Chicago with her best friend, Scarlett, and she's still reeling with grief from her mom's death. Jessie thinks often of her mom and what it'd be like to still have her around. This happens especially as Jessie considers where she lives in Los Angeles. Her stepmom, Rachel's, house is expansive, pristine, and white—and Jessie feels like a guest in it, not like a family member. This only heightens Jessie's sense of loneliness, which is why, after she experiences bullying at the hands of a popular girl named Gem at school, Jessie accepts help from SN, a boy who anonymously emails Jessie offering to help her. As Jessie's online relationship with SN takes off and becomes increasingly close, she also develops in-person friendships with classmates Dri and Agnes and does her best to listen attentively to them and be a good

friend. Despite having a few friends, Jessie remains a target for bullying in part because she's obviously middle class—and she's one of the only middle-class kids in all of Wood Valley High School. Unlike her peers, Jessie has to get a part-time job and hope to earn a college scholarship if she wants to attend college at all. Things begin to unravel for Jessie as she attempts to figure out who SN is and as Liam, Gem's boyfriend and Jessie's coworker, breaks up with Gem and expresses unrequited interest in Jessie. Though Rachel buys Jessie a ticket to Chicago trying to help, Jessie is surprised to find out that she doesn't feel at home in Chicago or with Scarlett, either. Jessie does come to the realization that she hasn't listened to Scarlett at all since she moved away, something that helps her understand that listening is what keeps friendships alive. Back in Los Angeles, Jessie is thrilled to discover that SN is Ethan—in both his personas, Ethan makes Jessie feel seen and as though she belongs.

Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman – Ethan is a boy in Jessie's grade and her love interest. He's tall with dark hair and piercing blue eyes, and he wears the same Batman T-shirt every day (hence Jessie referring to him as "the Batman" before she learns his name). Though Jessie doesn't discover the truth until the end of the novel, Ethan messages her at the beginning of the school year, posing as the anonymous Somebody Nobody, to offer help, advice, and friendship as Jessie navigates Wood Valley High School. As SN, Ethan is intently interested in hearing what Jessie has to say and in getting to know her. Their virtual relationship quickly transforms from one that focuses on navigating high school to a much deeper and more intimate relationship when SN admits that his sister died about a year ago—and like Jessie does, he counts the days since she died. In actuality, it was Ethan's older brother Xander who died, but since Xander's death was extremely public and shook the entire Wood Valley community, Ethan felt he had to change this detail to keep Jessie from finding out his identity. He spends much of his time caring for his mother, who abuses prescription drugs and is largely absent from his life, and many people suspect that since Xander died of a heroin overdose, Ethan must also use hard drugs. Jessie briefly wonders if this is true, especially since Ethan is still a part of Orgasmville, the semi-famous high school band that Xander led until his death. While Ethan loves music, he doesn't enjoy the fame as much as his bandmates do. Though Ethan is initially brisk and somewhat rude to Jessie, they end up partnered for an English project and grow closer and more open with each other as time goes on. He reads novels and poetry for fun, and he eventually admits that he memorized *The Waste Land*, the subject of their school project, in order to impress Jessie. Jessie is thrilled to discover that Ethan is SN—both of his personas make her feel comfortable and seen.

Gem – Gem, Liam's girlfriend, is a blonde and conventionally beautiful queen bee at Wood Valley who immediately takes to

bullying Jessie. She wears tiny dresses that show off her perfect body and breasts that Jessie suspects are the work of plastic surgery. Her father happens to be one of the school's major donors, which means that even though everything Gem does violates Wood Valley's no-tolerance policy toward bullying, she always gets away with it. Along with her best friend and sidekick, Crystal, Gem sets out to make Jessie's life miserable. At first, their bullying centers around Jessie's uncool fashion choices, but after a fateful encounter at a party, the tenor changes. Gem is dating Liam—and according to Dri, is an entirely different (and nice) person around him—but she takes major offense when, at the party, Liam seems more interested in talking to Jessie than in talking to her. Knowing she'll suffer no recourse for her actions, Gem begins to physically bully Jessie in addition to doubling down on her verbal abuse, and she begins to carry out more assaults in front of teachers. Gem only begins to lose her power over Jessie when Liam finally sees how mean she is and breaks up with her—and when Theo starts to stand up for Jessie. Theo shares with Jessie that Gem has been awful and has been using offensive slurs to bully people since she was little. Without the rest of the student body standing idly by, Gem becomes much less of a threat to Jessie (though it's still implied that she'll never face consequences from the school administration for anything she's done). Though Agnes offers insight into Gem's troubled family life at one point, Jessie refuses to excuse Gem's bad behavior just because her home life, like that of many kids at Wood Valley, is troubled.

Jessie's Dad – Jessie's dad is a pharmacist. Though he was always there for Jessie when Jessie was little and Mom was still alive, Jessie watched him shrink as though he also had cancer while Mom was ill—and after Mom's death, he was completely unable to keep up with household tasks. Thus, by the time that he reveals that he met and married a woman online (Rachel) and that he and Jessie are moving to California to be with her, Jessie already feels like she can't trust him or rely on him to be there for her. Indeed, Dad leaves Jessie to her own devices once they get to Rachel's. Though he spends most of his time with Rachel and though Jessie suspects that the two of them talk about their deceased former spouses, Dad seldom speaks to Jessie and almost never brings up Mom. His neglect makes Jessie fearful and anxious, and when she overhears a particularly passionate fight between Dad and Rachel, Jessie assumes that it is going to bring about the end of their marriage—and a return to Chicago. Ultimately, Dad recognizes that he botched the move and abandoned his parenting duties, and he apologizes for his behavior. In Theo's opinion, some of Dad's behavior can be attributed to the fact that both he and Rachel moved on quickly and seemingly forgot that a loved one died—and then expected their children to simply go along with it. Jessie also comes to understand that while she initially figured that Dad was doing just fine in Los Angeles, he struggles to fit in just like she does. His job as a pharmacist isn't

glamorous next to Rachel's, which is high paying and in the film industry, and he feels judged by her friends.

Liam Sandler – Liam Sandler is a senior at Wood Valley High School and the lead singer of the high school band Orgasmville. Liam has long hair and a bright, sunny personality. However, he's also just as entitled and wealthy as all of his peers—though he traveled around India over the summer, he insists smugly to his classmates that it will just make a great note in a college application essay. Jessie gets to know him better when she works alongside him at Liam's mom's bookstore, Book Out Below! For the most part, Jessie doesn't like this work arrangement—she and Liam don't have much to talk about and when they do talk, Jessie finds it awkward. She does, however, file away any potentially cute thing he does to share with Dri, who has nursed an entirely one-sided crush on Liam for some time. Liam is dating Gem, something that Jessie can't quite fathom—where Gem is mean and calculating, Liam is kind and oblivious (which Jessie eventually decides is exactly why the relationship worked for so long). Ethan has issues with Liam since Liam replaced Ethan's brother, Xander, in Orgasmville after Xander's death. While before the band played mostly small, intimate gigs, Liam wants to take the band on tour after he graduates. Their conflict comes to a head when Liam tries to ask Jessie out after breaking up with Gem to be with her—but Ethan reveals himself to be SN and Jessie chooses him instead. Liam leaves, however, without causing too much of a scene, and Jessie supposes that he'll get back together with Gem.

Theo – Theo is Jessie's stepbrother and Rachel's son. He's about the same age as Jessie, though the two never figure out which of them is older. Theo is openly, proudly, and flamboyantly gay. Though Jessie is accepting of his sexuality, she does find it surprising that he can be gay and so popular at school, reflecting that such a thing wouldn't be possible at her old school in Chicago. Initially, Jessie sees Theo as a stereotypical entitled brat. He barely speaks to her for the first few weeks she lives with him and if he does, it's to say something rude to her or Dad. He also refuses to acknowledge her at school. However, Theo and Jessie begin to open up to each other and develop routines that help them see that they can trust and count on the other. Theo opens up to Jessie about Theo's dad, with whom Theo was very close. He was the one who made it very clear to Theo that there was nothing wrong with being gay, and Theo was much closer to his dad than he is to his mom. Theo wisely observes that both Rachel and Dad seemed to believe that they could just marry again and forget that someone else died—which is one of the main reasons that Jessie and Theo learn to lean on each other. Theo eventually stands up for Jessie when Gem bullies her, which begins to turn the tide and help Jessie feel more comfortable at school. Though he remains obnoxious, entitled, and somewhat rude, Jessie comes to see that he's also kind, funny, and caring.

Scarlett – Scarlett is Jessie's half-Jewish, half-Korean best

friend. Scarlett is a tiny spitfire who works hard to make herself “undeniable” to others. She's an exceptional cheerleader for Jessie and has been since Jessie's mom died—she profoundly said in the aftermath that they needed to pretend that things were okay, even though they weren't, in order to make it through. Jessie is extremely grateful to Scarlett for her support and her advice on everything from how to deal with SN to her clothing or makeup choices. They text almost constantly after Jessie moves, though most of their conversations are about what Jessie is experiencing in Los Angeles. Occasionally, Scarlett interjects with something about her life, such as that she's befriending their former enemy Deena in Jessie's absence and that she's starting to date Adam Kravitz. Though Jessie is supportive when Scarlett offers these things, Jessie seldom asks about them. Scarlett goes back and forth on how she feels about possibly having sex with Adam. While she's curious and wants to get her first time over with, she's also very nervous—and more than anything, needs someone to talk to about her experiences and desires. Things come to a head between Scarlett and Jessie during Jessie's visit to Chicago. Scarlett finally breaks down and insists that Jessie hasn't been a good friend, since she hasn't shown genuine interest in Scarlett's life for months now. Scarlett reveals her insecurities about sex and her relationship with Adam once she and Jessie make up and not long after Jessie's visit, Scarlett has a positive first sexual experience with Adam.

Rachel/Dad's New Wife – Rachel is Dad's new wife, Theo's mom, and Jessie's stepmom. She's a tiny woman, but in Jessie's estimation, she makes up for her diminutive size with her exceptionally loud voice. She and Dad met through an online bereavement group; her first husband (Theo's dad) died sometime before the novel begins. Though Rachel and Dad spend many of their evenings out and about, schmoozing with Rachel's work contacts in the film industry, Theo tells Jessie that this isn't normal behavior for his mom—she's usually much more of a homebody. However, given the size of Rachel's huge and impeccably kept white house, Jessie never has to spend much time with Rachel and therefore learn what kind of a person Rachel really is. Indeed, not wanting to make Jessie uncomfortable, Rachel tries to give Jessie her space rather than get to know her. Eventually, however, Jessie begins to understand that Rachel is truly kind and generous—she gifts Jessie plane tickets for a weekend in Chicago when she's feeling particularly homesick—and is possibly a person whom Jessie might eventually be able to like and trust. Jessie also finds that Rachel is far more pleasant to be around once they get to know each other, as Rachel becomes quieter and more honest. She even takes Jessie's suggestion that they put up old family photos to heart, and she gives Jessie permission to decorate her bedroom how she sees fit.

Jessie's Mom – Jessie's mom died about two years before the novel begins of ovarian cancer. She was a bright, happy woman

who loved poetry. She worked part-time and with the rest of her time, she kept the household running. As far as Jessie knew, her mom and Dad were madly in love with each other. Her cancer diagnosis was sudden and surprising, as she was diagnosed with stage four cancer after not experiencing any symptoms that Jessie knew of. Jessie and her mom were very close, so Jessie spent a lot of time with her mom in the two years she battled cancer. They watched movies and ate Oreos—their special bad-day ritual—until the chemo and radiation caused Mom’s eyesight to go. In her last few months, Jessie read out loud to her. Jessie thinks often of her mom and how things used to be, and she counts the days since Mom died. This is one of the reasons why Jessie and SN are able to connect—SN lost a sibling and also counts the days since their passing.

Caleb – Caleb is one of Jessie’s classmates whom Jessie initially assumes is SN. He’s very attractive in what Jessie considers a very stereotypical, Ken-doll kind of way, and his daily uniform is a gray T-shirt. Jessie embarrasses herself on the first day by clapping when he shares that he climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro over the summer, and this feat is how she remembers him for much of the novel. Caleb is involved with the high school band Orgasmville as a songwriter, though he’s not part of the band itself. He’s close friends with Liam because of this, but when he comes into Book Out Below! one day looking for Liam, Jessie believes that he must be SN (she’d recently told SN where she works and Caleb is the first classmate to enter the store). Despite this “evidence,” nothing Caleb does in his interactions with Jessie suggests that he’s particularly interested in her, let alone her secret correspondent. He consistently brushes her off and seems disinterested in speaking to her.

Adrianna Sanchez/Dri – Dri is Jessie’s first in-person friend at Wood Valley High School. Dri looks like the kind of person Jessie would be friends with—she wears big glasses and puts her hair up in a messy bun—but it takes prodding from SN for Jessie to befriend Dri. Dri shows herself to be funny and caring but wildly insecure. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of every student at Wood Valley, since she’s gone there since kindergarten, and she shares what she knows with Jessie when asked. She also nurses an intense crush on Liam, though this is entirely one-sided, because Liam barely knows she exists. Dri’s support and friendship makes Jessie feel as though life in Los Angeles might not be so bad. Dri and her best friend, Agnes, ultimately help Jessie pick out [sunglasses](#), which make Jessie feel more at home in L.A., and they provide firsthand, in-person support that Jessie cannot get from Scarlett.

Agnes – Agnes is Dri’s best friend; she’s a tiny girl with a dyed red bob and plastic-framed glasses. Jessie thinks she’s not beautiful, but she’s cute. It takes Jessie a while to warm up to Agnes, as Agnes at first doesn’t seem like the best friend to Dri. She doesn’t support Dri’s intense and secret crush on Liam and she isn’t excited when Liam speaks in Dri’s vicinity. However, as

Jessie gets to know Agnes better, she begins to like her more. Agnes loves makeup and is instrumental in giving Jessie a makeover to go to parties. She’s also far more sexually experienced than either Jessie or Dri; she had sex at summer camp but isn’t sure if it counts since her partner remembered halfway through that his religion forbids premarital sex. She doesn’t think sex is a big deal and only had sex at camp so she could get her first time over with.

Mrs. Pollack – Mrs. Pollack is Jessie’s English teacher. Mrs. Pollack is in her 20s, dresses in hip clothing, and is pretty, so the student body unanimously decides to be nice to her. Jessie finds her kinder than all her other teachers, as Mrs. Pollack doesn’t make Jessie stand up and introduce herself on the first day of school. However, Mrs. Pollack does make one serious misstep that causes Jessie to question her trustworthiness: when Gem trips Jessie in front of the class, Mrs. Pollack privately asks Jessie if Jessie did anything to provoke Gem and explains that she can’t do anything to punish Gem, given how powerful Gem’s father is. Later, Mrs. Pollack apologizes and explains herself. As a teen, she was like Jessie: uncool, nerdy, and mercilessly bullied; she didn’t mean to make Jessie feel like the bullying was her own fault. She assures Jessie that things will get better after high school.

Adam Kravitz – Adam is Jessie’s neighbor in Chicago and her first kissing partner. Their kiss was awful because Adam was a horrible kisser when they kissed in ninth grade, so Jessie writes him off as a valid romantic partner for anyone in the present. However, Scarlett takes a liking to him and they begin to date right before homecoming. Scarlett insists that he’s actually nice and a good kisser, and that his acne is clearing up. When Jessie visits, she sees that Scarlett is right: Adam is filling out, getting taller and more muscular, and his acne is much better. He’s also clearly in love with Scarlett. To Jessie, Adam is only a peripheral character and mostly only exists in relation to Scarlett. Because of this, she shares little about his personality.

Xander – Xander was Ethan’s older brother; he died of a heroin overdose about a year before the novel begins. He was the lead singer for the locally famous high school rock band Orgasmville. Liam took his place after he died. Though Jessie learns little about Xander over the course of the novel, through her conversations with Ethan posing as SN, she does learn that he died suddenly and his death took a major toll on Ethan and Xander’s mother. His death shook Ethan’s world, and since Xander’s death, people suspect that Ethan is also dangerous and abuses drugs.

Theo’s Dad – Theo’s dad died sometime before the novel begins. Theo doesn’t talk about him much, but he does share with Jessie that his dad ran 12 miles per day and still died of lung cancer. Theo’s dad was also extremely supportive of his son and made it clear from the beginning that being gay was nothing Theo needed to be ashamed of—and because of this, he and Theo were extremely close. He was a fan of abstract art; he

chose the pieces that hang in Jessie's room.

Liam's Mom – Liam's mom is the owner of the Book Out Below! bookstore, where Jessie gets a job. Jessie can never remember her first name, so she usually refers to her just as Liam's mom. Unlike most women her age in Los Angeles, Liam's mom looks normal to Jessie. She hasn't had plastic surgery and so has wrinkles and gray hair. She wears long, linen tunics and is a surprisingly kind person: when Jessie is obviously having a bad day, she offers to give Jessie the rest of the day off.

Gloria – Gloria is Rachel's "house manager." She's Mexican, like the rest of the household staff, but according to Rachel is "like family." Though Jessie takes issue with this, Gloria does seem to genuinely care for Jessie: she leaves dinners for Jessie that are nutritious and interesting for her, and as time goes on, Jessie comes to appreciate everything that Gloria does. Gloria, however, never appears in person or speaks for herself throughout the novel.

Crystal – Crystal is Gem's sidekick in tormenting Jessie. She's a mean, conventionally beautiful blonde girl who seems perfect in every way. Given that Crystal is so mean, Jessie makes no effort to learn anything about her; her only defining characteristic is that she's not quite as blonde as Gem. Dri, however, shares that Gem and Crystal haven't always been so mean. They became mean in seventh grade.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ashby – Ashby is Theo's best friend. Like most girls at Wood Valley High School, she's gorgeous, thin, and looks like a model. She dresses in black clothing and often dyes her hair vibrant colors.

Joe – Joe is Deena's older brother. He attends the local community college and provides the beer for Jessie's welcome home party in Scarlett's basement. He tries to flirt with Jessie but eventually leaves her alone.

Deena – Deena is a mean girl in Chicago; she and Jessie were classmates and didn't get along. Jessie is shocked to discover when she visits Chicago that Scarlett and Deena are now close friends.

Mr. Shackleman – Mr. Shackleman is the gym teacher at Wood Valley High School. He's rude and abrasive, and everyone knows that he stares at girls' backsides in gym class.

Toby – Toby is Adam's best friend. He and Jessie have gone to school together since preschool, but Jessie doesn't know him well.

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



BLENDED FAMILIES

Tell Me Three Things introduces readers to 16-year-old Jessie, whose mom died tragically of cancer about two years ago. In the month before the novel begins, Jessie was surprised to learn that her Dad met someone and secretly got married in Hawaii—so within the space of a few months, she and Dad moved from Chicago to Los Angeles to move in with her new stepmom, Rachel, and her stepbrother, Theo, who's Jessie's age. This is an understandably difficult transition for everyone as they all navigate the unfamiliar territory of step-parenthood and running a new kind of household amid grief for their former lives. Theo observes at one point that their parents seemingly "thought they could just *insert replacement here* and forget that someone they loved actually died," and the novel goes to great lengths to show that he's right—and to show that this isn't a healthy or successful way to combine families. Instead, it makes the case that as families combine via remarriage, especially after a death, it's a constant process to navigate what that new family should look like. And while it won't necessarily be the same as a parent's first marriage, it's still important to not forget those people, like Jessie's mom and Theo's dad, who are missing—they, too, are part of the picture, even if they're not physically there.

In addition to Jessie's culture shock of moving from the Midwest to a wealthy Los Angeles suburb, life as a newly blended family is a shock for everyone. Jessie often shares with the reader how life proceeded when her mom was still alive—for instance, she and her parents had dinner together nightly, and though their house was small, the walls were covered in family photos. Now, nothing about living with Rachel and Theo at all resembles the way Jessie grew up. Though both Rachel and Dad, on some level, seem just as aware of this as their children, they nevertheless act as though everything is normal and like everyone should be perfectly fine with this arrangement. In practice, this means that Jessie feels alone at a time when she desperately needs support from someone like her dad, whom she trusts and loves. She also craves stability, something that seems tenuous every time Theo says something nasty to her or Dad and Rachel fight loudly enough for the kids to hear. Home and family life, in other words, seems increasingly unsafe or unreliable—nothing is the same, and the adults in charge won't admit that this is the case or reassure their children. With this, the novel suggests that the inability to trust what's going to happen in one's family as it changes only sows fear and resentment—it's a terrible way to create a loving, supportive family.

Because of the size of the house and the fact that Dad and Rachel mostly leave their kids to their own devices, Theo and Jessie are largely on their own to navigate their new stepsibling



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

relationship. Though it starts out rocky—Theo often says mean, snarky things, and he ignores Jessie when he's not being mean—gradually, the two begin to reach out to each other and regard the other with curiosity rather than animosity. In particular, what's most helpful to Theo and Jessie's budding relationship is that they develop shared routines. Though they continue to drive to school separately, Theo begins offering Jessie boxed juices in the morning when he grabs one for himself. Eventually, Jessie comes to count on and enjoy Theo's daily peace offering. This one routine leads to them sharing other things—including a bottle of wine and things about their deceased parents—that help them feel more secure with the fact that while they may not be able to count on their parents, they can count on each other. Jessie eventually discovers that a good first step in lieu of developing shared routines with Rachel—whom she refers to alternately as “the stepmonster” and as “Dad's new wife”—is to regard her with curiosity and respect as a complex human being, just like she did with Theo. As Rachel gradually begins to seem more human and vulnerable, she appears less and less like a dangerous interloper in Jessie's life—and even like someone that Jessie might be able to like and someday trust.

In addition to the necessity of stability, trust, and routines, the novel also makes a point to show that especially when it comes to blended families that come together after the deaths of one or more parents, it's important to not erase the deceased person from family life. Jessie comes to understand that much of Theo's angst comes from the fact that Rachel seemingly forgot her first husband, just like Dad sometimes seems to have forgotten Mom. The novel suggests that being seemingly asked to forget one's parent and accept a sub-par replacement is traumatizing—and this, more than anything, is where Dad and Rachel went wrong. Jessie eventually suggests to Rachel that she put up some childhood photos of Theo, and possibly some of her first husband. This would make it clear that while Theo doesn't have his father anymore and has Dad around instead, this doesn't mean that Theo's dad has been forgotten. With this, *Tell Me Three Things* suggests that when families come together after a loss, they're not just comprised of whatever parents and children are still alive. Rather, they include every family member who is no longer alive as well—and it's essential not to forget them if those still living are to remain happy and healthy.



INTIMACY AND GROWING UP

Sixteen-year-old Jessie and her female friends are all extremely interested in sex and intimacy. Several of them are becoming sexually active for the first time, while others, including Jessie, fear in-person intimacy and instead turn to the internet for a different kind of intimacy by communicating with others over an instant messaging program. Overwhelmingly, the novel positions this interest in intimacy as

something normal and expected of teens, as it signals their budding maturity. It also suggests that as teens come of age, they discover that true intimacy is about more than just close physical contact like kissing or having sex. Rather, it extends to the way that couples fight, comfort each other, and speak about everything from the mundane to the extremely personal.

At the beginning of the novel, Jessie believes she has a clear view of what it means to be intimate: to her, intimacy means sex. Given that Jessie has never had sex before, this distinction makes sense—the thought of being so close and vulnerable with another person is anxiety-inducing, and it seems far more meaningful in the grand scheme of things than other forms of intimacy (which don't require nakedness) that Jessie is already engaging in. One of those forms of intimacy is in her communication, especially with her friends. She and her friends speak often about close, personal problems—and often about sex, including whether or not to have it. However, the way that Jessie and her new friends in Los Angeles, Dri and Agnes, speak about sex suggests that at least to some of them, sex isn't really as intimate of an experience as it could be. When Agnes tells Jessie and Dri about her first time having sex, she questions whether it even counts as an actual sexual experience—her partner remembered halfway through that he was saving himself for marriage and so insisted they stop. She also insists that having sex with him in the first place was just a way to get her first experience out of the way, so it was not something that seemed especially intimate. For Agnes, having sex for the first time was about checking a box so she could say she was more adult and experienced; it wasn't about cultivating intimacy at all—at least not with her partner. When it comes to talking about the experience with her friends, on the other hand, sharing her story is valuable currency as she strengthens and deepens her bonds with Jessie and Dri.

Though sex remains the pinnacle of intimacy in Jessie's mind, she also begins to see that there are many other ways to cultivate intimacy in her life—and witness it in the lives of others. This happens especially as she begins instant messaging more with Somebody Nobody, or SN, an anonymous boy at school who contacts her and offers to help her navigate the social structure. SN quickly becomes Jessie's closest confidante and, eventually, her crush. At the same time, Jessie also begins spending time with a classmate named Ethan on whom she has a major crush, and the time they spend hanging out makes it abundantly clear to Jessie that intimacy isn't just about sex.

Though Jessie's conversations with SN start out dealing with practical matters, such as who to befriend and what to avoid in the cafeteria, they soon become far more open. Both of them are dealing with the relatively recent death of a close family member (SN lost his sister, while Jessie's mom died of cancer), and the revelation that both of them count the days since their loved one died helps them decide that they can go deeper and confide in each other about their sad family situations and their

grief for who they've lost. This eventually leads to a game (the novel's namesake), in which they ask each other to tell them three things about themselves. The very nature of this game encourages them to dive deeper and deeper into a relationship. Though SN only exists for Jessie online, she nevertheless recognizes that their relationship is far more intimate—if in a different way—than it could be otherwise. Talking virtually gives Jessie the ability to say things without worrying about how she looks while saying them, or about if she's not “properly” dressed in designer clothes like her other classmates. With Ethan, meanwhile, their hangouts evolve slowly from walks during which they discuss their school projects on T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* to coffee dates at the local Starbucks. On these dates, Jessie begins to feel as though every brush of Ethan's arm and every look of concern he gives her when she shows up with bruises from bullying attempts are far more intimate than the idea of sex or even her conversations with SN. Being around Ethan—and to a lesser degree, talking to SN—makes her begin to suspect that intimacy is much more about the little things than it is about major milestones like having sex.

These experiences also help Jessie to humanize and understand the intimacy in Dad and her stepmother, Rachel's, marriage. She's shocked when she discovers that listening to Dad and Rachel fight and scream at each other feels far more intimate than listening to them have sex—as does catching them one evening on the couch together, looking at what she suspects is a photo album while Rachel cries. These thoughts illustrate Jessie's broadening understanding of what intimacy means. Ultimately, Jessie realizes that, under the right circumstances, nearly anything anyone does with another person can feel intimate and meaningful, whether or not there's sexual contact involved.



WEALTH, FITTING IN, AND BULLYING

Part of the reason that 16-year-old Jessie struggles so much in her new home after Dad remarries is because she moves from a suburban public high school outside of Chicago to Wood Valley High School in Los Angeles an elite private school that educates the children of wealthy film and tech moguls. This culture shock means that Jessie is, for much of the novel, a fish out of water at her new school, even as she also recognizes that some aspects of high school—such as the prevalence of bullying and the desire to fit in—remain the same no matter where she is. The novel suggests that while it may be normal to want to fit in, bullying is different and more cutthroat when one doesn't have the wealth to do so—and when the bully in question isn't just wealthy but is also politically powerful at one's school. However, the novel also suggests that even if a bully is safe from punishment by adult authority figures, it's still possible to dethrone them if their peers band together and refuse to put up with their bad

behavior.

In Chicago, Jessie had what she believes was a normal time in high school. She's a self-professed nerd, which meant that she wasn't cool—but she had her best friend, Scarlett, and she wasn't so low in the school pecking order as to be bullied. Starting at Wood Valley High School in Los Angeles, however, shows Jessie that her experience in Chicago isn't the experience of every high school student in America. At Wood Valley, it's cool to be smart: students spend their summers building schools in rural African villages or interning at Google to beef up their college applications, and so the school sends about five kids to Harvard every year. To help Jessie navigate the landscape of Wood Valley, an anonymous boy who calls himself Somebody Nobody, or SN, begins emailing Jessie with tidbits of advice. Jessie initially refuses his help—in addition to being suspicious of anonymous emails, she figures that aside from the higher socioeconomic level of the student body, Wood Valley can't be all that different from home. However, she eventually accepts SN's help when two popular blonde girls, Gem and Crystal, begin to bully her—and as Ethan, Jessie's partner for an English project, announces that he'll do the project alone, put her name on it, and get her an A. Jessie's plea for help is, in its most basic form, a plea to help her figure out how to fit in—how to avoid being a target for Gem and Crystal and how to navigate a culture that's entirely different from her own. Additionally, Jessie wants to find a place for herself in that culture, which is unwelcoming since everyone else at Wood Valley has been going to school together since kindergarten.

Though Jessie doesn't dwell on it, one of the major reasons that she's a target at school is because she sticks out as being middle class in an environment where only a few kids share her socioeconomic status. Everyone else, in her assessment, runs around with designer bags, slim laptops, and luxury cars, while Jessie has none of these things. While at first the bullying that Jessie suffers centers mostly on how quaint she seems to Gem and Crystal, the tenor and intensity changes when Gem suddenly perceives Jessie as a threat. Jessie works with and is friendly with Gem's boyfriend, Liam, who is clueless about his girlfriend's nastiness and thus makes the mistake of talking to Jessie in front of Gem at a party. It seems likely that Gem would react badly to Liam speaking to *any* girl other than her—but because Gem believes that Jessie isn't good enough, wealthy enough, or pretty enough to be worthy of her boyfriend's attention, she treats Jessie with even more vitriol than she might otherwise. She trips Jessie, loudly whispers insults, and runs into her—all within earshot or in front of teachers. However, because Gem's father is one of the school's biggest donors, even Jessie's favorite teacher, Mrs. Pollack, doesn't feel like she's able to do anything to help. It doesn't matter that Gem is violating the school's no-tolerance policy toward bullying—because of who her father is, Gem is untouchable.

Things only begin to improve for Jessie when, with the help of

SN, time, and her stepbrother Theo, she starts to fit in a little better. SN helps her by giving her a place to vent and be upset, and as time goes on, Jessie manages to steel herself more successfully against Gem's attacks. Things especially turn a corner when Theo, who's in the same grade but who had previously been unwilling to so much as notice Jessie in the hallways, calls Gem out for pushing Jessie. As Jessie begins to fit in more with her family, it becomes easier to fit in at school—despite her refusal to wear designer clothing.

Theo's choice to stand up for Jessie also reflects his changing thoughts on class and fitting in. While he was initially enraged to hear that Jessie's dad, a pharmacist, was going to get a job at a pharmacy near school—pharmacists, in his view, are embarrassingly middle class—his choice to stand up for Jessie suggests that he's reevaluated this belief, at least enough to be willing to stand up for his stepsister. As rude as Theo's embarrassment about Dad's job may be, it also suggests that he's going through exactly the same thing that Jessie is. He wants to fit in like everyone else and avoid the bullying that comes with standing out, especially in a way that signals that he's not as wealthy as his peers. Though the novel offers no real remedies for bullying, especially when it comes to bullying about class and wealth, Theo's change in heart suggests that bullying can be stopped when kids choose to stand up for each other and create an environment that doesn't allow bullies to rule without consequences.



HOME

When 16-year-old Jessie's Dad remarries, they move cross-country and start over in Los Angeles in her stepmother, Rachel's, house, which is huge, entirely white, and impeccably kept. This experience forces Jessie to consider what it really means for someone to be home. For much of the novel, Jessie believes that moving back to Chicago will mean that she's home again, but a surprise weekend trip to Chicago impresses upon her that this isn't actually the case. Rather, she comes to realize that home is where someone feels safe, comfortable, and welcome—and that home doesn't have to be a single place. Rather, one can make a home anywhere, and it's other people that really make a place feel like home.

At the beginning of the novel, Jessie thinks often of her family's old house in Chicago. In Jessie's opinion, it has all the hallmarks of home: a dingy basement, family photos everywhere, and comfortable furniture. Most importantly, it was where she felt safe, loved, and wanted—and she never had to fear that she'd have to leave it. This all changed when Jessie's mom died—and while Jessie's physical address never changed in the two years after her mom's death, her home nevertheless changed. Without her mom around, the household tasks and family dinners she used to take care of fell by the wayside. By the time Jessie and Dad move out to Los Angeles to live with Rachel,

Jessie's childhood house is already completely different from the house she grew up in. It lacks elements she deems essential—most importantly, her mother. Clearly, even before Jessie has to contend with a new life in Los Angeles, her house isn't even the same home it was a few years ago. This suggests that the idea of home isn't as simple or straightforward as Jessie might want it to be. It may have more to do with people and with emotion than with a particular house.

Once at Rachel's, Jessie fixates on the trappings that make a house a home. In her mind, Rachel's house *isn't* a home—everything is too clean, too white, and too big. There are no family photos, no books, and no one cooks in the expansive kitchen since they have an assistant, Gloria, who feeds the family. Even Jessie's bedroom barely reflects that she lives there, as it has abstract paintings on the walls that Jessie hates and expensive soap in her private bathroom that Jessie feels uncomfortable using. Because Jessie feels so uncomfortable in Rachel's house, she believes even more strongly that home is in Chicago, not in California. Part of the problem certainly has to do with the fact that it is *Rachel's* house in Jessie's mind, not *Rachel and Dad's* house—it may be where Jessie eats and sleeps, but she feels no ownership over it. The only thing she has in her room that is undeniably hers is a photograph of her and her mom, another clue that people, not addresses, make a home. A lot of Jessie's discomfort also comes down to the fact that Dad and Rachel leave their children to their own devices once everyone is living under one roof. No one ever asks Jessie might make her feel better about living in California. She's put in a guest room, not a room that she has the ability to decorate or make her own—and the novel shows that being made to feel like a guest likes this makes it so that someone never can feel at home.

Things begin to change for Jessie when Rachel buys her a plane ticket so she can go back to Chicago for a weekend and stay with her best friend, Scarlett. Jessie is thrilled—she can eat real pizza, enjoy a cold autumn, and hang out with people who make her feel normal—but she soon discovers that her time in Los Angeles has made it difficult, if not impossible, to feel at home in Chicago anymore. Jessie's childhood home, for one, has a child's bike in the driveway, a clear indicator that she no longer lives there and can't even pretend that she does anymore.

Then, there's unexpected tension between Jessie and Scarlett—especially when Jessie gets drunk in Scarlett's basement, which no longer feels as homey as it once did, now that Jessie knows that Scarlett and her new boyfriend make out on the futon that Jessie fantasized about sleeping on if she moved back. Jessie also realizes for the first time that all her classmates in Chicago have accents, which only further emphasizes how alien she now feels in her hometown. Later, as Jessie vomits in one of Scarlett's bathrooms that she's been using for years, she realizes that even though everything about the bathroom is familiar, none of it feels like home. Home is not

in Chicago—especially when she’s fighting with Scarlett.

Making up with Scarlett begins to impress upon Jessie that SN, a virtual friend in Los Angeles, might be right: home is defined by people rather than by a place. Once Jessie and Scarlett are back on speaking terms again, it’s much easier for Jessie to feel comfortable—but she still doesn’t feel nearly the desire to stay as she thought she might. Home, Jessie has to admit, might not exist for her at all when neither the place she came from nor the place she currently sleeps feel appropriate or safe.

Though Jessie never feels entirely at home in California, she begins to feel more welcome when Rachel finally realizes how distressing and anxiety-inducing it must be for Jessie to sleep in a guest room. Rachel and Jessie might not be best friends by the end of the novel, but Rachel’s overture, combined with Jessie’s improving relationships with both Dad and her stepbrother, Theo, show again that home doesn’t stem from living in a particular house or part of the country. Rather, people are only able to feel at home when they’re comfortable with the people who live with them.



FRIENDSHIP

After 16-year-old Jessie’s Dad remarries and they move to Los Angeles to live with Jessie’s stepmom, Rachel, and stepbrother, Theo, one thing that’s majorly lacking in Jessie’s new life from the start is a friend.

Though Jessie constantly texts Scarlett, her best friend from Chicago, she recognizes that Scarlett is no real replacement for in-person friends—ones that understand the specific pressures she’s under at Wood Valley High School. Then, a few weeks into the school year, Jessie agrees to accept help from a mysterious Somebody Nobody, or SN, an anonymous male classmate who begins emailing and then instant messaging with Jessie, offering support and advice on how to navigate Wood Valley’s social structure. As Jessie’s friendships in Los Angeles blossom while she also remains in contact with Scarlett, Jessie must navigate the difficulty of making and keeping friends.

Ultimately, she discovers that the essential elements of any friendship are a willingness to ask to be friends in the first place, and even more importantly, a willingness to listen.

Jessie’s first few weeks at Wood Valley are extremely lonely. Though she texts Scarlett constantly, she realizes that Scarlett can’t take the place of someone in Los Angeles who understands what Jessie’s going through. Thus, with Scarlett’s encouragement, Jessie decides to email back SN, who emailed her right after school started offering his help. SN feels like a close friend almost immediately. He and Jessie begin playing a game in which they tell each other three things about themselves as a way to get to know each other, and they talk openly about the death of Jessie’s mom and of SN’s sister. Importantly, though Jessie doesn’t entirely recognize it, both she and SN are talking and listening about an equal amount. It’s possible that this has to do with the fact that SN is barely a real

person for Jessie—she has her suspicions about who he is at school, but she mostly maintains a mental barrier between who he might be in real life and who he is online. However, it likely has more to do with the fact that SN is telling her things that she finds necessary and interesting, and she has things to contribute to the conversation. Having a more or less equal conversation is easy for them because they’re both interested in the subject matter and both have information to share.

This isn’t so much the case with any of Jessie’s other friendships, either with Scarlett or with her new female friends at Wood Valley, Dri and Agnes. With Dri and Agnes, Jessie spends much of her time listening. The two girls have been at Wood Valley since kindergarten, so they can help illuminate all the ins and outs of the school itself and its student body for Jessie, who’s desperate to learn. This helps Jessie become friends with Dri and Agnes, as she presents herself as a willing audience of anything they have to say in order to earn their friendship. She listens dutifully to Dri talk about her fantasy romance with a classmate named Liam, and she listens to Agnes talk about makeup and her sexual experiences. It’s only after several weeks that Jessie begins to offer much in the way of her own opinions or thoughts on anything, once the trio’s friendship is better established. The fact that it takes Jessie so long to voice any of her own opinions suggests that being willing and able to listen is an important, if not vital, way to begin a friendship.

However hard Jessie applies herself to listening to Dri and Agnes, though, she misses that she must *continue* listening if she wishes to maintain her relationship with old friends like Scarlett. Many of Jessie and Scarlett’s text conversations are about Jessie and her experiences at Wood Valley. Scarlett dutifully asks questions and occasionally interjects information about what’s going on in her life—but though Jessie comments on what Scarlett says, she seldom asks Scarlett about what’s going on or allows Scarlett’s life to take center stage in their conversations. Scarlett finally calls Jessie out on this when Jessie visits Chicago for a weekend. Scarlett makes it very clear that if they’re going to remain friends despite the distance, Jessie has to be a good friend to her too, not just to her new Wood Valley friends who have newer and more interesting things to say. Listening, Scarlett implies, isn’t something that people can ever stop doing in a friendship—it must continue if the friendship itself is going to survive. Through this, *Tell Me Three Things* makes the case that though people may move and have to begin again, it’s possible to maintain a variety of different friendships and continue to make more if individuals are willing to listen attentively and ask questions as though every friend is as new and interesting as any other.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SUNGLASSES

In *Tell Me Three Things*, sunglasses take on two layers of symbolic significance. On the surface, they symbolize wealth, which Jessie's new school and neighborhood are riddled with. Everyone Jessie meets in Los Angeles, from her stepmother Rachel to the kids at Wood Valley, have designer sunglasses to wear whenever they're outside. That the glasses are always designer emphasizes that sunglasses are a way for people to externally signal their wealth to one another. Fittingly, when Jessie finally buys a pair of her own, she buys knockoffs, which speaks to her middle-class background.

However, as the novel unfolds, sunglasses also come to symbolize one's belonging and identity as a Californian. In the sunny Los Angeles weather, everyone wears sunglasses out of pure necessity—sunglasses, it seems, are part of the standard uniform for a Californian. It makes sense, then, that Jessie spends her first several weeks in Los Angeles squinting in the sun, unwilling to buy sunglasses of her own. At this point in the novel, Jessie doesn't want to accept that her life is in California now, so wearing sunglasses just like everyone else would signal her willingness to try to make a life here. Furthermore, Jessie struggles to fit in at school during her first several weeks, and not having sunglasses seems to symbolize her lack of belonging in Wood Valley's social landscape. Eventually, Jessie makes friends—Dri and Agnes—who convince her to buy a pair of inexpensive glasses. After, Jessie notes how the sunglasses “feel transformative, like I'm somehow a different person with large squares of plastic covering my face.” Buying and wearing her own pair of sunglasses signifies that she's starting to fit in at Wood Valley and in Los Angeles more broadly, which makes her a much “different person” than she was two months ago, back when she was desperate to move back to Chicago and was uninterested in anything California had to offer.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ember edition of *Tell Me Three Things* published in 2016.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ And only later, when I got to my actual homeroom and had to stand up and do the whole summer vacation thing all over again in front of another twenty-five kids—and utter the words “Smoothie King” for the second time to an equally appalled audience—did I realize I had a large clump of grass stuck to my ass.

On reflection, the number of people who may have sensed my desperation? At least fifty, and I'm estimating on the low side just to make myself feel better.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Caleb, Liam Sandler, Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Jessie recounts how, on her first day of school at Wood Valley High School, she shocked her classmates and embarrassed herself when she told everyone what she did over the summer: worked at a smoothie shop at the mall back in Chicago. Her classmates' reactions drive home the towering socioeconomic differences between Jessie and her peers at Wood Valley. It's unthinkable for most, if not all of her classmates, that someone their age should have an unglamorous job—SN even confirms later that his parents are more than willing to give him an allowance if it means he has the time to study that he'd otherwise spend working. While in a way, this might suggest that Jessie would fit in perfectly at Wood Valley, being so academic and school focused, the fact that her classmates are “appalled” shows that a shared interest in doing well in school isn't enough to integrate Jessie into the community. Rather, the fact that she has to work for her money marks her as an outsider who will, in the eyes of many of her classmates, never fit in.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ Spelled out in black-and-white: Reason #4,657 why I don't fit in here. My dad's not a film marketing mogul, whatever the hell that is; he's a pharmacist. Back home we were far from poor. We were what I knew as normal. But no one had their own credit cards. I shopped at Target or Goodwill with saved-up cash, and we wouldn't just buy a five-dollar coffee without first doing the unfortunate math and realizing that the drink cost almost an hour's worth of after-school pay.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Jessie's Dad,

Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

When SN confirms that everyone at Wood Valley (save for a few kids attending on a scholarship) is wealthy, Jessie feels even more out of her element. In Chicago, she lived a decidedly middle-class life—and that way of life makes sense to her. To her, it's normal to shop for new things at Target or buy things secondhand at her local GoodWill. What's not normal, as far as she's concerned, is purchasing expensive coffee drinks without thinking twice about what that might mean for one's bank account. Again, this drives home the economic differences between Jessie and her peers at Wood Valley. Especially given that she mentions buying expensive coffee, this highlights one of the important ways Jessie literally cannot afford to fit in, since she doesn't feel comfortable spending the cash she does have on coffee—an activity that might allow her to get to know her classmates better and possibly even make friends.

These differences in socioeconomic status also helps to flesh out what Jessie thinks of as home. Home, for her, means that people are middle class. Her area of Los Angeles is, by default, not home simply because she doesn't recognize anything about how people live there.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ The problem was that Mom wasn't here. That she would never be anywhere again. When I thought about that for too long, which I didn't, when I could help it, I realized it didn't matter much where I slept.

Certain facts tend to render everything else irrelevant.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Rachel/Dad's New Wife, Jessie's Mom, Jessie's Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jessie tells the reader about how she reacted and felt when she and Dad arrived at Rachel's house in Los Angeles, which didn't feel like home then, about a month ago, and still doesn't feel like home now. Even though in most of her narration Jessie insists that home is Chicago, she reveals

here that it actually has much less to do with Chicago itself and more to do with the memory of her mom, who died about two years ago of cancer. Without Mom, no place feels like home—a clear indicator that it's people that make a place home, not the place itself.

However, Jessie's insistence that her mom's death means that it doesn't matter where she sleeps implies that she's also not trying as hard as she perhaps could to make this place feel like home. She's grieving, both for her mom and for her old life in Chicago, which is entirely understandable. The fact remains, though, that while Jessie has all the tools to make Los Angeles more of a home—she can connect with the people there, including Rachel and Dad—but due to her grief, she either cannot or is choosing not to.

☝☝ “My dad died of lung cancer,” Theo says, apropos of nothing, and takes another long hit. “That’s why I smoke. Figure if you can run twelve miles a day and get cancer anyway, I might as well live it up.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I know, right?” Theo puts out the joint, carefully saves what’s left for later. He stands up and looks me straight in the eye. No trace of his temper tantrum left. “Hey, for what it’s worth, I’m really sorry about your mom.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Sorry about your dad.”

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes, Theo (speaker), Rachel/Dad's New Wife, Jessie's Dad, Theo's Dad, Jessie's Mom

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Late in the evening after the disastrous family dinner, Jessie and Theo sit outside and talk about their deceased parents. It's interesting to note that up until this point, Jessie has spoken about her mom to the reader, but this is seemingly the first time that she's spoken to anyone about her mom out loud. This is also the first she's heard about Theo's dad. The fact that both Jessie and Theo have to be the ones to share with each other these very important things about their deceased parents—and specifically, that their parents didn't prep them about their new partner's deceased spouse—suggests that Dad and Rachel are trying to move on and, at least in practice, act like their old marriages don't exist.

Especially since this is the first reasonable conversation that Jessie and Theo have with each other, it becomes clear that talking about their deceased parents is important to them. For them at least, it's impossible to forget that they lost a loved one—and that their memories loom large, even if their parents have remarried. This is a clear indicator that Dad and Rachel are making mistakes in how they deal with their new blended families, and that specifically, it's impossible to forget those deceased loved ones even after a new marriage.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ This is intimate, and not in the way it was at dinner, when Rachel put her hand on my dad's, a gesture that on reflection seemed more for Theo's and my benefit. Now, they are bent together, forehead to forehead, and there's a photo album I've never seen before open on their laps. Must be Rachel's. Is she showing my dad her *before* pictures? Her dead husband?

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman, Rachel/Dad's New Wife, Jessie's Dad, Theo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

When Jessie inadvertently stumbles upon Dad and Rachel looking at a photo album one night, she recoils from the intimacy that she recognizes in the moment. This is the first time Jessie shows that she understands intimacy can take the form of something other than sex—she recognizes that Dad and Rachel are sharing a highly intimate experience, even if they're just quietly looking at photo albums. It's telling that Jessie can identify this in the adults around her but not necessarily in her own experiences—despite the fact that she spends so much time spilling her heart out to SN online in a very trusting and intimate way.

It's also telling that Jessie believes Rachel is sharing her “before” pictures with Dad. She suspects, in other words, that her dad and stepmother haven't forgotten their deceased spouses and *do* actually understand that their previous spouses still have a role to play in their current blended family—but they only make that clear to each other, not to their children who are in desperate need of hearing that their parent hasn't forgotten their former spouse.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ “You know how it is. Mean girls get mean in seventh grade and they stay that way until your ten-year reunion, when they want to be best friends again. At least, that's what my mom says.”

“It's funny how high school is high school everywhere,” I say, and smile at Dri. Try not to feel uncomfortable at the mention of moms, like it didn't set off an invisible flare in my chest. “I mean, this place is completely different than where I come from, but in some ways it's exactly the same.”

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes, Adrianna Sanchez/Dri (speaker), Crystal, Gem, Jessie's Mom

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

During gym class, Jessie and Dri discuss whether Gem and Crystal have always been rude, unpleasant people. The discovery that Gem and Crystal are, in many ways, virtually the same as every other teenage mean girl across the United States is somewhat comforting for Jessie—even if it's an unfortunate touchstone, this is one easily identifiable way that life in Los Angeles might not be all that different from life in Chicago.

Having this discussion and giving Dri an audience to share this sort of thing also helps Jessie and Dri strengthen their budding friendship. Jessie soon learns that Dri has an extensive, almost encyclopedic knowledge of everyone at Wood Valley, so it makes her feel good to be able to share what she knows with someone who cares—that is, someone who's new and needs to learn the ropes, like Jessie. Even if Jessie doesn't entirely realize it now, this suggests that when a person is trying to nurture a friendship, whether it's a budding relationship or an older one, listening and showing interest in what a new friend has to say is vital.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ She looks to me to back her up, and I wonder if my existence is a problem for her friendship with Agnes. Scar and I always sat alone at lunch. We weren't really interested in talking to anyone else. To be honest, I'm not sure how I'd feel if she had invited some new girl to sit with us. Dri not only invited me, but did so excitedly.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Scarlett, Agnes, Adrianna Sanchez/Dri

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

As Dri and Agnes debate something at lunch on the first day that Jessie sits with them, Jessie checks out of the conversation and instead wonders if befriending Dri will complicate Dri's relationship with Agnes. With this, Jessie shows that she understands that friendship is extremely complex, and that making new friends is hard and should be done strategically. Her ability to compare what's happening here to what would've probably happened with Scarlett also speaks to Jessie's growing maturity and ability to empathize with others, something that she'll continue to develop as she comes of age. Most importantly, she recognizes that she's in a precarious position as the new girl and as the new friend in this group. By sitting and mostly listening, Jessie is able to portray herself as relatively nonthreatening and not someone who's going to walk all over Agnes and Dri's friendship, a strategy that will hopefully help Agnes warm to her. This also gives Jessie the opportunity to learn as much as she can about Wood Valley High and the kids who go there, something she desperately needs in addition to friends.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☹️ Will I, one day, be able to sleep with a guy and not feel horribly awkward and tortured and not wonder what it all means? I assume so. But right now, the thought of that sort of exposure seems unimaginable, and mostly, if I'm totally honest, nothing short of terrifying.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Adrianna Sanchez/Dri, Scarlett, Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

As Jessie compares how she feels about sex now, at age 16, with how she assumes she'll feel about sex as an adult, she makes it clear that when she thinks about intimacy, sex, and growing up, she thinks mostly about sexual contact—not necessarily all the other kinds of intimacy that people engage in. As far as Jessie is concerned, she's not mature yet because she can't fathom being naked and having sex with someone. While this is understandable given that she's

young and has never had sex before, this leaves little room for all the ways in which Jessie already encounters intimacy in other forms with people she knows. For instance, simply having open conversations about sex with her female friends helps them deepen and strengthen their friendships, and, importantly, it doesn't require that any of them actually have sex—they can have opinions about sex and discuss it without being sexually active. Jessie's conversations with SN are also very emotionally intimate, and they become more so as the novel progresses. In these ways, Jessie is already becoming increasingly mature and figuring out new ways to be an adult in the world, even if she's not having sex and becoming mature in that specific way.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☹️ SN: how long ago?

Me: 765 days, five hours, twenty-two minutes. You?

SN: 196 days, one hour, three minutes.

Me: You count too?

SN: I count too.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes, Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman (speaker), Xander, Jessie's Mom

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Over instant message, Jessie and SN share how long it's been since their loved ones died, and Jessie is surprised to learn that SN also counts the days since his sister's passing. (Though readers later learn that he actually lost a brother, not a sister, but altered this detail to keep Jessie from guessing his identity.) In this moment, the closeness and intimacy between Jessie and SN deepens dramatically. She tells no one else that she counts the days since her mom died, which speaks to the degree of trust that has evolved between her and SN.

Getting closer to SN allows Jessie to process her grief in a new way, with someone else who understands exactly what she's going through. Their shared grief and willingness to be open with each other about all manner of things is what forms the basis for their relationship—and because of this, in many respects, it's possible to argue that Jessie's relationship with SN is one of the most mature and healthy relationships of the novel.

Chapter 15 Quotes

“So that’s how I lost my virginity. It counts, right?” Agnes asks me, and I decide that maybe I’ve been too quick to judge her. She’s funny and super honest and willing to laugh at herself. I get now why she and Dri are best friends.

“I vote yes,” I say, because it’s a hell of a lot closer than I’ve ever come to having a penis inserted into me.

“But Dri’s right too. I totally got half peened. How about you?” Agnes asks so casually it’s like she’s asking what my favorite subject is.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes, Agnes (speaker), Adrianna Sanchez/Dri

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

During a Friday night hangout with Agnes and Dri, Jessie listens to Agnes tell the story of the first time she had sex. The way that Agnes speaks about having sex is extremely offhand—it’s clear that while she cares a lot about whether or not her first time “counts,” the question of whether or not sex with her first partner was fulfilling or especially intimate isn’t one that interests her. Instead, this sexual experience provides her with social currency that she can then use to become closer friends with Dri and Jessie. In this sense, sex with romantic partners is merely a tool the girls can use to strengthen their platonic relationships with each other.

Jessie’s offhand comment to the reader about her own virginity suggests that she views sex in much the same way—and to her, sex feels very far off and very mature. Because of that, she’s far more willing to go along with Agnes’s insistence that her sexual experience counts, even if she was “half peened” (midway through, her partner remembered he was saving himself for marriage and insisted they stop).

For a moment, I think it would be preferable to listen to them have sex. This is somehow more intimate, more raw. Even worse than witnessing her midnight tears.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman, Theo, Jessie’s Dad, Rachel/Dad’s New Wife

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

As Jessie and Theo secretly listen to Rachel and Dad fight, Jessie decides that listening to a couple fight like this is more intimate than listening to people have sex. This represents another major leap in Jessie’s understanding of intimacy—namely, she realizes in this moment that intimacy is more than sex. Rather, intimacy extends to how couples speak to each other, touch each other in nonsexual ways, and even to how they fight, especially when they think no one is listening. This is somewhat disturbing for Jessie, as it shows her once again that she cannot continue to hold sex up as the epitome of intimacy. Rather, she needs to understand that it’s possible to cultivate intimacy—and see it at work in others’ relationships—without ever having sexual contact.

In its discussion of intimacy, this passage relates to how Jessie conceives of her relationship with SN. Though she consistently says that it’s not as valid as other, in-person relationships, this perspective misses the lesson she learns here: that intimacy can take many forms, and one isn’t less valid than another.

“You think they’re going to get a divorce?” Theo asks, and it surprises me that my heart sinks at the thought. Not because I particularly like living here, but because we have nothing to go back to. Our house is gone. Our Chicago lives. [...] When Rachel told my dad to not come back, did she expect me to leave too? Are we kicked out?

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes, Theo (speaker), Jessie’s Dad, Rachel/Dad’s New Wife

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Following Rachel and Dad’s explosive fight, Jessie realizes that much to her surprise, she doesn’t want them to get divorced, if only because she doesn’t think she has much to go back to in Chicago. This suggests that Jessie’s conception of home is beginning to change as she settles in in Los Angeles, makes friends, and learns how her new school works. That Jessie is settling at all is an extremely important development—she’s beginning to learn that she can make a home anywhere, as long as she’s with people she loves and trusts.

This fight, however, makes Jessie question whether she *can* actually trust the people she lives with. While she and Theo are slowly coming to an understanding with each other, Jessie has barely spoken to Rachel at all since she and Dad arrived—and she’s barely spoken to her dad, either. Because she’s had little time with them to discern that their marriage is not at risk, hearing their fight a few minutes ago is extra destabilizing. She has no basis for how Dad and Rachel fight, so while the disagreement might be nothing, it nevertheless feels deeply unsettling to Jessie. And because Jessie can’t trust that Dad and Rachel are going to stay together, Jessie is even less willing to try to make Los Angeles and Rachel’s house in particular her home.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ “They’re both idiots.”

“Stop it.”

“They are. They thought they could just *insert replacement here* and forget that someone they loved actually died. Even I’m more emotionally mature than that.”

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes, Theo (speaker), Rachel/Dad’s New Wife, Jessie’s Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Not long after Theo and Jessie overhear Dad and Rachel’s explosive fight, Theo insists that their parents are going about this huge life transition all wrong. He succinctly identifies exactly where their parents are messing up: at least as far as Jessie and Theo can tell, their parents expect their children to simply accept a new replacement stepparent. And to make matters worse, neither Rachel nor Dad have acknowledged their dead spouses much or at all in front of their children, which makes it seem to Jessie and Theo as though it’s inappropriate to talk about them or openly grieve for their lives before their parent died.

Because Dad and Rachel refuse to acknowledge their children’s deceased parents, Jessie and Theo feel even more unmoored and unsure of how things work in their new blended household. Though Jessie has a photo in her room of her mom, it feels wildly inappropriate and uncomfortable to Jessie whenever Rachel notices it—which makes Jessie feel even more like she can’t acknowledge her mother if she wants to live in this house. Even if Jessie and Theo are young, they recognize the importance of honoring and

remembering their deceased parents—and this sense, are far more mature than the people currently caring for them.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ No, I don’t want to leave, but I don’t want to feel like this either. Like an interloper in someone else’s home. If I do throw up today, which is more likely than not at this point, I don’t want to have to worry about soiling Rachel’s bathroom. I don’t want to feel in constant danger of eviction.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Rachel/Dad’s New Wife, Jessie’s Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

When Jessie grudgingly joins Dad for pancakes after Jessie’s night out at a party, Jessie and Dad fight and Dad asks if Jessie honestly wants to leave Los Angeles. This is an uncomfortable question for Jessie, because the answer is complicated. At this point, Jessie is coming to learn that there’s a lot to like about Los Angeles—Jessie likes her new friends and it’s refreshing to go to a school that prioritizes and celebrates academics—but this doesn’t change or outweigh the fact that Jessie doesn’t feel like she has a place to call home. Jessie is still living in one of Rachel’s guest rooms, with abstract paintings she doesn’t like or appreciate on the walls and soap in the bathroom that seems too expensive to use. What Jessie wants is a place that feels familiar—and so far, Rachel’s house doesn’t feel familiar or like a home at all. It feels like a fancy hotel and Jessie consistently behaves in ways as to not make a mess, make too much noise, or otherwise disturb or damage the pristine house. This is understandably unsettling, and Jessie pins the fact that she feels like this on the way that Dad has effectively abandoned her since they moved here. And because Jessie has had so little contact with Dad and so few opportunities for him to assure her that she’s safe and wanted here, this place still doesn’t feel safe, trustworthy, or like home.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ We are sitting outside during our free period, our faces tilted up toward the sun like hungry cartoon flowers. I now have sunglasses—Dri and Agnes helped me pick out a knockoff pair—and I love them. They feel transformative, like I'm somehow a different person with large squares of plastic covering my face.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Agnes, Adrianna Sanchez/Dri

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jessie explains to the reader that her new sunglasses make her feel like a different person. This isn't just a feeling—the fact that Jessie has decided to purchase sunglasses at all indicates that she is indeed a different person from the one that moved here about two months ago. At first, Jessie was disturbed by everyone's sunglasses. They were, to her eyes, markers of wealth, as most of her classmates wear designer sunglasses that are very expensive. They also functioned to distance wearers from the non-wearers—like Jessie—who aren't adjusted enough to the Los Angeles sun to need or want to wear them. Wearing and loving her sunglasses is an indicator that Jessie is adjusting to Los Angeles and is well on her way to calling this new city home. It's also telling that Dri and Agnes helped Jessie pick out her sunglasses. This is another way for the girls to build intimacy in their friendship and strengthen their bonds with each other.

☝ And at least one mystery has been solved: Gem can do or say whatever she wants because her dad pays off the administration. I guess that's what a little tax fraud buys you.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Mrs. Pollack, Gem

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

On the day that Gem's bullying reaches its height—she tripped Jessie in front of Mrs. Pollack, in addition to audibly

calling Jessie horrible names—Mrs. Pollack botches her conversation with Jessie. Though it was an attempt to help, all she really does is make it clear to Jessie that Gem is untouchable, since her dad is a major donor to the school. This spells it out for Jessie that the adults in charge can say whatever they want about bullying (Wood Valley does, in fact, have a zero-tolerance policy), but the adults are truly helpless when it comes to making Gem stop. In fact, calling Gem out or punishing her for her behavior may only make things worse for Jessie, as it would make it appear as though Jessie is an outsider who has come to ruin the lives of members of the in-group, like Gem. Notably, Gem is able to get away with her horrible behavior because of her family's money, which highlights another way in which Jessie believes she'll never fit in. Rachel may be rich, but she's not rich enough to pay off the administration to excuse any and all of Jessie or Theo's possible bad behavior. Even as Jessie integrates more fully into her new, blended family, that still doesn't give her the protection she needs from bullies like Gem.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ There aren't pictures of him around, which would be weird, but then I realize there aren't very many pictures at all. [...]

The walls of my old house were covered with pictures of my family. Each of my school photos were framed and mounted in chronological order, even the ones where I was caught with my eyes closed [...]

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Rachel/Dad's New Wife, Jessie's Mom, Jessie's Dad, Theo's Dad, Theo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In the car on the way home from Giving Day, Jessie and Theo discuss Theo's dad, and it occurs to Jessie that unlike in her childhood home, there are no photos of Theo's biological family here in Los Angeles. While it's very likely that this is simply a matter of differing family culture—some families make more of a point to display photos than others—it nevertheless compounds Jessie's feeling that she'll never fit in here. She comes from a tight-knit environment where every photo, even the bad ones, were treasured. Because of this, it's strange and even outright uncomfortable for her to live in a place where family history doesn't exist for all to see on the walls of the house—she has

to talk to Theo, like she's doing now, to learn anything about how he grew up.

Jessie also sees the absence of photographs at Rachel's house as evidence that Rachel believes that both Jessie and Theo shouldn't think so much about their biological families and should instead throw themselves into this new, blended family. Because their living parents aren't willing to acknowledge or celebrate their deceased spouses, it sends the message that their children shouldn't do that either—and that makes the house feel even less welcoming to Jessie as she attempts to make a home there.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝ When I come home to find Rachel in my room, I remember that this is not my room at all. This is Rachel's guest room, and my sleeping here confirms what I already know: I am merely an interloper.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Jessie's Dad, Rachel/Dad's New Wife

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

The days since Jessie's fight with Dad have been horrendous—she's suffered major bullying in addition to being in a fight with her dad—and it's simply the icing on the cake to come home to find Rachel invasively in her bedroom. To Jessie, this makes it clear that she's never going to be able to call Rachel's house home. It is, after all, "Rachel's guest room"—not Jessie's very own bedroom. The very language that Jessie uses to describe the house and her room drives home that she feels no ownership over this house—there's nothing in it that represents her, save for her photograph of her mom in this bedroom.

This represents a major failing on Rachel's part, as overlooking Jessie's need for a safe, private, and individualized bedroom is one of the major reasons that Jessie doesn't feel at home here. Both Rachel and Dad have made mistakes in this regard, as they didn't consult with their children on how to make the whole blended family thing work. Rather, Dad and Rachel, in Jessie's mind, tossed Jessie in this room and expected her to make it work—alone, with no support, in a house that feels entirely unfamiliar. It's not surprising that Jessie feels this way; the novel emphasizes again and again that Rachel and Dad's behavior is no way to make someone feel safe, loved, and at home.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝ I will tell her about the mess I've made of things, how my new life feels on the verge of unraveling, and she will tell me how to fix it. [...]

And she'll remind me that everything that is new always feels tenuous, that a lot of this, maybe even most of this, is in my head.

In T minus four hours, I will be home again. Even though my mom won't be there, at least, finally, I will be someplace I recognize.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Jessie's Mom, Scarlett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

On the flight to Chicago, Jessie thinks through how her visit with Scarlett will unfold—and tellingly, it all has to do with what Scarlett is going to do for Jessie. Though Jessie doesn't realize it yet, she hasn't been effectively nurturing her friendship with Scarlett since she moved to Los Angeles. Jessie is getting a lot out of their friendship—after all, up until this visit, Scarlett has been the voice of reason and an on-call giver of advice for Jessie at all times of the day and night—but Jessie isn't showing Scarlett the same kind of interest or respect by asking what life has been like for Scarlett since Jessie left.

Jessie also doubles down on her belief that home is a place—Chicago—and not necessarily about people. Though she occasionally expresses the understanding that home is more about people than it is about a certain locale, she's unable to do so in this situation because she's so excited about being back in a place where things finally feel familiar and safe again. This also drives home how neglectful Dad has been since they moved—he hasn't made Rachel's house a safe place for Jessie—and thus, as far as Jessie is concerned, home is the last place she felt safe: Chicago.

☝ For a moment, I switch things around: think about what it would have been like if Scar had been the one who took off and I'd been the one left behind. What it would have been like to start all over with the people we have known forever. All of those people we had already chosen, for one reason or another, *not* to be friends with. Until now, it has never once occurred to me that my leaving happened to anyone but me.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Scarlett

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

When Scarlett finally forces the issue and makes Jessie aware of how hard things have been for her since Jessie moved away, Jessie takes a moment and realizes that Scarlett is right. By extension, Jessie begins to understand that she hasn't been a great friend to Scarlett. While Scarlett has spent much of her time since Jessie left coaching Jessie through her new life in Los Angeles, Jessie has only engaged in conversation about Scarlett's life when Scarlett has brought things up—and even then, it's been fairly cursory. In this moment then, Jessie has to grow up a little bit as she realizes that she's not the center of Scarlett's orbit or the only important one in the girls' friendship. Even though Jessie is navigating a whole host of changes and difficulties in Los Angeles, she can't ignore the fact that she still needs to show her friends the respect and care that they show her, especially if she expects to keep them after moving far away and making it much harder to maintain the relationship.

☞ I turn off my phone. Run up the stairs to the small bathroom. Throw up my DeLucci's pizza and six cans of beer and don't even feel the tiniest bit of nostalgic relief when I see Scar's map of the world shower curtain or even the Cat in the Hat soap dispenser that has been there for as long as I can remember.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman, Scarlett

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

After fighting with SN and having a horrible time at Scarlett's get-together in her honor, Jessie vomits and feels totally unmoored. It's especially telling that Jessie makes note of what exactly is around her and what she's throwing up. She's throwing up pizza that should be amazing and familiar, and she's in a bathroom that she's been using since childhood and that hasn't changed a bit since then. Despite the familiarity of all these things, it's impossible for Jessie to feel nostalgic or at home—an indicator that when she's at

odds with the person who makes this place home, the place itself cannot feel like home. This drives home for Jessie that whether she likes or realizes it, she is adjusting to Los Angeles and she is moving further and further away from her friends in Chicago. It's no longer easy to connect with Scarlett, given that Scarlett now has a boyfriend and is friends with people that Scarlett and Jessie had previously avoided. Nothing about Chicago feels familiar anymore to Jessie in a way that's comforting—and thus, she concludes, Chicago might not be home at all.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☞ And as stupid as it is, I admit I think about SN that way too. Not Caleb, not the real-life version of SN, but the one on my screen. The one who is always there for me.

He's not real, of course. We're all better versions of ourselves when we get that extra time to craft the perfect message. The SN I know and obsess about can't translate into real life. He's a virtual soul mate, not a real one. I do realize that.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Caleb, Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman, Adam Kravitz, Scarlett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

As Jessie and Scarlett talk about Scarlett's obsession with Adam, Jessie clarifies for the reader how she sees her relationship with SN: as something that exists entirely online, in a different realm that she believes doesn't count as real or meaningful. Though there's certainly merit to what Jessie has to say—she's right that talking online can give people extra time to craft a persona that shows off one's best qualities, rather than a person's dark or unattractive sides—she also grossly underestimates and undervalues what she's getting out of her relationship with SN. Whoever SN is, he's still giving Jessie a place to process her grief for her mother and connect with another person who understands Wood Valley on a much deeper level than Jessie ever will. And furthermore, SN can—and ultimately does—translate into a real-life friend and romantic interest for Jessie, once she uncovers his identity. Essentially, because of her youth, immaturity, and lack of experience, Jessie jumps to an easy conclusion when she insists that her relationship with SN isn't real. It's far more difficult to recognize that while their relationship may be different

than an in-person relationship, it still is an important source of nourishment, support, and friendship for the both of them.

💬 “I think he’s Liam.”

“No way,” I say.

“It explains why he would dump Gem for you.”

I smile at Scar but not because any part of me hopes SN is Liam. [...]

“You’ve been listening,” I say, and feel so grateful she’s still my friend, that she will be, hopefully forever.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes, Scarlett (speaker), Gem, Liam Sandler, Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

As Jessie and Scarlett discuss who SN is, Jessie is thrilled not by their conversation itself, but by the realization that Scarlett has been truly listening to her for the last two months. This drives home one of the novel’s main points about friendship: that in order to make friends and keep them, one must be willing to listen. Having Scarlett confirm that she has been honestly listening to all of Jessie’s ramblings for the last few months gives Jessie the courage to trust that Scarlett will continue to be there for her going forward. It also gives Jessie an example to emulate. If Jessie chooses to change her behavior and listen to Scarlett in the same way that Scarlett has taken the time to listen to her, their relationship can continue to thrive and grow as the girls get older. If Jessie chooses to continue as she has been—not listening much to Scarlett or showing much interest in Scarlett’s life—the friendship will inevitably fade.

Chapter 33 Quotes

💬 I think about the life I’ve built here. SN and Ethan, or maybe SN/Ethan, Dri and Agnes, even Theo. Liam too, I guess. How my new English teacher said I’m one of her brightest students, which is a huge compliment, considering I go to a school that sends *five* kids to Harvard each year. How Wood Valley may be filled with rich brats, but it also has a beautiful library, and I get to work in a bookstore, and I’m reading college-level poetry with a boy who can recite it back to me. In a strange way, thanks to Rachel, LA has turned out to be nerd heaven.

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Adrianna Sanchez/Dri, Rachel/Dad’s New Wife, Mrs. Pollack, Liam Sandler, Theo, Agnes, Ethan/Somebody Nobody/The Batman, Jessie’s Dad

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

When Dad offers seriously to take Jessie back to Chicago so she can finish school there, Jessie takes stock of all she has in Los Angeles and realizes that, all things considered, it’s not so bad. This is the point at which Jessie truly understands that though she’s still in the process of figuring out where she belongs in Los Angeles and who she is, Los Angeles is well on its way to becoming home to her. She also mentions a number of specific people that make this place feel like home, driving home again that people make a place feel like home; home isn’t something that refers simply to a place. Because she’s been able to form these strong relationships with these specific people, even a city that’s still unfamiliar and strange to her can feel more welcoming.

Realizing that Jessie has Rachel to thank for all of this is also a major step in Jessie’s relationship with Rachel. She begins to understand that while she doesn’t know Rachel well and hasn’t made any effort to change that, the fact still remains that Rachel has done something amazing for Jessie by giving her the opportunity to live someplace where she’ll be able to thrive in a better way than she would’ve in Chicago. While things may have been easier socially in Chicago, friends on the whole aren’t exclusive to Chicago—Jessie can make (and has made) friends in Los Angeles, and this allows her to take advantage of the academic leg up that Wood Valley affords her.

●● This is a house full of pain, of bad juju, as Theo said, but it's also a house of starting over. Maybe we need to light a few candles. Better yet, start putting things on all of the white walls. "You know, I mean, this place is beautiful, but maybe you should put out some pictures too. Of your husband—I mean your, uh, other husband, Theo's dad, and of Theo as a kid. So he can remember."

Related Characters: Jessie Holmes (speaker), Jessie's Mom, Theo's Dad, Theo, Rachel/Dad's New Wife, Jessie's Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

When Rachel comes to Jessie's room to apologize for her absent behavior and to give Jessie permission to decorate

as she sees fit, Jessie begins to realize that she does have ownership over the house—and she can suggest things they can do to make the house feel more like home to everyone. This is a major turning point for Jessie, as up until now, she's felt like a guest in Rachel's house and hasn't even felt comfortable using the fancy soap in her own bathroom. The suggestion that they light candles represents Jessie's newfound realization that they need to move forward and do things that help her, Dad, Rachel, and Theo feel like a cohesive family in a warm and welcoming home. Importantly, however, Jessie also recognizes that their family doesn't just include those four people. Rather, it's important—and necessary—to remember Theo's dad and Jessie's mom, who may be deceased but are still deeply important to the new family. They're a part of the family and only through remembering that and memorializing them can Jessie begin to move forward and feel more comfortable in this house.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

It's been 733 days since Jessie's mom died, 45 days since Dad eloped with a woman he met online, a month since they moved to California, and a week since Jessie started at a new school. She receives a mysterious email from someone who calls himself Somebody Nobody. He purports to be a 16-year-old classmate and admits that he's been watching Jessie; she stands out when everyone else is "blond, vacant-eyed Barbies and Kens." Normally, he's not interested in what other people think, but Jessie intrigues him—and he'd like to offer up his expertise on Wood Valley High School. He can offer advice on who to befriend, what to eat in the cafeteria, and he'll tell her now to be careful of Mr. Shackleman, the gym teacher—he likes to look at girls' butts.

In her reply, Jessie refuses. She believes she'll end up a joke on Tumblr if he's pranking her. They banter for a few emails and then, Jessie sends a sexual innuendo and immediately feels weird—she'd never say something like that in person. In real life, she doesn't know how to do more than kiss. Her only kissing experience, however, was a bad one with Adam Kravitz in ninth grade. Jessie reminds herself that she needs to be careful, since she doesn't know who SN is and he's probably a cruel jokester, not a secret admirer like in a romantic book. And Jessie lied in her emails too; she's not tough, especially after moving to "the Valley" and starting at Wood Valley High.

Jessie knows she'll never look back fondly on high school and remembers how her mom always said that there are two kinds of people: those who love high school and those who spend their lives recovering from high school. Mom also said that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but now she's dead. Jessie wonders if she'll ever recover from high school.

It's telling that Somebody Nobody takes notice of Jessie because she looks so different from everyone else. Clearly, Jessie doesn't fit in and is going to have to work hard if that's something she wants to do. Somebody Nobody's offer is, at its core, an offer of friendship, as he's someone who will be able to introduce Jessie to how this California school operates. That is, they'll be able to develop a friendship as Jessie listens to what he has to say and uses what she learns to become more comfortable here in California.



Jessie is clearly uncomfortable with her lack of expertise when it comes to sexual contact with boys. Though it's something she's interested in experimenting with—as evidenced by her sexual innuendo she uses in her email—actually taking steps to be sexy in person isn't something she's yet willing to do. This reminds readers that Jessie is still young, though it's telling that Jessie links her immaturity simply to her sexual inexperience. Maturity comes from a variety of places, not just one's sexual experiences.



High school is more fraught for Jessie than it is for many, simply because her mom died right around the time she started high school. She, importantly, doesn't mention that her dad can provide emotional support, which suggests she lost a lot of closeness and support when her mom died.



CHAPTER 2

Googling “who is SN?” turns up no results, so Jessie thinks back to her first day of school. It was awful, but no more awful than every day has been since her mom died. She figures that she must’ve caught someone’s attention with how pathetic she was. The first day was embarrassing on so many levels. Jessie’s stepbrother, Theo, pretended she didn’t exist and drove to school alone, so Jessie got stuck in Los Angeles traffic by herself. At school, she parked in the lot filled with luxury cars and joined what she thought was her first period class, which was sitting in a circle on the lawn. All the girls were wearing tiny dresses on their slim bodies, while Jessie was wearing dark jeans. She sat down between two attractive guys.

One guy, Caleb, was talking about how he climbed Kilimanjaro over the summer and built a school in a rural African village. Jessie starts to clap, but she’s the only one. The next guy, Liam, says he interned at Google—the food was great—and backpacked through India. He amends his story to say that he stayed in nice hotels to please his parents and got an application essay out of the experience. The teacher, Mr. Shackleman, calls on Jessie to speak next. Jessie says nervously that she just moved from Chicago and spent her time working at a smoothie joint at the mall. The other kids look pitying. Mr. Shackleman asks Jessie if she’s a senior, rudely says he’s not Mrs. Murray, and points Jessie inside. Only later did Jessie realize she had grass stuck to her backside.

Two weeks later, Jessie stands in the cafeteria and wonders where to sit. She can’t sit with Theo, who ignores her and spends time with a girl named Ashby. Jessie is privately shocked that Theo is so popular because in Chicago, Theo would’ve been teased for being so flamboyantly gay. Jessie considers eating in the fancy, elaborate library (her library in Chicago was a “book closet”), vows not to eat in the bathroom, and then heads outside. She passes the Koffee Kart and notes a guy in a Batman T-shirt and a gaggle of girls there. The Batman ignores the girls as they try to get him to walk with them. Jessie thinks the Batman is cute, but he looks sad and exhausted. As Jessie walks past, one of the girls snaps “What are you staring at?” at her. It’s the first thing anything has said to her.

Everything that happens on Jessie’s first day makes it clear that Jessie doesn’t fit in. She doesn’t have the right car (while she never says what she drives, the fact that she points out others’ luxury cars suggests that hers isn’t a luxury model), she doesn’t wear the right clothes, and she can’t even turn to her new stepbrother for support.



As far as Jessie’s concerned, building a school in Africa is something worth applauding. The fact that no one else thinks so points to the fact that at Wood Valley, where everyone is wealthy and well connected, it’s not impressive for someone to spend their summer doing service work in Africa. Liam makes this clear when he notes that what he really got out of his summer travels was an application essay. The point of these trips isn’t to experience different cultures or have fun—it’s to beef up one’s college application. Thus, Jessie’s summer job is pitiable, since she’s clearly not going to be able to write about it and get into college with it.



When the first thing Jessie hears is something that makes her feel unwelcome, it again drives home how out of place she is at Wood Valley. The culture is, in so many ways, foreign to her, so it’s unthinkable to her that she’ll ever be able to call this place home. Further, experiencing bullying like this on her first day underlines the fact that she’s attempting to infiltrate an insular community that doesn’t take well to newcomers.



CHAPTER 3

Jessie settles on a bench and tells herself it's not so bad; people are mean everywhere. She tries to focus on the sunny weather and realizes that while she'd normally roll her eyes that everyone wears designer **sunglasses**, they need them. Most of all, Jessie misses her best friend Scarlett, who can come up with biting comebacks on the fly. Jessie wishes she knew more about how this world works as the blonde girls walk past, giggling. One asks if "she" is for real and calls attention to a scrunchie, clearly making fun of Jessie. The girl is perfectly beautiful.

Jessie's face burns and she tries not to cry. She texts Scarlett that everyone here is size 0 or 00. Scarlett refuses to assure Jessie she's not fat and reminds Jessie to not "go L.A. on [her]." Jessie says she'd have to talk to people to do that and snaps a selfie for Scarlett. Scarlett tells her to take out the scrunchie and asks who the attractive guy behind her is. Jessie squints at the selfie and sees the Batman in it. She deletes the photo.

Attempting to rationalize bullying as something that happens everywhere is a way for Jessie to try to make sense of her uncomfortable new situation. What she doesn't yet entirely understand is that because of the wealthy student body at Wood Valley, the bullying here takes place on an entirely different level than elsewhere—and because Jessie doesn't have the wealth to fit in, she's a prime target for these bullies.



What Scarlett wants is for Jessie to not change. While this is understandable, this doesn't necessarily help Jessie cope—if Jessie is to even get through a single day at Wood Valley without crying, she's going to have to adapt in some way to her new surroundings.



CHAPTER 4

Mrs. Pollack asks if anyone has read T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Nobody raises a hand, though Jessie did read it a few years ago. Her mom used to read poetry, and Jessie regrets not asking her mom about all the notes she made in the margins. This regret, she thinks, is the worst part of someone dying. Now, all of Mom's books are molding in a storage unit in Chicago.

Jessie likes Mrs. Pollack. She introduced Jessie on the first day but didn't make her stand up. Mrs. Pollack says that *The Waste Land* is hard and gets the class to cheer before telling them to find a partner with whom to read the poem for the next two months. Everyone else finds a partner immediately. As Jessie prepares to raise her hand to ask for help, someone taps her shoulder. It's the Batman. Jessie nods.

Jessie is clearly preoccupied with thoughts of her mom and the life she left behind. While this is entirely understandable—grief isn't something that goes away quickly—it does mean that Jessie is perhaps less willing to try to integrate into her new life in California. Because she doesn't have friends here, she turns to the one person who will always be there for her: her mom's memory.



Mrs. Pollack seems to be aware of some of the ins and outs of the social hierarchy at school, given that she spared Jessie the embarrassment of having to stand up on the first day. This suggests that there are authority figures Jessie can trust to look out for her.



Jessie spends the rest of class wondering why the Batman picked her. Maybe she looks smart, or maybe he's just doing a nice thing. He did see the blonde girls—who Jessie learned are hilariously named Gem and Crystal—torment Jessie. As the bell rings, the Batman stops at Jessie's desk. Jessie stares at him, overwhelmed by how attractive he is, and asks if they should exchange numbers. The Batman says he'll do the assignment and put their names on it. He assures Jessie she'll get an A and leaves. Jessie is flabbergasted. She texts Scarlett, who offers condolences and says that SN is totally a secret admirer. Scarlett also suggests that Jessie find someone local to help her, specifically SN.

Jessie emails SN and asks for help. She adds an aside that if SN is Deena, Deena wins. SN asks who Deena is and answers Jessie's questions. He tells Jessie to befriend Adrianna Sanchez, explains that WV Giving Day is a service day with Habitat for Humanity, and the lunch cards aren't preloaded. Jessie asks if everyone is rich and SN confirms that except for a few scholarship kids, everyone is indeed rich. Jessie feels even more out of her element. Dad is a pharmacist, and in Chicago, they were normal in terms of finances. Dad and Mom traveled instead of buying stuff. Suddenly, Jessie feels enraged at the Batman for insisting on doing their project. She actually has to *earn* a scholarship to college and she knows what he proposes is technically cheating. Jessie thinks she hates everything and tells SN that the school sucks.

CHAPTER 5

Jessie remembers how Dad said, "Home, sweet home" the first time they walked into Dad's new wife's house. While Jessie's house in Chicago was squat and tough, this one is tall, shiny, and entirely white. Jessie is terrified to stain anything since Dad's new wife is paying for her school tuition. It doesn't feel like home, especially since Jessie sleeps in a guest room. There's abstract art on the walls and fancy soaps in the bathroom. The only clues that Jessie lives here are a stuffed animal and a photo of Jessie and her mom. Dad, though, was happy and exhausted—and after two years of him being sad and helpless when Mom was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer, Jessie went along with his excitement.

When the Batman completely brushes Jessie off, it makes Jessie feel even more like she doesn't matter. Not only does she have to suffer the indignity of Gem and Crystal's bullying, now she can't even do an assignment she's secretly excited to do. It's even more of a letdown since Jessie had hoped that the Batman might actually be a nice person and a friend. Scarlett is onto something when she suggests Jessie find a local friend—although Scarlett can provide support, she can't help Jessie navigate Wood Valley as well as someone local can.



Though having it confirmed that everyone at Wood Valley is wealthy doesn't make Jessie feel any better, it does spell out exactly what she's up against. Once again, Jessie compares her old life to her new one, focusing most of her attention on how Wood Valley is horrible by comparison. With this kind of a mindset, it'll be even harder for Jessie to integrate into Wood Valley—but deciding to call the Batman out on his bad behavior is a step in the right direction. By standing up for herself, Jessie can begin to make a place for herself.



It's telling that Jessie refers to her new stepmom as "Dad's new wife." Refusing to refer to her as a stepmom or use her name indicates that Jessie has no desire to get to know this woman. Meanwhile, everything about this house makes Jessie feel as though she's in some sort of fancy hotel, not necessarily in a place she should call home. In particular, sleeping in a guest room heightens Jessie's sense that she doesn't belong here. It makes her feel like a temporary guest and as though she has no ownership over the house and her new life.



Dad lost weight and hair when Mom got sick. Jessie took over grocery shopping and household chores while Dad fought with insurance companies. Jessie almost forgot how happy they were before Mom got sick. Even today, Jessie doesn't know how to talk about this, or about her mom. On that first day in Los Angeles, Jessie thought the house was pretty, but it didn't have Mom. Dad's new wife asked Jessie to call her Rachel. She was a shock, since Jessie had only figured out a month before that Dad even had a girlfriend, let alone had gotten married. Jessie finds Rachel exhausting to be around; she's tiny but loud. Today, Rachel announces that there will be a family dinner. Usually, Jessie eats in her bedroom alone and tries not to burden Gloria, the house manager.

Jessie grudgingly leaves her bedroom and follows Theo downstairs. Theo is rude, so Jessie decides to be an angel. Rachel says they have exciting news: Dad got a job. Jessie is relieved and glad that Rachel is so enthusiastic—Dad's salary probably won't be much more than Gloria's. Dad says he'll be working at the pharmacy counter at the Ralph's grocery store near Jessie's school, though he'll be an intern until he passes the exam to practice in California. It's a good job and provides dental insurance. Theo yells in indignation that he's already humiliated. He throws his fork and storms off. Jessie thinks that she's always been proud of her dad's job and is thrilled he's getting dental insurance.

Later, Jessie sits on the deck and wonders if Theo, Rachel, and Theo's dad all sat down to dinner before their lives changed. Theo slumps down next to Jessie, starts to roll a joint, and announces that he's not an asshole. Jessie says all evidence suggests he is and asks if Rachel will be upset about the marijuana. Theo explains that it's prescription. He smiles and offers it to Jessie, but she refuses. He also explains that since a kid died from a heroin overdose last year, Rachel should be thrilled it's *just* marijuana. Theo continues that in other circumstances, they could be friends, but Dad is horrible. Jessie says *life* is horrible for her; people said hi to her in Chicago.

Unprompted, Theo says Theo's dad died of lung cancer. This is why Theo smokes; he figures he should live it up if someone who ran 12 miles per day got lung cancer and died. Jessie offers her condolences, and Theo begs Jessie to start eating in the kitchen to make Gloria happy.

Jessie's aside that this house doesn't contain her mom is a clue that Jessie understands that it's people who make a home, not necessarily a particular place. Home, for Jessie, is where her mom is. However, as Jessie describes life in the two years before the move and after Mom's death, it becomes clear that the house in Chicago wasn't necessarily home either—it also didn't contain Mom. Then, when Jessie talks about the shock of finding out that Dad got married, it shows that she's been given few reasons to trust the adults in her life.



Jessie is more than willing to give Rachel credit for her enthusiasm. This offers hope that Rachel and Jessie will be able to have a civil, if not actually positive, relationship as time wears on. Theo's tantrum shows that while he's coming at things from a place of privilege, he's in the same boat as Jessie: he doesn't want to look middle class and suffer the wrath of his peers.



When Theo makes the overture to sit down with Jessie, it also offers hope that Jessie and Theo might be able to form some sort of relationship, even if things might be rocky with their parents. He also begins to share important information about Wood Valley culture when he mentions that a kid overdosed on heroin; it seems as though this is something that shook the community and that they're still healing from.



Mentioning his dad also allows Theo to make it clear that even if his mom might be married again, his dad is still an important figure in his life and shouldn't be forgotten. In his case, he understands that this blended family can't work unless they all honor their deceased loved ones.



CHAPTER 6

Jessie emails SN to complain about how unhappy she is, but she thinks she shouldn't have written. It's about midnight and she decides she needs some tea. Jessie creeps down the stairs, but as she starts to cross the living room, she sees Dad and Rachel on a couch under a single reading light. They can't see her. They look intimate sitting there, looking at a photo album. It must be Rachel's. She looks like she's crying, and Dad might be too. Jessie feels sick and imagines the photos in the album. She wonders if Dad showed Rachel their photos too and feels ready to cry. Everything feels broken. Jessie creeps back upstairs.

When Jessie observes that this moment between Dad and Rachel is intimate, it begins to show that she's learning that intimacy can be more than sex. It can be about sharing one's history with another person, like what Dad and Rachel are doing with the photos. It can also mean talking to SN online, which Jessie is doing—but which she doesn't necessarily see as being intimate or especially important.



CHAPTER 7

The next day, Gem insults Jessie's Gap jeans, so Jessie turns to Adrianna and compliments her glasses. Adrianna thanks Jessie, smiles, and mouths "Bitches" in reference to Gem and Crystal. After class, Jessie bravely approaches the Batman at the Koffee Kart, reminds herself that he's not her type, and watches a group of girls try to convince him to come to a party. His lack of interest is impressive. When he finally turns to Jessie, she insists on working together on the project or splitting up. She says it's against the school honor code, which makes him smirk. Jessie feels suddenly stupid and like crying, but the Batman smiles and it transforms his moody face into that of a goofy teenager. He agrees to work with Jessie and introduces himself as Ethan.

Jessie takes Gem's bullying and, instead of wallowing, turns it into something positive. Reaching out to Adrianna gives her the one thing that will help her stand up to Gem's bullying: friendship. Ethan's smile offers hope that she might be able to find friendship with him too, if he will agree to work with someone like Jessie. This bravery, however, is difficult to maintain, hence Jessie's tears. Trying to fit in is difficult, emotional work for her.



In gym class later, Jessie and Adrianna—who goes by Dri—walk the track together, giggling at Mr. Shackleman constantly reaching for his crotch. Dri wonders if he's trying to hide an erection from watching Gem and Crystal run. She explains that Gem and Crystal haven't always been horrible; they got that way in seventh grade and, according to Dri's mom, will be like that until their 10-year reunion. Jessie muses that high school is high school everywhere and ignores the tightness in her chest from Dri's mention of a mother. Jessie also thinks that Scarlett would like Dri and repeats one of SN's lines to test if Dri is SN. Dri shows no recognition and pulls out her inhaler. She apologizes for looking dumb, but Jessie thinks that when they're better friends, she'll tell Dri that she doesn't need to be sorry.

Dri's friendship is immediately helpful for Jessie, as Dri is able to share all that she knows about Wood Valley and its characters, while Jessie can soak up this knowledge and put it to work as she tries to fit in. Jessie also gets to mentally take note of all the things she can say to Dri when they're better friends, which indicates that she's in this for the long haul and knows how to be a good friend.



CHAPTER 8

Theo comes into the kitchen wearing impossibly tight jeans and a leather vest. He flexes his arms and tosses Jessie a fancy juice box. Jessie catches it, thinking that if she'd known Theo was home, she wouldn't have left her room in her clay facemask. The juice is revolting. They discuss Theo's outfit—Jessie says he looks like a biker, but he was going for a rocker look—and Jessie realizes that Theo might not be confident all the time. Theo asks if Jessie is coming to the party tonight and uses one of SN's expressions. Jessie refuses Theo's snarky invitation to dress her up and take her out.

After Theo leaves, Jessie emails SN to ask if he's at the party. SN asks if they can instant message instead of email. He admits that he was at the party, but now he's just sitting in his car. He also says they can't text since he'd have to give up his identity. SN checks if Jessie is feeling better after her horrible week and says that he's not having the best year either. When SN says that Jessie has "sad eyes" and a "sad brow," Jessie stops typing. She thinks that Mom always warned her that she'd get a wrinkle from furrowing her brow and hopes she doesn't look sad all the time. SN messages again and says that Jessie's brow is great the way it is. He tells Jessie that the party was a typical party, but it feels unimportant. Talking to Jessie, however, feels important.

CHAPTER 9

Jessie shares that before her mom died, she and Scarlett used to talk about what would make the perfect day. Jessie's perfect day wasn't anything crazy—it maybe contained a first kiss, but it was mostly about not feeling shy or stubbing her toe. Jessie now thinks she can't have a perfect day without Mom. All days before Mom died seem perfect in retrospect. Jessie shares that she and Mom had an unusually close relationship. Even though Mom read the Harry Potter series to Jessie, Jessie can no longer remember Mom's voice when she reads the books. She thinks that she'll never feel like she belongs to someone again, and that maybe perfect days are for people whose dreams are small.

The aside that Jessie would've stayed in her room if she'd known Theo was home shows again how uncomfortable she feels in this house. In particular, though, she feels uncomfortable with the people—and for good reason, judging by Theo's snarky tone when he invites Jessie to accompany him to a party. Jessie can't even be herself in the place she calls home, which is understandably difficult and scary for her.



Moving their communication from email to an instant messaging program is a way to escalate the intimacy and the immediacy in Jessie and SN's relationship. Further, it's significant that SN mentions he's not having a great year either—he clearly needs support and someone to talk to, just like Jessie does. And the fact that SN suggests that talking with Jessie is more important than the party indicates that he recognizes the importance of communicating openly and honestly. This is, after all, how they'll build their relationship.



This explanation of how close Jessie and Mom were speaks to why Jessie is so entrenched in the past. Again, while this isn't something to fault Jessie for—losing her mom was understandably traumatic—she still suggests that she can't have good days, let alone perfect ones, now that Mom is gone.



CHAPTER 10

When Jessie asks about a job, the Starbucks barista tells her they only hire experienced baristas with an insincere smile. Several other businesses turn Jessie down, so she decides to try a bookstore called Book Out Below! She immediately feels at home inside and scans the books, though she needs money way more than she needs reading material. The saleswoman (Liam's mom) approaches Jessie. Jessie is surprised—the woman has wrinkles and looks normal. Thinking of Scarlett's advice to be "undeniable," Jessie asks if the woman is hiring. The woman studies Jessie and asks if she's a book person, so Jessie opens her bag and pulls out her collection of current reading material. The woman is impressed.

Liam's mom starts to reject Jessie, but Jessie interjects that she can work as much or as little as needed. She thrusts a resume at the woman. When the woman asks, Jessie says she goes to Wood Valley but since she just moved, she doesn't know the woman's son, Liam, yet. Reassuringly, the woman says she likes Jessie and will ask Liam if he wants to give up hours to practice with his band. Jessie hopes he wants to practice all the time and thinks she'd rather live in this shop than at Rachel's house. She wants this woman to comfort her and tell her she'll do fine on the PSAT, even if she doesn't have a tutor like Theo. Jessie texts Scarlett on her way out the door.

Suddenly, Jessie finds herself on the floor of the bookstore, holding her forehead and seeing stars. A guy Jessie's age kneels down and asks if she's okay. He's like a better-looking version of Adam Kravitz and explains that his guitar hit Jessie in the head. Jessie recognizes him—he's Liam, the guy who traveled India and interned at Google. Jessie again channels her inner undeniable Scarlett and makes her case for getting a job.

At Rachel's house later, Jessie gleefully announces to Theo that she got a job someplace that won't embarrass him, since he'll never go there. Theo puts down his laptop and tries to guess where, but Rachel excitedly interrupts and asks what the good news is. Jessie feels guilty, but she doesn't want to tell Rachel anything that might make her think everything is okay. When Rachel leaves, Jessie says she got a job at Book Out Below! Theo imperiously says he's smart and *has* been there. Jessie believes him: he recently beat her on a physics quiz even though he didn't study. Everyone at Wood Valley is smart or motivated. Jessie thinks she should be popular because of this, but she's not.

The way that Jessie feels in Book Out Below! complicates the novel's exploration of what it means to fit in. Though Jessie is in the bookstore to begin with because she needs a job—something that sets her apart from her peers in a negative way—the bookstore itself makes Jessie feel right at home. The owner also makes Jessie feel better, as this is seemingly the first "normal" (that is, no plastic surgery) person Jessie has seen since moving to Los Angeles.



Jessie's immediate sense of attachment to Liam's mom shows just how badly Rachel is failing at parenting Jessie. It's odd that she hasn't invited Jessie to join in Theo's tutoring sessions, and being left out surely makes Jessie feel even less welcome at home. Essentially, because Liam's mom looks far more familiar—and far nicer—than Rachel does, Jessie wants this job and a relationship with this woman even more than she might otherwise.



Getting knocked to the floor while texting Scarlett is a veiled indication that Jessie is possibly holding on too tightly to Scarlett and their text-based friendship. If Jessie wants to get through the day unscathed and get a job, she needs to connect with the world in front of her, not just with the world inside her phone.



Though Rachel is making a number of missteps when it comes to navigating her relationship with Jessie, she's not the only guilty one—in denying Rachel the chance to celebrate with her, Jessie only continues to keep the two of them at a distance. That Jessie feels comfortable telling Theo, on the other hand, suggests that their relationship is becoming more stable and he is now someone whom Jessie can trust.



CHAPTER 11

Ethan texts Jessie and asks if they can meet at the library on Friday to work on *The Waste Land*. He uses the expression “cool beans” and somehow makes it sound acceptable. Jessie wonders if she should try to keep texting him, but she reminds herself that there’s no chemistry between them and texts Scarlett instead. Scarlett complains about having to sit next to Deena and makes Jessie promise that she won’t like Dri better than her. Scarlett offers to punch Gem and Crystal and also asks about Dad, but Jessie says she’s not sure how he is—he’s always with Rachel. Scarlett then reveals that Adam Kravitz asked her to homecoming. Jessie gives her blessing and Scarlett confirms that “cool beans” will never be cool.

SN messages Jessie and compliments her on the hat she wore to cover the bruise Liam’s guitar gave her. He asks if he needs to beat someone up for Jessie, which makes Jessie feel good—he’s the second person today to offer to defend her. She offers that she thinks Scarlett and SN would get along and asks SN how his day was. He says that his mom having a hard time right now and they agree that everything is complicated. Then, they share their favorite words. SN’s is “why,” while Jessie’s is “waffle.” They agree that they should eat waffles together someday.

At lunch the next day, Jessie sits with Dri and Dri’s friend Agnes. Jessie thinks about how she fit in in the social hierarchy at home in Chicago (she was a “worker bee,” a middle-hierarchy smart kid who wasn’t an uncool nerd) and where she, Dri, and Agnes might fit in here. Jessie realizes she doesn’t care—sitting with anyone is better than sitting alone. Agnes and Dri passionately debate whether or not someone’s Instagram post was rude as Jessie admits to the reader that she thinks that all other girls are prettier than she is. Agnes interrupts and asks Jessie’s opinion. Since Jessie has no idea what they’re talking about, Jessie says that she guesses she agrees with Agnes. Privately, Jessie is sure she doesn’t—Agnes holds all manner of questionable beliefs.

Dri calmly tells Agnes that some people are shy and communicate better in writing. When Dri looks to Jessie like she wants Jessie to back her up, Jessie wonders if she’s a problem for Dri and Agnes’s friendship. She knows that if Scarlett had invited the new girl to sit with them in Chicago, she wouldn’t have been happy. Jessie says that she communicates better in writing and considers mentioning SN, but she doesn’t want Dri and Agnes to figure out who he is—maybe her words flow better because she *doesn’t* know who SN is.

Jessie clearly has a crush on Ethan but doesn’t want to admit this to herself. Having a crush at all suggests that Jessie is starting to feel slightly more at home at Wood Valley, if only because it indicates that she now has a better understanding of her classmates. Meanwhile, Scarlett sharing that she’s going to homecoming with Adam makes it clear that back in Chicago, things are moving on without Jessie. Adam isn’t just Jessie’s first kissing partner; he’s now Scarlett’s date.



SN’s compliment makes Jessie feel seen in a way that no one else can right now. The thought that Scarlett and SN would get along helps Jessie feel more secure in her relationship with SN, as it makes her feel as though she doesn’t have to entirely give up her old life in order to make a new life that includes him. The conversation about eating together someday is a promise to elevate their relationship to an in-person one and increase their intimacy.



Given that it’s cool at Wood Valley to be smart, it’s likely that the social hierarchy here is entirely different than it was in Chicago. However, Jessie recognizes that hierarchy doesn’t matter at all if she has people to weather it with. This is why she’s so ready to agree with Agnes, even if she’s not sure she honestly agrees. In order to earn Agnes’s trust and build on their budding friendship, she needs to make Agnes feel as though Jessie is worth spending time with—and at this point, that means that it’s a risk to disagree.



Jessie also recognizes that Dri is taking a huge risk by inviting her to hang out with her and Agnes. Adding a new person to the mix is difficult for everyone, as it might complicate Dri’s and Agnes’s dynamic, while Jessie has to contend with the fact that she’s still a bit of a third wheel. Jessie’s recognition that it can be easier to communicate in writing shows that intimacy in writing—like in her conversations with SN—is just as valid as close relationships that take place in person.



Someone shouts Jessie's name across the cafeteria and Liam jogs over with his guitar. Jessie banter with him and blushes—she knows she's flirting, but she doesn't want to flirt and doesn't know how. He confirms that they're on for work training and runs off. Dri squeals; she's been in love with Liam for forever and loves his band, Orgasmville. She shares that Liam has never said one word until now. Agnes points out that Liam didn't speak to Dri and mentions that Liam has a girlfriend, which makes Jessie wonder why Agnes is being so mean. Jessie always supported Scarlett's questionable crushes. Dri mentions in passing that Liam is dating Gem, which shocks Jessie given how nasty Gem is and how nice Liam is. Dri hugs Jessie and says that Jessie is her favorite person. Agnes shoots Jessie a dirty look.

SN messages Jessie to ask about her day and they discuss whether college will be any better than high school. Jessie says that she loves Nutella. When SN asks if she eats it with a spoon, Jessie says she used to, but now she lives with "Others"—Rachel and Theo—and Dad wouldn't let her label her jar. SN says that his parents are still together, but they barely look at each other. He says it's complicated but assures Jessie that someday they'll share more about themselves.

CHAPTER 12

Dri makes Jessie swear to text her whenever Liam says anything cute. Jessie understands; information like this will help Dri pretend she knows Liam. Liam says nothing interesting as he and Jessie sit in the bookstore. She asks him about his band and he jokingly says they're kind of like Lou Reed, but modern and better. Jessie texts Dri and when Liam asks who she's texting, tells him. He shows no interest. Jessie thinks that there are girls like Gem and Crystal who are "fearless about guys and orifices and secretions," and then there are girls like Jessie and Dri who are terrified. Jessie thinks that she may own her vagina, but that doesn't mean she's not terrified of what it wants (romance novels and Ethan). She can imagine having sex and in her mind, it's fine, but actual sex seems terrifying.

Liam asks Jessie how she likes it in L.A., which makes Jessie wonder how he knows about her and if he might be SN. He offers to introduce Jessie to Gem and Jessie feigns casual interest. Liam says he knows what it's like to be new, since he just started with his band last year after the rest of them had been together for years. Jessie texts Dri, who says that there was some sad "Oville" drama. Jessie wonders how a high school band could have drama, but she thinks that even rich kids experience sadness. She suddenly thinks of her mom, bald and sick, and Liam invites Jessie to their upcoming gig at Gem's house. Jessie texts Dri about it and Dri says they have to go—Gem is nice when Liam is around.

Even if Dri's undying, unrealistic love for Liam reads as immature, Jessie still believes that it's a friend's duty to support a crush like this. Questioning Agnes's behavior then becomes a way for Jessie to question how friendships might function differently here. Clearly, nice people become involved with outright mean ones, as evidenced by Liam and Gem's relationship. Liam's genuinely kind behavior toward Jessie, however, suggests that he's not at all involved in that kind of bullying and possibly doesn't know that side of Gem.



Though labeling one's jar of Nutella may read as passive-aggressive in some situations, in this one, it would simply be a way for Jessie to feel some degree of ownership over the house. It would help her feel like she lives here and make her feel more secure, both things that she needs right now. Calling her stepfamily "Others" speaks to how alone and unmoored Jessie feels in this new family.



On some level, Jessie recognizes that Dri's imagined romance with Liam is a way for her to experiment with what intimacy feels like. She's at a different point in her development than Jessie, Gem, and Crystal are (though it's important to keep in mind that Jessie is only assuming that Gem and Crystal are sexually active; the novel never confirms this). Even if Jessie has moved on to the next step of having a crush on someone who knows she exists, this still doesn't mean that a future step like sex isn't scary for her. It also doesn't invalidate the kinds of intimacy she's experiencing now, both platonically with Dri and more romantically with SN.



Jessie moves through the world with some prejudice of her own; Gem isn't the only one who holds questionable beliefs about people of different socioeconomic classes. However, because Jessie is of a lower class than Gem is, Jessie doesn't have the power to bully others like Gem does. This drives home that even in a school setting among minors who aren't the ones responsible for earning their family's money, wealth is still everything—and not having it marks someone as less than.



CHAPTER 13

On Friday, Ethan is already in the library when Jessie gets there. Jessie fantasizes about touching his face but then reminds herself that he's a jerk and she has better things to do. She sits down, acts cool, and thinks that Ethan smells like lavender and honey. Jessie wonders if he washes his shirt every night and then realizes that she sounds like Dri: obsessed. As Ethan asks if Jessie reads much poetry, Jessie recognizes his expression: he's here, but he's mentally somewhere else. Jessie realizes he's exhausted, not on drugs, and then they start to discuss *The Waste Land*. As they discuss the first line, which mentions April, Ethan says he hates April and then looks inexplicably angry. He suggests they walk and talk and stands up before Jessie can say anything.

Ethan slips on a pair of Ray-Ban **sunglasses** and says that according to Google, Eliot was forced to cut 43 lines from the beginning of the poem—and he wasn't working on a computer. Jessie says she hates writing on paper, since it's too slow. Ethan asks Jessie to share more about herself. Jessie says there's nothing to tell, but thinks that she hates December since her mom's birthday is in December—and she wants to know everything about Ethan. Ethan recites the next several lines of *The Waste Land* from memory, which awes Jessie. He explains that he reads poetry when he can't sleep.

Later, Jessie messages SN. They both had not-bad days. Jessie asks SN to tell her three things about himself, thinking that talking to Ethan made her reckless. SN writes that he makes an "amazeballs" grilled cheese sandwich and that he loved Justin Timberlake as a middle schooler, but he won't offer a third thing. Then, it's Jessie's turn. She says that she has a theory that the universe is tiny and insignificant next to some larger species. She has a hard time remembering her multiplication tables, even though she can do calculus. When she refuses to offer a third thing, SN says his third thing is that he likes Jessie. Jessie writes that her third thing is that she likes SN, too.

Jessie immediately feels weird and reminds herself that she doesn't know who SN is—but he (if SN even is a male Wood Valley student) knows everything about her. She messages him back and says they need to take it back a step, though he insists that "I like you" just means that he thinks she's cool. She reminds him that it's weird how much he knows and stops messaging him when he says that life isn't fair. When Jessie picks up her phone a minute later, SN apologizes and says that he likes talking like this. He offers three more things: he likes books, music, and video games more than people; he still sleeps with his childhood blanket; and he was a different, happier person a year ago.

As Jessie recognizes that Ethan is exhausted and is sharing more than he might like to, she begins to develop a sense of intimacy with him—even if, at this point, it's only one-sided. For that matter, it's not necessarily a bad thing that Jessie sounds like Dri when she talks about how she's noticing every little thing Ethan does—the novel implies that this is entirely normal.



Ethan's sunglasses make him look even more unattainable and unknowable. They're designer and make it clear that he's very different from Jessie, who still doesn't have her own pair of sunglasses. When Jessie mentions how much more she likes typing than writing, it's a nod to how she's able to edit herself and say what she really wants to say to SN. Since physical writing isn't their main mode of communication, it doesn't feel as easy to use.



Admitting they like each other ramps up the intimacy between Jessie and SN, as does sharing more about themselves.



Though this is an understandably tense moment in their relationship, SN nevertheless listens to what Jessie is saying and lets her know that he understands how weird this is for her. He's asking her to take a major leap of faith as she continues to trust him, which he acknowledges by sharing personal things like that he sleeps with his childhood blanket. However, this won't be able to go on forever—facts like this cannot replace in-person connections in the long term.



About a year ago, SN's sister died suddenly. He asks about Jessie's mom and they realize that they both count the days, hours, and minutes since their loved one died. Jessie decides not to ask about his sister. SN says that he saw a gorgeous rainbow yesterday but didn't get a picture of it, but he hopes that Jessie can confirm that it happened so that he can be sure he's not losing his mind. Jessie remembers seeing a brief rainbow—it seemed like a message from her mom—and taking a picture. She sends it to SN. When Liam texts asking Jessie to work tomorrow she accepts. He calls her a "lifesaver." To SN, Jessie notes that so many normal expressions are about death.

Ethan then messages Jessie with the definition of the word "tuber," which appears in *The Waste Land*. Jessie is thrilled to get a message from Ethan—it means he was thinking about her. Ethan suggests that tuber is a good insult and says that Gem and Crystal are tubers. Jessie feels horrible knowing that Ethan hears what Gem says. Today, Gem insulted the stickers on Jessie's laptop, which Scarlett designed. When Jessie thanks Ethan for defending her, he reminds her that he didn't and says she doesn't look like she needs a defender. Jessie gets a notification from Instagram: Dri posted a picture of her and Jessie at lunch. Agnes has been cropped out. Scarlett texts that even if Jessie didn't ask, she got her homecoming dress. Thrilled that she has four conversations going at once, Jessie screenshots it.

CHAPTER 14

First thing in the morning, SN tells Jessie three things: he's terrified of flying, he was vegetarian but gave up because of bacon, and he spends too much time playing video games. Jessie offers her own three things: she dislikes veggies except for Brussels sprouts, she hates mornings (she's only up so early because Gloria makes strong coffee, and she tells SN about how she's coming around to having a house manager), and though she's a lefty, she trained herself to use her right hand and now regrets it. SN says he uses his right hand for everything and Jessie asks if that's an innuendo.

Admitting that he lost his sister and that, like Jessie, he counts the days since he lost his loved one takes their relationship even further. Though SN hasn't said much about his family thus far, it's possible to imply that his family may be struggling just as much as Jessie's is to deal with the grief—and he may be experiencing some of the same sense of anxiety and loss that Jessie is as he looks at his altered family structure.



Jessie's four conversations make her feel like she has it all. Gem may still be awful to her, but she at least has an engaged study partner, a confidante in SN, and friends in Dri and Scarlett. However, Scarlett's language—that Jessie didn't ask about her homecoming dress—suggests that despite Jessie's happiness, not all is well. While Jessie's conversations with SN are more or less equal in terms of who's talking more and who's sharing more, Jessie hasn't asked Scarlett anything about life in Chicago thus far. Jessie isn't listening, and this could easily cause problems later.



The game of sharing three things gives Jessie and SN a structure through which to get to know each other. It's easy to fall back on when there's nothing else to say—and the reciprocal, turn-taking aspect of the game means that they're each speaking more or less an equal amount. This helps to start their relationship on equal footing, especially since they also seem to match each other in terms of how personal or silly their three things are.



CHAPTER 15

Instead of staying in on Friday night, Jessie hangs out with Dri and Agnes. She wonders if Agnes is comfortable with her being here but reminds herself that Dri invited her. Agnes moans that she doesn't understand why everyone makes such a big deal about sex. Dri insists that Agnes is technically still a virgin and Agnes shares her story with Jessie: last summer at drama camp, she was bored with being a virgin so she and a guy started to have penetrative sex. Suddenly, he freaked out about "his bro J.C." and wanting to wait until marriage. Jessie says it counts—it's closer than Jessie has ever gotten to sex. Agnes asks if Jessie is a virgin. Jessie says she is; Dri is as well. Agnes says that her sister at UCLA is sleeping with lots of guys to "own her sexuality." Jessie thinks Scarlett would love this.

Jessie nervously asks if they know anyone in their class whose sister died. Jessie tries to figure out how to explain her relationship with SN and, prompted by Agnes's teasing, tells them almost everything. Dri and Agnes feel like they're soon to be real friends.

Back at Rachel's house, Jessie finds Theo outside their parents' bedroom. Jessie hears loud shouting inside and Theo says they might be breaking up. Dad curses about a dinner, which is unusual—he never curses. Dad spits that he's tired of feeling judged by Rachel's friends, which shocks Jessie. She never thought that Dad would have trouble too. The fight continues; Dad is angry that Rachel corrected his drink order the other day, which makes Rachel sound ready to cry. She insults Dad's intelligence. Dad insists that Jessie is the only sane one in the house, but Rachel points out that Jessie has no friends. Jessie starts to cry, thinking that it's not her fault that her mother died and she had to move here—and furthermore, Mom loved poetry and she and Dad still made it work.

Theo whispers that Rachel just says mean things when she's mad. Dad angrily starts to say something about how Theo "gallivants." Jessie briefly thinks she'd rather listen to them have sex, since this seems more intimate. She wonders if meeting on the internet means that people can connect without context. Jessie can kind of see why Dad was attracted to Rachel: she's a widow, but she's rich, successful, and pretty. Jessie can't figure out, however, why Rachel fell for Dad. When Mom and Dad fought, they just refused to talk to each other for days on end. Dad says he's not ignorant or homophobic and announces that he's going on a walk. Rachel screams after him to not come back.

Agnes's story of having sex for the first time reads as more of an attempt to strengthen her relationship with Jessie and Dri than anything else. The sex itself doesn't seem to matter much to Agnes, which again complicates the novel's exploration of intimacy. Intimate moments can sometimes be more about bolstering friendships than connecting romantically with others. Agnes's sexual partner's sudden recollection of "his bro J.C." is a colloquial reference to Jesus Christ—and, by extension, the idea that's common in Christianity that premarital sex is a sin.



Finally, Jessie reaches the point in her relationships with Dri and Agnes that she can talk openly with them. As she does this, it becomes easier for her to feel at home in Los Angeles.



Even if Jessie came home on a high after her time with Dri and Agnes, this fight brings her back down to scary real life. The fight reveals that Dad is having a hard time adjusting to life in Los Angeles, just like Jessie is—something that complicates Jessie's belief that Dad picked them up and brought them here just for his own benefit. Bringing Jessie into the fight makes it clear that Dad and Rachel don't expect their children to be listening, which suggests that this fight may have major consequences going forward—Jessie now knows that Rachel doesn't think highly of her, at least when Rachel is angry.



Again, Jessie recognizes that sex isn't always the pinnacle of intimacy. Rather, intimacy can be more about how couples talk to each other or fight with each other. This will, hopefully, help her understand that her relationship with SN—a nonsexual form of intimacy—is just as valid as a sexual relationship would be. It's important to note that this fight is extra unsettling for Jessie because she's never seen a couple fight like this. She doesn't know how to handle what she hears, and she doesn't know whether to take Rachel seriously.



Theo and Jessie race quietly to Theo's room. They wonder whether their parents are going to divorce. Surprisingly, that possibility makes Jessie sad—she and Dad couldn't afford to stay in L.A., and there's nothing left for them in Chicago. Theo asks if Dad would've said something offensive about him being gay and Jessie assures him that Dad wouldn't do that. Theo explains that he's known since kindergarten that he's gay and thinks that everyone should enjoy how fabulous he is. Jessie smiles. She realizes she appreciates how enthusiastic and subtly kind Theo is. He asks who Jessie's been texting and asks if she wants to share some chocolate. She accepts the chocolate and refuses to mention SN, hoping he's not Theo.

Jessie's realization that she doesn't really want to leave speaks to how at home she already feels in Los Angeles, even if she's not ready to use those words quite yet. And again, the only relationship Jessie feels able to trust in her new family is her relationship with Theo. This is mostly because she and Theo talk to each other, while Dad and Rachel have stayed away from their children. While Jessie and Theo figure out how to live with each other and make this work, Rachel and Dad fight and make Jessie feel afraid.



CHAPTER 16

SN wakes Jessie up with three more things. One is that he used to dream about his sister a lot, but now, he doesn't dream about her at all. In response, Jessie says she doesn't dream about her mom anymore but she does sometimes forget that she's dead. They discuss SN's idea to sell wheatberry juice. After school, Jessie heads straight to work, worried that Gloria has already packed Jessie's duffel bag. At breakfast, Rachel came into the kitchen alone. Jessie momentarily panicked that Dad had already left as Rachel looked for all her belongings, listing each thing out loud. When Rachel asked where her **sunglasses** were, Jessie realized how rattled Rachel was. Jessie reminded Rachel that the sunglasses were on her head.

Because Jessie has no experience with couples who fight so passionately—and she's so accustomed to her life being uprooted—she jumps immediately to the conclusion that Rachel meant what she said. Here, the novel seems to imply that it's Dad and Rachel's job as parents and stepparents to communicate more openly with their children and assure them that arguments—even emotionally charged ones like in this passage—don't necessarily spell the end of a relationship.



Liam is playing and singing when Jessie gets to Book Out Below! They discuss his plans for life after high school; Liam's mom isn't excited about his plan to go to a music school in Boston or to skip college to tour with "Oville" (their band's nickname). He asks if Jessie is coming to his gig at Gem's party and Jessie hesitates, even though she, Dri, and Agnes have already picked out outfits. Jessie asks if Liam is working and if he wants Jessie to leave, but he says they can both work. Jessie is relieved; she doesn't want to go home to Chicago and give up on SN. Jessie wonders if Liam feels sorry for her. She thinks of the Gap-wearing scholarship kids at school. Gem doesn't bother them. Liam starts to play an original song as Jessie texts Dri. The song is catchy and Dri is beside herself.

Jessie is, once again, made uncomfortably aware that as a middle-class student at Wood Valley, she's different from her peers—she has to earn money, unlike them. She's also still convinced that the fight between Dad and Rachel means that she and Dad will have to leave. This speaks to just how freaked out she is by what happened. To her, it wasn't just a fight—it was, potentially, the thing that could once again rearrange her life completely. The only thing keeping her grounded at this moment is her new friendship with Dri, proof that this life is already starting to look familiar.



Scarlett texts and asks if she should have sex with Adam after homecoming; it'd be nice to lose her virginity with someone who isn't intimidating and then move on. Jessie is shocked and reminds Scarlett that sex is meaningful. She privately runs through all that could go wrong and thinks that Scarlett is just pretending to be casual about this; Scarlett is more like Jessie and Dri than Agnes's sister when it comes to something like sex. They discuss that Adam's face is clearing up and Jessie mentions Dad and Rachel's fight. Scarlett returns to wondering about whether to have sex with Adam.

Scarlett clearly wants to talk about whether or not to have sex, a conversation that Jessie simply isn't prepared to have with her right now. While Jessie is understandably preoccupied, her reaction continues to show Scarlett that Jessie doesn't care about her and her life as much as Scarlett would like. Jessie's unwillingness to give Scarlett her attention means that Scarlett will have to turn to others instead for advice.



When Jessie gets home, she eats the meal that Gloria left on the counter under a glass dome and thinks about Mom’s hearty stews. Jessie notices Dad on the deck and steps outside. She’s annoyed when Dad looks at her like he forgot she existed. She wants to ask if they have to leave, but can’t do it. Dad says he just realized that he’s truly an adult, but he doesn’t feel like it. Jessie reminds him that he’s 44, and Dad’s voice goes shaky. He says that he wishes that someone had told him long ago that these are the good times and it’ll all end at some point. He says that his relationship with Mom was never hard. Jessie vows to not look at him after he uprooted her life. She reminds him that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

Dad says that Jessie has been able to see through him since she was a baby, but Jessie thinks this is a lie: Dad has ordered the “correct” drink with steak often. She again decides to not ask if they’re leaving and laughs at Dad’s joke about being old.

What Jessie wants more than anything is for Dad to act like a parent. In her mind, this means that he needs to act strong and in control of what’s going on. Bringing the conversation back to Mom and their relationship only makes Jessie more worried about Dad and Rachel’s situation—if his relationship wasn’t hard with Mom, what does that mean about his relationship with Rachel? If it’s hard, does that mean it’ll end?



Jessie doesn’t understand why her dad ordered the “wrong” thing with his steak at dinner with Rachel, which only makes her more nervous about what’s going on in her new family. Though she may be wise and mature in some ways, she doesn’t have the insight into Dad’s relationship with Rachel that Dad seems to think she does—and it seems inappropriate for him to cast her in the position of an all-knowing adult when she’s still a child.



CHAPTER 17

In the morning, Jessie and SN exchange three more things. SN’s mom abuses prescription drugs, while Jessie regrets not learning to play piano like her mom. When she later meets Ethan to work on *The Waste Land*, he greets her by calling her “Dried Tubers” and says they should use the word as a nickname. He seems peppy as they start to walk and Jessie asks if he got some sleep. She explains that he always looks tired, and Ethan says he never sleeps well since he reads all night. They walk and eventually land at a Starbucks. Ethan buys Jessie a latte, which makes Jessie wonder if this is a date, if he feels sorry for her, or if he’s just being nice. She thinks he probably has a girlfriend with a robust sexual history, but Jessie is too embarrassed to ask Dri.

Ethan says that he assumes Jessie isn’t going to Gem’s party on Saturday. He’s almost belligerent when Jessie says she’s going and is friends with Liam. Jessie is shocked but not surprised to learn that Ethan is in the band. He plays electric guitar. He says coldly that Liam is pretty good, but Ethan himself is good too.

Discovering that SN’s mother abuses prescription drugs makes it clear to Jessie that while her home life may feel bad right now, she’s not the only one who faces major difficulties at home. This is something that transcends class boundaries. Jessie thinks so hard about why Ethan bought her the latte because she’s trying to figure out what their relationship actually is. She believes she should behave differently depending on whether he’s romantically interested versus just being nice.



Ethan’s tone when he talks about Liam suggests that there’s some tension between them. Again, Jessie isn’t the only one struggling with family and friendship issues—even privileged rich kids like Ethan are struggling to make their friendships work.



That night, Jessie finds Theo at the counter with a glass of wine, looking like he's 40. He pours Jessie a glass and says their parents are still married. Theo doesn't know where their parents went and says Dad and Rachel are both idiots—even he, at 16, understands that they can't forget that people they loved died. Jessie thinks he's right. Theo laments that he didn't ask for all these hard things, but Jessie points out that he has multiple PSAT tutors and an in at any college he wants. Theo laments that Harvard only accepts five Wood Valley kids every year, so Jessie notes that no one from her school in Chicago ever got into Harvard. When Theo says his dad went to Harvard, Jessie laughs and points out that he's a legacy. Theo offers to let Jessie join his Monday tutoring sessions.

Theo's sadness reveals again that he's just trying to fit in at Wood Valley. That means that he needs to get into Harvard, and he believes that the difficulties he's facing this year because of Jessie will make that more challenging for him. However, she reminds him of the fact that he's a legacy—since his dad went to Harvard, Theo is more likely to be accepted. Receiving this little bit of encouragement makes Theo feel more warm and generous towards Jessie, as he thanks her by inviting her to his tutoring sessions.



CHAPTER 18

On Saturday morning, Jessie and SN exchange their customary three things, and then Jessie asks if he's going to the party later. SN begs Jessie to stop trying to figure out who he is. A bit later, Jessie texts Scarlett and wishes her a good time at homecoming. Agnes does Jessie's makeup that evening. Dri is the designated driver since drinking upsets her stomach. They all pile into Dri's mom's car and Jessie feels, for once, like a normal teenager.

It's telling that Jessie feels normal going to a party—her friends allow her to emotionally distance herself from all her problems and feel at home in this new world, even for just a night. With this, the novel suggests that friends are an integral part of feeling at home—as well as in helping a person set aside their fears and their grief.



Once they get to Gem's mansion, Agnes drags Jessie to the bar. Right when Jessie promises to introduce Dri to Liam if they see him, Liam sneaks up behind Jessie and covers her eyes. He's clearly drunk. Jessie introduces him to Dri, who freezes. Dri compliments Oville and Liam cockily says they aim to please. He runs away and Agnes gives Jessie a pointed look but won't explain what she means. Dri drags them to the stage. Jessie studies Ethan, who looks like he was born to be on stage. Excitedly, Dri says that everyone thought Oville would break up after Xander died, but Liam stepped in and saved the day. The music starts, so Jessie wonders to herself if Xander is the kid who overdosed on heroin. She wonders if Liam and Ethan are stereotypical, drug-addicted rock stars.

Liam's behavior makes him seem like even less like someone Dri would want to date—he's self-centered and shows little interest in Dri as a person. To him, she's just an adoring fan. Dri's mention of Xander's death impresses upon Jessie that she has a lot to learn about Wood Valley history and culture if she wants to fit in. Clearly, whatever happened shook the band and the wider community, and it's still affecting them to this day. His death also implies that the band is probably dealing with grief of their own just like Jessie is. They may all have more in common than Jessie thinks.



Jessie soon becomes transfixed by the music and stares at Ethan. When the band takes a break, Jessie tells Dri that she was right about the band. Liam suddenly appears next to Jessie. Before Jessie can get Dri to say something, Gem races up, leaps into Liam's arms, and kisses him passionately. He puts her down and seems confused and no longer drunk. Liam excitedly introduces Gem to Jessie, and Gem's smile is beautiful and looks sincere. Jessie gets why Liam likes her; he's never seen how nasty can be. Dri compliments a change to one of the songs, a subject that Liam is keen to discuss. Gem whines and pulls Liam away to make her a drink, but Liam smiles hugely at Dri and Jessie before leaving.

Finally, Liam seems a bit more reasonable here—he's clearly interested in discussing his music, something that apparently doesn't interest Gem at all. It's worth considering, given how disconnected Liam and Gem seem here, that Liam might be dating Gem in an attempt to fit in. In other words, he may be trying to do exactly what Jessie and Theo are: making himself seem popular in order to avoid bullying. Fitting in, clearly, is a concern for everyone, not just Jessie.



SN messages Jessie and says she looks beautiful. Jessie ignores the compliment and asks where he is, thinking that her mom always told her she was beautiful but she never took it seriously. Jessie scans the crowd and sees the guy who climbed Kilimanjaro texting. She asks Dri about him; his name is Caleb. Dri leaps onto a chair and reports that most guys are texting right now. SN messages and says he's hiding in plain sight, but he's bored. He brushes off Jessie's insistence that Oville was amazing by saying they used to be better. They both mention that they're drunk, but SN refuses to meet Jessie in person. He says he's too drunk to explain, but he wants to feel comfortable enough to tuck a lock of Jessie's hair behind her ear. Jessie gets this and tries to imagine that coming out of Caleb's mouth. It seems unlikely.

Jessie announces to Dri and Agnes that she's drunk. She tries to decide if she's being sloppy and asks if it's possible to have a crush on multiple people at once. Agnes says it definitely is and Dri asks who she likes. Jessie is about to admit she likes Ethan. She knows that Dri will tell her more than she ever wanted to know, but before she can say anything, Gem races up, gets in Jessie's face, and tells her to stay away from Liam. Jessie is drunk and confused. Gem storms away and Dri giggles. Agnes explains that Gem has been off since her dad got arrested last year for tax fraud and soliciting a prostitute, but Jessie can't sympathize. Jessie assures Dri she doesn't have a crush on Liam, texts Scarlett, and notices Ethan sleeping alone as she leaves the party.

CHAPTER 19

The next morning, Jessie messages SN three things, all of which have to do with being hung over. SN messages back that he's been up for a while, but his mom is still asleep. They discuss that SN's parents don't want him to have a job—they'd prefer that he study—and Jessie shares that she works at Book Out Below! She suggests that SN visit. A bit later, Scarlett texts to announce that she didn't have sex after homecoming, but Adam has turned into an exceptional kisser.

SN's comment about wanting to feel comfortable enough to tuck hair behind Jessie's ear speaks to the kind of intimacy he wants to foster with her. He recognizes that simply seeing each other in person won't necessarily help their relationship or deepen their connection with each other. Rather, what will help them is to continue to talk like they have been until they feel more comfortable with each other and develop a sense of closeness. When Jessie insists to the reader that she understands this, it shows that she does, on some level, understand that her virtual relationship with SN is just as meaningful as her in-person relationships with others.



What Agnes has to say about Gem's home life shows again that Jessie isn't the only one with a difficult family situation. Plenty of kids at school, even the wealthy and popular ones, are struggling to figure out how to deal with their families—even if they don't have the specific issues of navigating a blended family for the first time. That Gem attempts to intimidate Jessie at all suggests that Jessie suddenly appears like more of a threat—especially because Liam shows an interest in her. Jessie's friendship with Liam now seems a liability, not a plus.



It's significant that Jessie decides to text SN before she texts Scarlett in the morning, as it implies that Jessie is starting to pull away from Scarlett. Indeed, because Jessie doesn't text and ask Scarlett how homecoming was, Scarlett likely feels a bit abandoned and unimportant. Despite this, she still desperately wants to share what happened with her best friend.



When Jessie gets downstairs, she finds Dad in the kitchen making pancakes. He's annoyingly cheerful and looks out of place—Mom always cooked, and the kitchen here seems too big and pristine to use. Jessie accepts a plate as to not feed any suspicions about her drinking, but she doesn't ask if his happiness is genuine and if they're staying. Dad says they need to talk. Jessie figures this is it: he and Rachel are divorcing and they're headed back to Chicago. When Dad simply expresses his surprise that she has friends, Jessie asks if they're leaving. Dad looks genuinely surprised, and when Jessie brings up his fight with Rachel, he says it was just an argument. He sighs that he forgets Jessie is a teenager and that everything seems more important at her age.

Jessie knows she's acting like a stereotypical teenager, but she spits that Dad shouldn't be condescending. She shouts that she heard "her" tell Dad to leave and not come back. Dad responds that "her" name is Rachel, and he asks if Jessie wants to leave. Jessie doesn't—but she doesn't want to feel like a guest in someone's home, either. Even more than that, she wants to hurt Dad right now. She drops it and asks what Dad wanted to talk about, but when Dad says he just wants to check in, Jessie loses it again. She accuses Dad of ignoring her and climbs the stairs two at a time.

At Book Out Below! later, Caleb walks in. Jessie gasps in surprise; this is the first time that a classmate has come here—and Caleb arrived right after Jessie told SN about her job. Rather than feeling disappointed that Caleb is SN, Jessie feels disoriented. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy to talk like SN, but she figures he felt bad for her on the first day of school. He asks if Liam is here; Liam has his phone. As Caleb turns to leave, Jessie decides she has to let him know she knows he's SN, so she invites him to have coffee. He accepts awkwardly. Later, Jessie tells SN that it was nice of him to visit. He seems confused. Jessie is annoyed since apparently, they're going to pretend they never spoke.

CHAPTER 20

Ethan laments that *The Waste Land* is long and too complicated. They discuss poetry and he mentions the line "A rose is a rose is a rose" from a Gertrude Stein poem. Jessie tells the reader that her mom loved Stein, so when she got sick, Jessie read Stein out loud to her. She tells Ethan about this and after a moment, Ethan offers his condolences. He says that he hates how people pretend bad things don't happen so they don't risk saying the wrong thing, but he insists that people should say something even if it's wrong. Jessie realizes how much she likes Ethan. He's brave, honest, and good.

Though Dad isn't entirely wrong in his assessment (Jessie is a teen and therefore lacks the experience and maturity to fully grasp what happened between Dad and Rachel), his assessment doesn't capture the whole story. Dad hasn't gone out of his way to make sure that Jessie feels secure at home, and Rachel has barely acknowledged Jessie since the fight. Because of this, it's understandable that Jessie is so afraid—she's never seen adults fight like this before, and given how little she trusts the adults who control her life, there's no reason not to jump to the worst conclusion.



Neither Dad nor Rachel have done much to make Jessie feel at home; she's still sleeping in a guest room, after all, and no one pays her much attention. Her anger and fear, in this case, are totally justified. However, the fact that Jessie doesn't really want to leave also shows that she's beginning to feel more at home in Los Angeles—largely because of the friends she has at school—even if she doesn't feel at home in this house.



Caleb is dismissive and awkward with Jessie, while SN is kind, open, and interested in her. It's possible, then, that Jessie is only jumping on the idea that Caleb is SN because she's so desperate to figure out who he is—and she's therefore unwilling to critically look at the evidence in front of her and see that Caleb isn't acting at all like SN.



What Ethan has to say about how people handle bad things offers his perspective on another aspect of intimacy. While lots of people, he observes, would rather keep their distance by saying nothing and not acknowledging others' tragedies, he doesn't believe that's appropriate. Rather, people should open themselves up to embarrassment and closeness by saying something, as that's how people know others care.



Jessie and Ethan are still at Starbucks an hour later, just chatting. They talk about Oville. Ethan cryptically says he wishes they could just play for fun like they did “before,” but “before” clearly refers to more than just the time before Liam joined. They discuss whether Ethan gets stage fright. He doesn’t, but being onstage makes him feel alone. When Jessie incredulously points out that girls line up to talk to him at lunch, Ethan says that’s because of something else but again won’t elaborate. Ethan shares that he and Liam write most of their songs, but Caleb, who’s not in the band, writes some of them. Jessie thinks this makes sense; SN would totally write melancholy lyrics but refuse to sing them.

Jessie wonders if Ethan, Caleb, and Liam have talked about her and wonders if Gem got in her face because people think she’s obsessed with Liam. She wonders out loud if she’ll ever figure Wood Valley out. Ethan says he still hasn’t, but he has a secret: no one has to. Jessie is gripped with the desire to touch Ethan’s hair or hands and ask him how can act like a friend one minute and be cold the next.

At home, Jessie finds the dinner Gloria left for her and messages SN that her day was great. SN also had a good day. Jessie saw Caleb once in the hallway. He saluted her with his phone, which Jessie figures means that they’re never going to talk in person. Right after the salute, SN messaged Jessie and it seemed to drive home the point. Jessie is disappointed, since Caleb is attractive—but less distracting than Ethan. SN types that his mom cooked tonight and seems off meds, but SN might just be feeling optimistic. That night, Jessie dreams that Caleb and Ethan are in her room ignoring her.

CHAPTER 21

Jessie, Dri, and Agnes sit outside during their free period, enjoying the sun. Jessie finally has **sunglasses**. They’re knockoffs, but they make her feel like a different person. Dri says she feels invisible. Jessie wants to tell Dri that SN clearly noticed her and thinks she’s cool, but she’s embarrassed to say so. Instead, she says she wishes she were invisible so Gem and Crystal would back off. Agnes says that Gem hates Jessie because Jessie is hot, and Dri insists that Liam likes her. Jessie ignores this and watches Ethan head for the parking lot. She wonders if he’ll be back in time for English and confesses her crush to Dri and Agnes. Dri squeals, but Agnes says he’s damaged. SN messages Jessie with three things and Jessie reciprocates.

Once again, Jessie can’t truly fit in or participate in Wood Valley life until she figures out what went down with Oville, which is likely related to why Ethan has issues with Liam. It’s interesting that Jessie hasn’t asked Dri to tell her the whole story yet. It’s possible that Jessie simply wants the satisfaction of figuring it out on her own, but it’s also possible that she recognizes that learning what happened will be the final thing that inducts her into the Wood Valley community—and she’s not ready for that yet.



Wanting to touch Ethan is a desire to take their relationship to a deeper level—and importantly, what Jessie wants to do isn’t necessarily sexual. Now, she’s beginning to see that even in her own life, she has opportunities to experience intimate moments with people without them being sexual or even purely romantic.



It’s worth considering that while Jessie has admitted from the beginning that she finds Caleb attractive, she’s clearly not as attracted to him as she is to Ethan. Because she believes he’s SN, however, he suddenly seems more attractive to her than he perhaps would otherwise.



Buying sunglasses, even knockoffs, is a major turning point for Jessie—it suggests that she’s finally acclimating to her new home, at least enough to wear an essential part of the Los Angeles “uniform.” Agnes’s insistence that Jessie is attractive is a small way that Agnes can begin to shift power away from Gem. If Jessie starts to see herself as attractive, she can more easily ignore Gem’s taunts and be secure and comfortable with how she looks.



As Jessie walks into English, Gem fake sneezes and says “slut.” She follows up with several other ugly insults that even Mrs. Pollack can hear. Jessie tries to stand up straight, but Gem trips her. Jessie flies forward, hits her nose on her desk, and lands on the floor right in front of Ethan’s shoes. Gem and Crystal cackle. Jessie focuses on the pain instead of the humiliation, ignores Ethan’s helping hand, and slowly gets up and into her seat. Wide-eyed, Dri confirms that Jessie isn’t bleeding and Jessie refuses to go to the nurse. Mrs. Pollack calls the class to attention and Jessie tries her best to be invisible.

Jessie shoots for the door when the bell rings, but Mrs. Pollack asks her to hang back. Jessie hears Gem’s insults in her head as everyone else files out. She tries not to cry and says she didn’t do anything. She insists she doesn’t want to talk and realizes she’s acting angry so she doesn’t cry. Mrs. Pollack says she could talk to the principal since Gem’s behavior is out of line, but it might make things worse for Jessie—Gem’s dad is one of the school’s major donors. She asks if Jessie did anything to attract Gem’s ire, which is the final straw for Jessie. Jessie snaps that she hasn’t done anything, but doing something also doesn’t make it okay to call people names. She realizes that she’s never getting a college scholarship and that Gem will never stop, and she runs out of the room.

CHAPTER 22

Jessie puts her head down and hurries to her car, shaking. She decides to drive to Chicago, but Liam appears in front of her. Jessie begs him to leave her alone and then angrily tells him that he and Gem need to let her be. Liam looks confused and swings his guitar off next to his car, a Tesla. Jessie tells him to talk to Gem and deflates when Liam asks if she’s working today. She realizes she’s not going to Chicago; she needs gas money first. SN messages her and they discuss her favorite movie, *Footloose*, which he doesn’t like. He’s had an awful day; his mom hasn’t left the couch or acknowledged him. He asks Jessie to promise to not leave L.A. Jessie is confused since Caleb barely acknowledged her again today, but she decides to lie and promises to stay.

Gem has the confidence to overtly bully Jessie in front of a teacher—especially one who’s sympathetic toward Jessie. When Mrs. Pollack effectively ignores what happened, this suggests that Gem is powerful in more ways than just being the most popular girl at Wood Valley—there’s more that allows her to act horribly and not fear the consequences.



Mrs. Pollack illuminates why Gem can get away with her bullying crusade: Gem’s dad can pay to get Gem out of trouble. Gem is, in other words, politically powerful, not just socially powerful. This makes it even clearer to Jessie that she’ll never have any power at Wood Valley. Even if she may someday look like she fits in, it’s unclear if Rachel’s money will ever be able to give Jessie or Theo the ability to behave so horribly at school and not face consequences. Money is, once again, everything, and it dictates who’s powerful and who’s not.



Noting that Liam drives a Tesla shows that in this moment, Jessie is hyper-aware of all the ways that her classmates are different and wealthier than she is. Liam may be nice to her most of the time, but he’s still part of a socioeconomic class that can buy its way out of trouble and consequences. This all becomes even clearer to Jessie when she realizes she doesn’t even have the money to escape Los Angeles unless she works and earns the money herself.



At work, Liam's mom gives Jessie a box of books to shelve. Jessie contemplates grabbing one for Dad before remembering they're not speaking. She thinks about Caleb's smile, which is hard to conjure, and Ethan's, which comes into her mind easily. Liam's mom gives Jessie a tissue to clean up her mascara-smudged face as Jessie wonders if Liam's mom likes or knows Gem. Liam's mom tells Jessie she's beautiful and offers to give Jessie the afternoon off. Her kindness makes Jessie hurt. It makes Jessie remember that she'll go home to Rachel's house, not her own, and Mom won't be there to help Jessie feel better. They won't be able to go through their bad-day ritual of cocoa and cookies. Jessie texts Scarlett and asks if her basement couch is available next term. Scarlett says it is, but it's dirty—she and Adam spend a lot of time there.

Even though Los Angeles doesn't seem all that great right now, Scarlett's implication that she and Adam are being physically intimate on the basement couch makes it clear to Jessie that Chicago might not be home anymore either. Clearly, Scarlett has moved on and is growing up much faster than Jessie is. Jessie shows just how unmoored and lost she feels when she again refers to her house in Los Angeles as "Rachel's house." She still feels no ownership over the space—and Rachel feels less approachable than Liam's mom does at this point. In essence, Jessie feels like there's no one to turn to right now.



CHAPTER 23

Dad texts Jessie and asks if they can talk tonight. They haven't spoken in eight days since their fight over the pancakes, but Jessie isn't ready to let him feel better for making bad choices and ignoring her. She figures he can talk to Rachel and texts that she's working late.

When Jessie says that Dad can talk to Rachel, it suggests she thinks that Dad already has a community and a family here to support him—and by extension, that he doesn't need her. This reflects Jessie's narrow, immature view on the world—Dad is human too, and moving is hard for everyone.



CHAPTER 24

For Giving Day, Jessie follows SN's advice and wears her sneakers; it's too hot for her winter boots and they'd make her even more of a target for Gem, even if they are more appropriate for a construction site. Theo suggests they drive together since he's afraid of someone stealing his car, but the neighborhood looks like Jessie's in Chicago. As soon as they arrive, Gem, dressed in a tank top and a sequined sports bra, walks past and jams her shoulder into Jessie's. Indignantly, Theo tells Gem to leave Jessie alone or he'll "ruin" her. Liam walks up, oblivious and happy, and Theo tells him to keep Gem under control. Jessie excuses herself and heads for Caleb, who has built something before. She hears Liam and Gem arguing behind her. Jessie and Caleb banter for a moment and then Caleb says he'd love to have coffee on Thursday.

Theo's choice to stand up for Jessie is a major development in their relationship. It suggests that Theo is starting to get over himself and understand that if this new setup at home is going to work, he needs to act like Jessie is worthy of his attention and help. Then, even more importantly, Gem seems to listen to Theo. This illustrates an important way to stop bullying: kids themselves can stand up for their peers and not allow bullies to reign unchecked.



Caleb brushes Jessie off and walks away, which hurts, but Jessie gets a message from SN a moment later. Dri finds Jessie and gives her a big hug before admiring Liam, who's now shirtless. Agnes offers to beat Gem up for Jessie and though Jessie refuses, she's grateful that so many have offered. She mentions that Theo saved her today. When Jessie learns that Gem's dad sponsored lunch, she wonders if she shouldn't eat. Ethan appears behind her and says the food is too good to miss. He starts to make Jessie a plate and then leads her to a secluded area of the job site. He apologizes for not doing anything to help Jessie yesterday and reaches out as though to touch her bruise.

On the drive home, Jessie thanks Theo for standing up for her. He says quietly that Gem called him a "faggot" when he was little. He had no idea what it meant; Theo's dad explained it to him that night and made it clear that there was nothing wrong with being gay. Jessie is curious to hear about Theo's dad, since there are no family photos on the walls. Theo says his dad was great. They discuss whether they wish they could switch which parent died. Both Jessie and Theo would. Jessie thinks that she genuinely liked her mom as a person, odd as that is for a teenager.

Theo then asks if Jessie and Ethan are friends. He warns Jessie that Ethan might be into "heavy shit" like his brother. Jessie doesn't think he's on drugs and says so, but she realizes that she barely knows him and he often seems withdrawn. He's left campus at lunchtime several times in the last week. Regardless, she thinks of Ethan's eyes and realizes she wants to kiss him.

CHAPTER 25

Jessie and SN are messaging when Jessie enters her room to find Rachel. It reminds Jessie that this is Rachel's guest room, not Jessie's room. Fortunately, the room is neat: dirty laundry and tampons are hidden, and Jessie's laptop and her embarrassing internet search history are closed. Jessie is curt with Rachel, and Rachel finally holds out a piece of paper. It's a plane ticket to Chicago for next weekend. Rachel picks up the photo of Mom and Jessie, which bothers Jessie. Rachel says that Scarlett's parents called Dad and it's understandable that Jessie is homesick—this has been a big change for everyone. Jessie is confused and can't decide whether to be ecstatic or enraged, since she's holding a ticket to everything familiar. Rachel says that Jessie just has to promise to come back.

Gem would probably love it if Jessie went hungry because her dad sponsored the meal, as that would only confirm Gem's power. Because of this, Ethan's choice to help Jessie and make her a plate is another example of Gem's classmates shutting her down and making it clear that her bullying behavior won't be tolerated. Even if Wood Valley teachers won't do anything about Gem, her peers can refuse to give her the air she needs to maintain her power.



The car ride home gives Jessie and Theo more time to connect honestly and openly with each other. Again, it's telling that they're the ones having conversations like these of their own volition. While this conversation isn't something they'd necessarily share with either of their parents, it's a major misstep on Dad and Rachel's part that they haven't tried to foster close, open conversations at home. Their negligence has made this relationship take even longer to form.



Whether or not Theo is right about Ethan's relationship with drugs, mentioning that Ethan's brother uses heavy drugs shows again that the rich kids at Wood Valley have problems of their own at home. Their home lives are nowhere close to perfect just because they're wealthy.



As awkward as this encounter is, Rachel's overture offers hope that she and Jessie will be able to form some sort of healthy relationship going forward—but it's going to take a willingness to try and speak up on both of their parts. The revelation that Scarlett's parents were the one to instigate all of this makes it clear that Jessie has more adults looking out for her than she might realize. In other words, she has many places to turn for help and support if she only recognizes what they are and chooses to use them.



Scarlett and Jessie text. Scarlett says that her parents were concerned when Scarlett mentioned that Jessie might be interested in their basement. She also asks if it's okay if they hang with Adam on Saturday and suggests she throw a welcome home party. Jessie agrees but is less certain. Jessie texts SN next and tells him the news. He's happy for her but makes her promise that she's coming back. Then, Jessie texts Ethan and asks to reschedule their Friday *Waste Land* study date. He quotes lines from *The Waste Land* at her and agrees to meet up on Monday after she gets back. He says he already has the entirety of the poem memorized. Jessie thinks that a drug addict wouldn't have time to memorize poetry, even if he is "damaged."

CHAPTER 26

Jessie is so nervous for her date with Caleb that she can't eat. Agnes announces that Caleb can't be SN; he's not that kind of guy. Jessie lays out all of her evidence, which Dri finds compelling. Dri, however, is intently watching Liam, who's sitting far away from Gem. She wonders if Jessie broke up the couple. Agnes matter-of-factly says that she knew Caleb's sister had issues, but she hasn't heard anything about her dying. Dri wonders if Caleb lied about his sister dying in order to connect with Jessie, but Jessie thinks that no one can make up counting the days since their loved one died.

Gem doesn't acknowledge Jessie in English class. She just sits, looking beautiful and perfect. Jessie wonders if Ethan is staring at her and if he thinks about Gem at night. Jessie has tried thinking about Caleb instead of Ethan at night, but it doesn't work. In her dreams about Ethan, she's not afraid of sex or intimacy and doesn't compare herself to Gem—but she wakes up, sad and acne-ridden, in the morning. Mrs. Pollack calls on Jessie to answer a question, but Jessie hasn't been paying attention. Ethan comes to Jessie's rescue and Mrs. Pollack gives Jessie a look of empathy. After class, Jessie thanks him and remembers Theo's warning. Ethan's pupils are a normal size. He wishes Jessie a safe trip and tells her to not forget about "us." Jessie isn't sure who he's referring to.

Even though Scarlett's best friend is visiting, that doesn't mean that Scarlett's life stops cold. She still has a boyfriend and presumably, other people she spends time with in Chicago—Jessie is no longer the center of Scarlett's world. Jessie's lack of enthusiasm for hanging with Adam and having a party suggests that on some level, she expect Scarlett to be available to her all the time, just like Scarlett used to be.



To a degree, the debate over SN's identity is a way for Agnes, Dri, and Jessie to solidify their friendships with each other. While SN's identity certainly has major implications for Jessie, discussing this in a purely theoretical way is also a major driver in the girls' friendship. Jessie suggests that it's impossible to fabricate the coping mechanisms that arrive from experiencing the death of a family member.



Jessie is still trying to make Caleb seem attractive, even though he doesn't truly spark her interest—possibly even if he is SN. This suggests that even if Jessie and SN do indeed have a close, intimate relationship over their instant messenger program, that isn't a guarantee that their relationship can translate into the real world if there's no chemistry there. However, it's still important that Jessie not devalue what they do have online. She's still getting a lot out of the relationship, and it seems that SN is as well.



Jessie waits for Caleb by the stairs. He's 15 minutes late, so Jessie pretends to text and prays he won't stand her up. Gem cruises past and says she wishes Jessie would go back home. Quietly but out loud, Jessie agrees with Gem just as Caleb walks up. He greets her warmly but then says they shouldn't have coffee. Jessie vows to not let her disappointment show. She hates that her body is so nondescript and imperfect next to his Ken-doll perfection. He says it's because of Liam, which makes Jessie do a double take. He doesn't want Liam to get the wrong idea. Jessie is confused, but Caleb explains that Liam broke up with Gem because of Jessie. None of this makes sense; Liam can't possibly like Jessie more than Gem. At least Liam isn't SN, since he's an only child.

Caleb says that he can't get involved and walks away. SN messages and asks if Jessie is excited for her trip, but Jessie brushes off his question about her day. She wants to tell him that he hurt her feelings and she doesn't like Liam, and she wants to confirm that he's Caleb. Jessie starts to pity herself when Dri texts and excitedly writes that Liam broke up with Gem. Jessie thinks that when school started, the idea of a senior like Liam asking her out would've thrilled her. Now, she knows this will screw up everything with Dri, work, Ethan, and Caleb/SN. Dri asks how coffee was and commiserates with Jessie that it didn't happen.

CHAPTER 27

As the plane takes off, Jessie thinks about how Scarlett will pick her up in four hours. They'll eat pizza and share inside jokes. Jessie will tell Scarlett about all her drama, and Scarlett will give Jessie soothing advice. Jessie will feel like she's home and she begins to cry at the thought. Later, in the car with Scarlett, Jessie thinks that Scarlett looks different. She has a new haircut and when she speaks, there's an edge to her voice. She also seems to focus too intently on the road as she says that she only recently realized how much time she and Jessie used to spend together. They stop for pizza and Jessie shares everything, expecting advice. Scarlett, however, says this sounds like "high-class problems." She looks Jessie up and down and says Jessie is overthinking things.

When Jessie goes straight to critiquing her "imperfect" body after Caleb's rejection, it's an indicator that Gem's bullying has gotten to Jessie. Now, Jessie believes, at least on some level, that she's never going to fit in at school physically or be able to find a boyfriend because her body isn't the right size. It may also make things worse for Jessie now that Liam broke up with Gem. Clearly, Jessie truly is a threat to Gem's power—and now that Jessie has deprived Gem of her status symbol boyfriend, there's no telling what else Gem might do.



As Jessie's friendship with Dri grows stronger, Jessie begins to realize that the world doesn't revolve around her romantic relationships. Indeed, she may have to put romantic relationships aside in order to maintain her friendships with people like Dri. Though it doesn't occur to Jessie, it's worth considering that this idea applies to her relationship with Scarlett as well—if Jessie continues to focus on her own struggles, she'll alienate Scarlett.



When Jessie talks about how things are going to play out with Scarlett, it all focuses on what Scarlett is going to do for Jessie. Scarlett is going to listen and give Jessie advice—but there's no mention of what Jessie might do for Scarlett. Indeed, Scarlett clearly doesn't appreciate Jessie's implication that only Jessie's life matters. Indeed, Scarlett seems uninterested in actually listening to Jessie. Though this is understandably hurtful to Jessie, it's also justified—Jessie has done a poor job of listening to Scarlett since she moved away.



Scarlett interrupts Jessie's sputtering to say that Adam and Deena are coming over later. She says that Deena isn't so bad, but Jessie doesn't believe it: Jessie has hated Deena for years, ever since Deena tried to cause problems between Jessie and Scarlett. Scarlett puts her drink down and says that this has been hard for her, too. She also had to make new friends. Jessie realizes suddenly that Scarlett had to start over in Jessie's absence. Jessie apologizes for not having thought about it, but Scarlett angrily snaps back. Tears fill Scarlett's eyes and Jessie wants to be anywhere but here. She wants to message SN, but she thinks of how he turned her down yesterday. Scarlett tells Jessie to forget about it and throws her pizza away, uneaten.

Later, Scarlett sits with Adam as Deena whispers in Scarlett's ear as though to broadcast that they're best friends now. Deena's brother Joe brought beer, and Adam's friend Toby is here as well. Jessie thinks that everyone looks different but exactly the same. Adam looks like someone worth dating, while Deena seems older. Toby asks about L.A. and Jessie tries to downplay Rachel's house for Scarlett's benefit. Jessie is shocked to realize that Toby has a Chicago accent and wonders if she sounds weird to everyone at Wood Valley. She wonders if Scarlett thought Jessie was bragging whenever she described Wood Valley. Jessie would rather watch Netflix with Scarlett than eat fancy hamburgers any day.

Jessie thinks of her new friends and whether they'd fit in in Chicago. She thinks that Dri, Agnes, and maybe Caleb would be fine, but Ethan would struggle since he's more like Jessie. Jessie continues to drink and by the time she's drunk, Scarlett and Adam are in the laundry room with the door closed. They're clearly having sex. Jessie wonders if Scarlett has talked with Deena about sex, since Jessie can't provide any advice in that area. Deena and Toby kiss on the couch, right where Jessie fantasized about sleeping if she moved back, as Joe tries desperately to engage Jessie in conversation.

Jessie takes out her phone to message SN and says she's drunk and feels alone. She calls him out for refusing to have coffee with her and starts to cry, which makes Joe give up. Jessie insists she knows who SN is. SN suggests they talk later when Jessie is sober. Jessie runs upstairs, throws up, and doesn't feel comforted at all by the familiar shower curtain or soap dispenser in Scarlett's bathroom.

Finally, Jessie has to contend with the fact that she effectively abandoned Scarlett and left her to figure out life alone. And in Jessie's absence, Scarlett has had to make questionable choices about who she hangs out with, like inviting Deena into her inner circle. When Jessie feels like she wants to be anywhere else, it makes it clear that Chicago itself isn't home—being with Scarlett, on good terms and in the same way they used to be, is what makes this place home. And because of the way SN/Caleb treated Jessie yesterday, Los Angeles doesn't feel like home right now either.



Picking up on Toby's accent means that Jessie has spent enough time in Los Angeles to forget how people speak in Chicago—another indicator that in many ways, Los Angeles is now more of a home to her than Chicago is. Indeed, nothing about this gathering makes sense to Jessie. She's the uncomfortable and unwilling center of attention, and Deena, Joe, and Toby are all new additions to the girls' circle. This is a normal part of growing up—but it doesn't mean that it's any easier for Jessie to swallow.



Even though Jessie has been willing to talk about sex with Agnes and Dri, she hasn't been as open or curious about Scarlett's experimentations with Adam. This emphasizes that it's not that Jessie is inexperienced; it's that she hasn't acted interested in this part of Scarlett's life.



Not feeling safe or at home in the upstairs bathroom makes it clear that the place itself doesn't mean this is home. Jessie feels totally unmoored and alone, and it's likely she'd feel that way with or without the alcohol in her system. She feels unmoored because she's at odds with both SN and Scarlett—the two people who make her feel loved and whole.



CHAPTER 28

Scarlett wakes Jessie up. Scarlett is in pajamas but looks put-together; Jessie is in Scarlett's bed and feels horrendous. Jessie accepts a glass of water and admits she's thinking of going back to California early. She says she doesn't know why Scarlett hates her so much. Scarlett snuggles in next to Jessie and reminds her that Jessie left and has barely asked about Scarlett's life since then. Jessie starts to cry as Scarlett says she didn't really want to be friends with Deena, but she had no one after Jessie left. She feels bad about being mad at Jessie, but she still needs her best friend. Scarlett bursts into tears and once she calms down, she gulps that Adam is going to break up with her because of "the sex thing." She admits that they're not having sex yet; she's too afraid.

Jessie pulls the blanket away when Scarlett pulls it over her head and tells Scarlett to tell her what's going on. Scarlett says she can barely function because of how much she likes Adam, a sentiment Jessie understands: she feels like that about Ethan and, to a degree, SN (but not his in-person self as Caleb). Jessie tells Scarlett that this is great, but Scarlett says she feels like an idiot. Jessie assures Scarlett that Adam is super into her and feels elated that Scarlett has found a good boyfriend. Jessie realizes that Scarlett is right about how she's behaved badly, so she asks Scarlett to tell her everything.

Later, as they power through spicy soup that's supposed to cure hangovers, Scarlett says that Adam wants her to make him stickers for his computer. Jessie is thrilled and ignores her phone beeping. Scarlett, however, says that she wants to hear about Wood Valley stuff and insists that Jessie check her phone. When Jessie doesn't move, Scarlett fetches the phone and squeals happily: Dri and Agnes saw Caleb with his living, breathing sister. Jessie is confused. She wonders if Caleb made up a dead sister and remembers joking with SN once about "taking back" coffee, which she thought referred to Caleb canceling their coffee date. Jessie feels ready to vomit as Scarlett says that Caleb is a jerk and can't be SN.

Especially once Scarlett bursts into tears, it becomes clear that she's not really angry with Jessie. She feels alone, afraid, and in need of her best friend—which is exactly the situation Jessie has been in since she left. Realizing that Scarlett is in the same boat helps Jessie understand how poorly she's behaved since leaving, which in turn motivates her to do better. For instance, she can ask what the "sex thing" is and show genuine interest in what Scarlett has to say.



By flipping their usual roles and being the one to now give Scarlett advice, Jessie is able to fuel their friendship and begin to repair the damage she's done. While talking about SN and Jessie's romantic endeavors have helped the girls maintain their friendship for the last few months, if they're going to stay friends for much longer, Jessie will have to spend more time on the advice-giving side of things to make Scarlett feel supported and valued.



Scarlett's insistence that she wants to hear about Wood Valley drama and debate who SN is shows that the girls don't have to simply decide that one of them gets to talk all the time and the other has to give advice. Rather, their friendship will only flourish if they both show interest and each take turns talking and listening. As an outsider, Scarlett may also have different insights into what's going on with SN—like the observation that Caleb has been a jerk in a way that contrasts greatly with how SN treats Jessie.



Jessie asks who SN is then, and Scarlett hands Jessie's phone back to her. SN messaged her multiple times throughout the night. Early in the morning, he texted her three things. First, he only told one lie; second, talking to Jessie feels realer than anything else; and third, he thinks he knows who Jessie thinks he is and she's wrong. He adds a fourth: he wants to meet. Jessie insists that SN is Caleb, since he just admitted to lying. Scarlett says that Jessie is wrong, and Jessie believes her. She thinks about how dismissive Caleb has been and how engaged SN always is. Scarlett says she thinks SN is Liam, given what else is going on. Jessie smiles. She doesn't want SN to be Liam, but she's happy for this confirmation that Scarlett has been listening. She messages SN that she'd love to meet.

Given everything that's happened, SN now realizes that he needs to be more open with Jessie and move their relationship into the open. Just as Jessie had to recognize that she wasn't being a great friend to Scarlett, SN has to acknowledge the skewed power dynamic in his relationship with Jessie and take steps to fix that. This suggests that a major part of being a friend—or a romantic partner—is being willing to make changes when one learns that something is hurting someone else. Without that willingness to change, friendships and relationships will simply die.



CHAPTER 29

Scarlett drives as Jessie rambles about how SN could be anyone. They drive past Jessie's old house, which looks the same save for the tricycle out front. Scarlett pulls into the 7-11 and announces that SN is Liam. They sit in the car and Jessie thinks about Mom. She tells Scarlett that she doesn't like Liam like that. Liam doesn't make her feel seen like SN does. She asks Scarlett if she wants to talk about sex. Scarlett says she wants to have sex, but she's worried and is afraid to talk to her mom about birth control. Jessie suggests that Scarlett play things by ear and is surprised by how insecure Scarlett is. She points out that the first time is always a bit scary, but there's no right answer. Scarlett smiles. In unison, Jessie and Scarlett get out and buy Slurpees, just like they used to.

Before their fight, it seems possible that Jessie simply wouldn't have taken Scarlett's insecurities seriously—the Scarlett she knows is fearless and “undeniable,” after all. Recognizing that this is a big, scary thing for Scarlett shows that Jessie herself has come of age and matured through this experience. She now understands that everyone feels insecure sometimes—and in order to get through their insecurities, they need someone to listen without judgment and assure them that whatever happens, everything is going to be okay.



Dri texts and asks if Liam asked Jessie out. Jessie wonders if it's technically a lie to say no if Liam is SN. Reading over Jessie's shoulder, Scarlett tells Jessie to not tell Dri that she's the reason Liam broke up with Gem. Dri continues to text that Liam likes Jessie and might be SN. Scarlett confidently says that if Liam is SN, she has to give him a chance—and Dri will understand if she's a real friend. Dri texts back that Liam doesn't have a sister, but she still thinks he's SN.

Scarlett shows here that she's not wholly uninterested in Wood Valley Drama—it's compelling and her best friend is in the middle of it, so it's entertaining if nothing else. Even if she views Jessie's involvement in all of this as entertainment first and foremost, the fact remains that her interest will keep her friendship with Jessie alive going forward.



Theo texts a bit later, impressed that Liam broke up with Gem to be with Jessie. He says that Dad is making him pick Jessie up at the airport. A bit later, Jessie messages SN three things. She admits she doesn't know who he is, says she's never lied, and she's not sure where home is. SN suggests that home might not be a place.

Especially after her fight with Scarlett, Jessie has to conclude that she doesn't know everything and can't go through life believing she knows what others are thinking. Recognizing this is a mark of her growing maturity.



CHAPTER 30

Jessie watches Chicago get smaller as the plane takes off. She tries to figure out whether she'd rather stay with Scarlett and Scarlett's new life or go home to Rachel's house, Dad, Liam, and SN. She fingers the envelope that Scarlett gave her before they parted and remembers how, right after Mom died, Scarlett said that what happened wasn't okay, but they needed to pretend it was. Jessie thinks it'll never be okay that her mom isn't here to see who she becomes. She opens the envelope. It's a sticker of a ninja with a sword and a note from Scarlett. It reads that Scarlett wants Jessie to see herself as a strong fighter and her mother's daughter. Jessie hugs the sticker and vows to stop being afraid.

Home is a hazy, difficult idea for Jessie at this point, since her life seems to be constantly changing. Though to a degree, she still wants home to be where her mother is, she also recognizes that Mom's memory will always be with her. Even if Mom isn't around in person to watch Jessie grow, she still lives on in Jessie's mind and will forever. This, more than anything, is proof that Jessie's new family still includes Mom, whether anyone else acknowledges this or not.



CHAPTER 31

Theo is impeccably dressed in a pinstripe blazer and matching shorts. He says he only offered to do this because he figured Jessie would tell him everything. Jessie says she has nothing to share. It's the truth; she has no idea what's up with Liam and Gem, and she's pretty sure Liam isn't SN. Theo shares what he knows: Liam is madly in love with Jessie, which Jessie says makes no sense. Jessie says she doesn't want Liam to ask her out. Theo asks if it's because of Ethan and says that Jessie shouldn't date him because of Xander. Everyone knew Xander was into drugs, but they were all shocked when he overdosed on heroin.

Because Jessie doesn't have anything to share, she gets to listen. This is exactly what she needs right now, as Theo finally seems willing to give Jessie the information she needs to make sense out of Wood Valley and its characters. The simple fact that Theo is so interested in all of this suggests that Jessie has become a major player in Wood Valley drama, whether she likes it or not. In other words, she's starting to fit in and become one of the crew.



Jessie doesn't understand what this has to do with Ethan, though she's sure it was awful for Ethan to watch a bandmate die like that. Theo says that Xander was Ethan's older brother. Jessie finally realizes that the faraway look in Ethan's eyes is because of grief. Things start to make sense and she wants to ask SN if he's Ethan. His lie might have been to simply sub in a sister for a brother. She vows to not get her hopes up or jump to conclusions. SN messages that if they want to go to a Waffle House, they have to go to Arizona. Instead, he suggests IHOP. Jessie looks through her texts with Ethan and sees that he writes very differently from SN. Later, SN asks if they can meet tomorrow after school. Jessie declines since she that's when she meets with Ethan. She starts to feel disappointed as they decide on Wednesday.

The revelation that Ethan's brother died explains why Jessie and Ethan have gotten along so well. Even if Jessie wasn't aware that Ethan's brother died, she still likely recognized some of his mannerisms as ones connected to grief. Having this information also makes it easier to empathize with Ethan and see him as a real person. Jessie now knows for sure that Ethan's home life is just as challenging and hard to deal with as her own—losing a close family member like this leaves its mark, whether one loses a parent or a sibling.



CHAPTER 32

After Jessie and Ethan sit with their coffees at Starbucks, Ethan notes that Jessie looks out of it and is staring. He asks how her weekend was, which Jessie thinks could be evidence for or against him being SN. She says it was rocky at first but hard to leave, which is kind of true. She doesn't feel like she belongs anywhere. Ethan then compliments the new sticker from Scarlett. Jessie wants to crawl into his lap and ask him so many things, but she settles on asking why he doesn't sleep. He says he's just weird, but it's gotten worse in the last year. He confirms that he has indeed memorized the first part of *The Waste Land*. Jessie blurts out that she's sorry about Xander. She wants to tell him that everything will get better, but she doesn't.

Ethan stares out the window and says that Jessie is the only person who didn't know him while Xander was alive. Now, everyone else assumes that Ethan is like Xander or thinks that Ethan should be fine. Jessie totally gets it if Ethan just needs someone who didn't know him before. Ethan abruptly changes the subject and says that Liam is going to ask Jessie out. Jessie doesn't know what to say. She's not sure if Ethan is SN, but she knows that her crush on Ethan is real. Jessie says she doesn't want Liam to ask her out, so Ethan suggests she say no. Later, Jessie replays the conversation as SN texts that he's nervous to meet.

Minutes after, Scarlett texts—she just discovered she can order birth control online and doesn't want to go to the gynecologist. Jessie tells her to go to the doctor. Ethan texts and says they need to start writing their paper and should start meeting more than once a week. Jessie agrees and dances around her room. SN messages Jessie to tell her that when people used telegraphs, they wrote in code, just like people do now with abbreviations like “ttyl.”

CHAPTER 33

Theo tosses Jessie a juice box and says she needs to talk to Dad. Jessie reminds Theo that he's too immature to be giving her advice like this, but he insists she's bringing bad energy into the house by ignoring him. Jessie agrees to talk to her dad and texts him. Dad is thrilled and asks when they can talk. Jessie marvels that she has to schedule a time to make up with her dad; before, she, Dad, and Mom would all have dinner every night and they'd play a game where they each shared one thing from their day. Jessie thinks it's a lot like her game with SN and wonders what she'd tell Mom about her day. She and Dad decide to just talk later.

If Ethan is SN, he clearly still wants to stay undercover for as long as possible—otherwise he would've insisted they do something today, when he's already with Jessie. Whoever SN is, hiding and prolonging his big reveal allows SN to cling to the relationship that he and Jessie have right now, which is still comfortable for him even if it can't last forever. Jessie's sense that she doesn't belong is a product of discovering that Chicago no longer feels like home. However, since she doesn't know who SN is yet, Jessie also can't feel entirely secure in Los Angeles either.



For Ethan, his friendship with Jessie allowed him to figure out who he is without baggage that turns him into an object of curiosity for so many. In a way, omitting that his brother died allowed Jessie and Ethan to cultivate a different kind of intimacy, if only because Jessie has had the opportunity to see who Ethan really is—that is, to understand that Ethan doesn't do drugs like his brother did. Then, because of her own experience, Jessie is also able to understand that he's still grieving.



Again, taking this authoritative role with Scarlett and encouraging her to go to the doctor allows Jessie to demonstrate that she's engaged and paying attention—she doesn't want Scarlett to end up with fake medicine or something dangerous because she was too afraid to see a doctor.



The juice box from Theo is another peace offering, and it helps Jessie feel more secure in her relationship. This is why she takes Theo seriously when he asks that she talk to Dad. Especially since Jessie's first thought is to consider how things worked when Mom was still alive, it makes it clear that Mom is still a part of Jessie and Dad's life, even if she's no longer here in person. She's a part of this family and overshadows everything Jessie does.



After English class, Mrs. Pollack asks Jessie to stay behind. It's been a good day since Gem is out sick, and Ethan makes it even better by mouthing "Good luck" at Jessie on his way out. Mrs. Pollack apologizes for how she handled things last week. Jessie points out that it's not Mrs. Pollack's fault that "Gem is a total bitch" and is immediately mortified. Mrs. Pollack says that she was uncool and tortured in high school. She says that Jessie already knows who she is and that's probably what makes her seem threatening to Gem. Mrs. Pollack reminds Jessie that there's a counselor, psychiatrist, and a life coach on staff if Jessie needs to talk, or she can come talk to her. She also says that she's excited to read Jessie and Ethan's *Waste Land* paper, since they're her brightest students.

At Book Out Below!, Jessie tries to figure out how to turn Liam down and messages SN. SN promises that he's not a serial killer and suggests they meet at 3:45 p.m. The bell rings; it's Dad. He says the shop is great and Jessie wonders if they're just going to ignore their fight. Dad sits down and says it's unnatural for it to be 90 degrees in November and the pizza is awful here. Suddenly serious, Dad says that he knows he did a bad job parenting through this transition. He asks if Jessie wants to move back to Chicago and says that if she does, they can make it happen.

Jessie thinks about how everyone in Chicago has moved on since she left. She also loves Ethan, SN, Dri, Agnes, and Theo, as well as Mrs. Pollack and the library at Wood Valley. Jessie says she'd rather stay here. She begins to cry and Dad says he doesn't want her to feel alone. Jessie feels like she can finally tell Dad how alone she's felt in the last few months in a house that's big, strange, and not hers. Jessie waves off Dad's hug and says that she's just going to be mad for a while. He accepts this. Out of the blue, Jessie asks if Dad loves Rachel. He says he does and starts to say that it "doesn't mean" something, but Jessie makes him stop. She knows that love isn't finite; his love for Rachel doesn't mean he loves her or Mom any less.

Scarlett texts that she and Adam just had sex. It was awkward, but they did okay—she's in the bathroom and they're going to have sex again in a minute. Jessie is ecstatic and when Dad asks, tells him that Scarlett texted her something funny. Dad says he's been talking to Scarlett's mom about Adam, whom he remembers being "shrimpy." Dad asks if Jessie remembers how she'd used to say "I grewed!" when she was little. Mom and Dad used to ask Jessie this sort of thing all the time; she never remembered what they brought up and doesn't remember this either. Dad tells Jessie that Mom would be proud of her. Seeing Dad's earnest look, Jessie thinks that maybe this has all been harder for Dad than it's been for her.

Mrs. Pollack essentially confirms for Jessie what both Ethan and SN have made clear to her: that it's not actually necessary to fit in at Wood Valley in the way that Jessie thinks she has to. She doesn't have to dress a certain way or embody a certain kind of feminine ideal; she can simply lean into her academic tendencies and let everything else go. It's even more important and helpful that Mrs. Pollack compliments Jessie's academic performance, as this makes it clear to Jessie that this is really a thing she should be trying for—fitting in socially may help her get through the school days, but it's not necessarily the most important part of school.



Dad finally realizes that it was a major misstep to essentially abandon Jessie to figure everything out on her own. What she's needed this entire time was a parent who was willing to listen, take her seriously, and offer some guidance as to how things were going to work. Now, though it's a good thing he apologized, it's too little, too late—Jessie is too entrenched here to move back to Chicago.



Because Jessie has genuine friends in Los Angeles and is excelling academically here—and because everything is so different back in Chicago—it's not hard for her to see that her life is here for the foreseeable future. It's also telling that she makes a point to call Dad out on how unfamiliar and unwelcoming the house feels. Even if he can't fix what's already happened, this is one place where he can do helpful things going forward.



Just like Jessie, Dad's memories of Chicago no longer match the reality—Adam has been working out and is clearly no longer the scrawny child that Dad remembers. Jessie isn't either, for that matter—now, she's better able to think of others and how things feel for them, which is why she's suddenly able to consider that this has been difficult for Dad. Then, when Dad reminds Jessie that Mom would be proud, it's an important recognition on his part that Mom is still part of this family—her opinion, even if it comes from Dad's mouth, still matters.



Jessie is messaging SN when she enters her bedroom to find Rachel. Rachel comments sadly that Mom was beautiful as she stares at the photo. Jessie notices that Rachel took down the paintings. Rachel apologizes for leaving them up; Theo's dad chose them. She says that Jessie should put up whatever she wants and that Jessie will start joining Theo for SAT tutoring. Rachel apologizes again and a tear falls. When Jessie asks if she's okay, Rachel says that Dad is wonderful, but she still misses Theo's dad and knows that Theo does too. Jessie is at a loss, but she suggests that Rachel put up some photos of Theo's dad and of Theo as a kid. Rachel says that's a great idea, wipes her tears, and leaves.

Finally, Rachel realizes and takes important steps to help Jessie feel at home. By transforming the guest room into Jessie's room, Rachel makes it clear that Jessie does have some level of ownership over this house and can trust that she's going to stay here. When Jessie suggests they put up photos of Theo's dad, she tries to help Rachel feel more at peace with the fact that her first husband may be deceased, but that doesn't mean she has to forget him. They can all grieve their loved ones and they can do so together—they are, after all, part of the family.



CHAPTER 34

Jessie arrives at IHOP early and sits in the first booth so she can spot SN right away. She wonders if she's dressed appropriately in her normal jeans and a T-shirt and thinks of how broken out her face is right now. Dri texts and assures Jessie that if Liam is SN, she should go for it. Dri asks multiple times if SN is there yet, a game that Jessie finds funny, until Liam appears across the restaurant. Jessie's eyes fill with tears. With a smile, Liam slides in the booth and asks Jessie if he'd have dinner with him sometime. Jessie hears Ethan's words telling her to say no in her head, but that was before she learned that SN is Liam.

Because Jessie so completely believes that Liam is SN, she can no longer take Ethan's advice to heart. The intimacy of her conversations makes her far more willing to give Liam a chance, just as she was willing to give Caleb a chance. Again, this shows how powerful the intimacy that Jessie and SN cultivated is. It's enough to make Jessie willing to go along with a guy she knows she doesn't like.



Jessie focuses on her coffee, terrified and unsure of what to say. A shadow crosses the table and she briefly fears that Gem is here to beat her up, but it's Ethan. Jessie, confused, thinks that this can't be true—she wants to say no to Liam, but he's SN. Caleb appears suddenly behind Ethan and then smiles encouragingly at Liam. Jessie wonders if this is all a big joke and considers taking Dad up on his offer to move back to Chicago. Ethan tells Jessie she's early and Liam angrily snaps at Ethan. Jessie remembers Dri saying there was band drama, and she remembers that Liam replaced Xander—*That's why Ethan hates Liam.* Liam stands, ready to punch Ethan, but Ethan pulls out his phone. Jessie's phone beeps; SN just messaged her that it's him. Ethan is SN.

Though Jessie's confusion is understandable, it makes far more sense that SN is Ethan. Unlike Caleb and Liam, Ethan has connected with Jessie in person in a way that's close and intimate. He hasn't simply brushed her off or chatted to her about band drama—he's treated her like a real person, with interesting things to say. In the end, Jessie learns that it's their equal role in the conversations that makes all of this work. While she's been able to listen or not talk at all with Liam and Caleb, Ethan has given her the space to talk and share in a way that no other guy has.



Grinning, Ethan says that Oville had a meeting in the back and Liam happened to get to Jessie first when they finished. Liam looks more confused than angry and Jessie smiles at Ethan, now sitting across from her in the booth. Liam and Caleb leave. SN messages Jessie and asks if he can sit next to her. She tells Ethan he can. He immediately tucks her hair behind her ears. Several hours later, Jessie and Ethan are still talking and holding hands. She asks why he reached out to her over email. Ethan explains that his therapist suggested he write instead of talk and he's anonymously emailed a few kids before, but never for as long as he emailed with Jessie. He also explains that the Batman shirt was Xander's.

Jessie asks Ethan to tell her three things. He says he's terrified of drugs, even Tylenol; he memorized *The Waste Land* just to impress Jessie; and his mom is in rehab, though he's not optimistic about it. Jessie gives Ethan three things. She says she hoped that Ethan was SN and the possibility of Liam being SN almost made her cry. Ethan says that Liam isn't awful, but Jessie says now he'll go back to Gem and she'll never be able to set Dri up with him. Jessie wonders what to say next. She thanks him for being her first friend and thinks that she feels like she's exactly where she wants to be. She doesn't have a third thing. Ethan says he has one for her: he'd like to kiss her. They kiss and it's "poetry."

Ethan's therapist as much as confirms that writing can be just as meaningful as talking to someone in person. In some situations, like Ethan and Jessie discovered, it can even lead to what looks to be a strong, fulfilling, romantic relationship. The fact that the Batman shirt was Xander's speaks to where Ethan is in his grieving process. It's still important to him to remember Xander in this very tangible way, every single day—and it likely makes Ethan feel like Xander is still a part of the family.



Now that Jessie knows who SN is—and, importantly, he's the person Jessie most wanted him to be—she can finally feel at home in Los Angeles. This makes it clear that home doesn't just refer to a certain place. Rather, home has to do with the people one spends time with and loves—including those who are deceased. Jessie can still remember her mom, even here in Los Angeles, and Ethan can keep Xander alive by wearing his shirt. And both of them can move forward and take their relationship even deeper thanks to the foundation they developed through their messages.





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