

The Lovely Bones



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALICE SEBOLD

Alice Sebold was born in Wisconsin and raised in the suburbs of Philadelphia. In her freshman year at Syracuse University in New York State, she was assaulted while walking off-campus, and spent years attempting to ensure that her rapist—whom she did not know—was eventually put behind bars. The experience shaped many of Sebold’s interests and obsessions as a writer, and her 1999 memoir *Lucky*, her 2002 debut novel *The Lovely Bones*, and her 2007 follow-up *The Almost Moon* all reflect themes of violence, darkness, injustice, and the banality of evil. Sebold holds an MFA in fiction from the University of California Irvine, and lives in San Francisco with her husband, Glen David Gold, who is also a writer and whom she met in the writing program at UC Irvine.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Susie Salmon is murdered in December of 1973—the year the United States discontinued their involvement in the Vietnam War, the year the Watergate Scandal unfolded before the eyes of the American Public, and the year of the Yom Kippur War. The world of Susie Salmon’s youth was changing rapidly, and as violence ebbed and flowed in various conflicts the world over, the falsely idyllic veneer of life on the American home front had begun to deteriorate. In her hometown of Norristown, Pennsylvania, Susie Salmon was aware of the counterculture raging through the country and longed to take part in it. The novel deals with the destruction of a marriage, the deficiencies in the assigned duties, roles, and expectations of fathers and mothers, the ineffectiveness of the American justice system, and the reluctance to believe that idyllic suburban life was struck through with an undercurrent of darkness. All of these issues, themes, and motifs are, if not unique to the moment of the early 1970s, at least things which had, in many parts of the country, been swept under the rug and ignored for decades.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sebold’s 1999 memoir *Lucky*, which details her brutal assault and rape at the hands of a complete stranger during her freshman year at Syracuse University, reflects many of the same themes as *The Lovely Bones*. Sebold recounts watching herself “change” in the eyes of her friends and family whenever she tells someone new about the violent incident—just as Susie, from heaven, watches helplessly as her friends and family struggle to understand what has happened to her and what she must have endured in the grisly final moments of her young life. What it takes to recover from trauma is explored in both texts,

though in wildly different ways. Whereas Sebold was forced to cope day after day on Earth, Susie has the advantage of a vast, cosmic, and heavenly perspective—yet both women learned what it takes to save themselves and secure justice on their own behalf. Novels that tackle similar themes and problems include Mitch Albom’s [The Five People You Meet in Heaven](#), which also offers a vision of heaven that complicates the notion of eternal bliss, and instead focuses on heaven as a place of reflection, understanding, and coping with one’s life and losses; Donna Tartt’s *The Little Friend*, which also focuses on the brutal murder of a child, and that child’s sibling’s journey to reveal their loved one’s killer; and *Mystic River*, a novel by Dennis Lehane, which charts the lives of a group of men who together, as children, bore witness to the kidnapping of one of their friends, and whose lives are still marked by tragedy, loss, and violence.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Lovely Bones*
- **When Written:** Mid-to-late 1990s
- **Where Written:** California, USA
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction; thriller; literary fiction
- **Setting:** Norristown, PA
- **Climax:** Susie Salmon, after nearly a decade of longingly watching her friends’ and family’s lives on Earth go on without her, switches places—and bodies—with her high school classmate Ruth Connors, whom she had previously “passed by” on her way up to heaven directly after her murder. Ruth ascends to heaven, where her dedication to honoring the deaths of murdered women is lauded and appreciated at last, while Susie, in possession of Ruth’s body, reconnects with and makes love to her high school sweetheart Ray Singh.
- **Antagonist:** George Harvey
- **Point of View:** First-person; third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Bones at the Box Office. In 2009, visionary New Zealand director Peter Jackson—best known for his film adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and [The Hobbit](#)—brought Susie Salmon’s story to the big screen. Jackson assembled an all-star cast including Saoirse Ronan as Susie, Stanley Tucci as George Harvey, and Mark Wahlberg and Rachel Weisz as Jack and Abigail. Jackson’s first major feature film, *Heavenly Creatures*, dealt with similar themes and motifs—everyday

violence, the concerns of teenage girls, and perceptions of the afterlife—and featured Academy Award-winner Kate Winslet in her first film role ever.



PLOT SUMMARY

Susie Salmon is fourteen years old when she is murdered. After school on December 6th, 1973, Susie walks home from school, cutting through the cornfield which separates her junior high from her neighborhood. Her neighbor George Harvey is waiting in the field, and he invites her to come take a look at something he has built. Harvey opens up a trapdoor in the ground and invites Susie to climb down. Once below the earth, Mr. Harvey remarks on how beautiful Susie is, and urges her to take off her clothes. She and Harvey begin to struggle physically, but Harvey bests her, and throws Susie down on the ground. He begins kissing her, and Susie thinks of her first real kiss—it happened just the other week, with a classmate named Ray Singh. Susie begs Harvey to stop, but he rapes her. After the act is done, Harvey instructs her to tell him that she loves him. Susie does, but “the end [comes] anyway.”

Susie arrives in heaven and finds that everyone’s heaven is different. The dead interact in the spaces where their heavens overlap—Susie soon makes friend with a girl named Holly, who, like Susie, has newly arrived. Franny, their intake counselor, helps the girls adjust to life in heaven, and explains the rules to them—to get what they want, all they have to do is desire it, and understand the reason why. What Susie really wants is to return to Earth, but as she is unable to, she decides to spend her time in heaven watching those she has left behind in order to see whole lives from beginning to end, and understand the secrets of adulthood, love, and life. Back on earth, Susie’s parents, Jack and Abigail, her younger sister, Lindsey, and her four-year-old brother Buckley struggle as Detective Len Fenerman brings them the news that the investigation of Susie’s disappearance has turned into a murder investigation.

Susie explains that when souls leave Earth, they often pass by a still-living person. When Susie left Earth, she passed by a classmate of hers, a loner named Ruth Connors. Ruth, attempting to reckon with the experience of what has happened to her, becomes obsessed with finding out as much as she can about Susie. As Ruth’s preoccupation with Susie deepens, so too does Susie’s own preoccupation with her memories of her brief time on Earth. Propelled by her longing for her family, Susie is finally able to “break through” and reveal herself to her father one morning as he smashes his collection of ships-in-bottles—a craft he and Susie used to do together. Susie reveals herself to him in the shards of glass, and she and Jack both realize that the line between the living and the dead is not so stark or final after all.

On the outskirts of Norristown there is a [sinkhole](#), which a family owns and operates by charging people to dump their old

appliances and furniture. Mr. Harvey dumps a safe containing Susie’s remains into the sinkhole. As Mr. Harvey walks back to his car, he feels Susie’s charm bracelet in his jacket pocket. He stops off on the way home at the site of an under-construction industrial park and throws the bracelet into the bottom of a man-made pond. Harvey keeps one charm from the bracelet—a Pennsylvania keystone, engaged with Susie’s initials—as a kind of trophy. Weeks later, Mr. Harvey feels a familiar itch to build something. Jack passes by Harvey’s house, and notices him building a kind of tent in the yard. Jack stops by and offers to help Harvey—Harvey, lying, explains that it is a bridal tent he constructs each year in memory of his late wife. Harvey apologizes for Jack’s loss, and as it begins to snow, the two men set to work. Once the structure is finished, Jack accuses Harvey of knowing something about Susie’s murder. Harvey retreats into the tent and explains that all of the neighbors have just seen Jack helping him to build something—in the eyes of the casual observer, the two are friends.

Back at home, Jack places a call to Len Fenerman and says that he believes Harvey knows something about Susie’s death. The next day, Len Fenerman visits George Harvey at his home. After the visit, Len calls Jack and tells him that he found nothing. On Christmas Day, as the Salmons solemnly open their presents, one of Lindsey’s classmates, Samuel Heckler, comes by to give her a present. Susie watches both joyously and jealously as her sister receives her first kiss.

Weeks after Susie’s disappearance, Ruth begins walking through the cornfield each morning. Ray Singh, also preoccupied by Susie’s death, begins joining Ruth on these walks, and they bond over their shared feelings of loneliness and their mutual obsession with Susie. One afternoon, Jack goes over to the Singh home—he wants to talk to Ray about Susie. Jack converses with Ray’s mother Ruana. He confesses his theory about Harvey to her, and Ruana tells Jack that if it were her child, she would wait until she was absolutely sure of their murderer, then would find a quiet way and kill that person.

On the morning of Susie’s memorial, Lindsey frets over what to wear, and ultimately ends up going into Susie’s closet to pick out a dress. Grandma Lynn, in town for a visit, helps her, and the family all go together to the memorial. At the church, friends and neighbors have gathered to say goodbye to Susie. Len Fenerman is there, standing by the door and planning to watch those who come and go from the service for any suspicious activity. Toward the end of the memorial, Lindsey sees George Harvey standing just outside the church, looking in. Lindsey faints and in the commotion, Harvey slips away.

Months later, Lindsey, Ruth, and Samuel all attend a summer camp for gifted students. Ruth attempts to ask Lindsey about Susie, despite Lindsey’s desire to break out of her role as the dead girl’s sister and make friends on her own terms. The final week of the symposium always concludes in a camp-wide competition. This year, the challenge is devising a plan for how

to commit the perfect murder. Lindsey is rattled by the news, and she and Samuel retreat down to the lake. Beneath a rowboat, the two of them have sex for the first time, and Susie watches with envy as Lindsey has a positive and joyful sexual experience. As Susie watches Lindsey and Samuel make love, she remarks that “How to Commit the Perfect Murder” is an oft-played game in heaven, and that she always chooses an icicle because the weapon melts away.

Back in Norristown, Mr. Harvey has been very careful not to draw attention to himself. Jack remains convinced he is Susie’s killer, and has been making calls to the police all summer to report his theories. One day, Len arrives at the Salmon house to tell Jack to stop calling about Harvey. That night, while up in his study, Jack sees a beam of light out his window, traveling toward the cornfield. Believing that it is Harvey, Jack grabs a baseball bat downstairs and heads out to the cornfield. There, he finds not Harvey, but Susie’s friend Clarissa—in a moment of delusion, believing Clarissa to be Susie herself, Jack leaps toward Clarissa. Clarissa’s boyfriend Brian Nelson jumps out of the corn and begins beating Jack with his own bat. Jack is admitted to the hospital and sent into surgery. Early the following morning, Abigail arrives at the hospital—she puts a call through to the police, and asks if Len Fenerman is available to join her at the hospital. When Len arrives, the two of them go outside for a cigarette. As the two of them talk about their respective losses—Abigail’s daughter and Len’s wife—the air between them becomes charged, and Abigail kisses Len.

In the fall of 1974, Lindsey returns to junior high. As the school year begins she is now known not just as the sister of the dead girl, but as the daughter of the town crackpot—news of Jack’s mishap in the field has begun to spread. As the first anniversary of Susie’s death approaches, Lindsey asks her father whether he is still convinced that Mr. Harvey is responsible for Susie’s murder, and Jack tells her that there is no doubt in his mind. One afternoon, Lindsey heads for George Harvey’s house. She breaks into his basement and begins searching the house. In Harvey’s bedroom, Lindsey finds a sketchbook. Flipping through it, she finds a schematic for an underground structure to be built in the cornfield behind the junior high. Mr. Harvey arrives home, and, hearing movement upstairs, goes to his bedroom. He enters just as Lindsey jumps out of the second-story window, and he watches her run back to her own house. Jack, now in possession of the sketch Lindsey stole, phones the police and asks for Len Fenerman, but Len is unavailable. Susie reveals that Len is with her mother—the two of them are having sex while George Harvey, having thrown the police off his case once again, packs his belongings and leaves town.

On the anniversary of Susie’s death, Ruth and Ray take some candles out to the cornfield to memorialize her. To their surprise, when they arrive, several of the Salmons’ neighbors have already begun to gather there. Lindsey, at home in the living room, looks out the window and sees the gathering in the

cornfield. She wants to go, but Abigail does not, expressing her desire to move on. Lindsey asks Abigail if she is going to leave their family, and Abigail promises she will not.

In the summer of 1975, Abigail leaves, drives out to California, and takes a job at a winery. That fall, Grandma Lynn comes to stay. In December of 1975, over a year has passed since Mr. Harvey packed up and left, but there has been no sign of him. Lindsey goes to the police station to confront Fenerman about why no one can turn up Harvey—on his desk, she spots one of her mother’s scarves, and realizes that the two of them had been having an affair. In the fall of 1976, Len Fenerman visits the evidence room to add a new piece of evidence to Susie’s file—a Coke bottle bearing Susie’s and Harvey’s fingerprints, recently dug up in the middle of the cornfield. Fenerman laments the fact that Jack was right all along. Meanwhile, in Connecticut, a hunter turns up Susie’s Pennsylvania keystone charm—along with the bones of a child’s foot. Ray attends school at University of Pennsylvania, and studies medicine; Ruth moves to New York City, where she spends her days walking the streets, nursing her “second sight” for places where girls and women have been murdered in the past. Mr. Harvey is “living wild” along the Northeast Corridor, occasionally returning to Norristown under cover of darkness to drive through his old neighborhood. As more and more bodies connected to Harvey are turned up throughout the Northeast, Len compiles evidence.

Lindsey and Samuel have just graduated from college. As they ride Samuel’s motorcycle home from the ceremony, it begins to rain, and the two seek shelter in an old, run-down Victorian house. Samuel marvels at the details, and announces that he wants to move into the house and restore it—he wants Lindsey by his side, and he proposes marriage to her. She accepts. Ruth, in New York City, receives a call from her father—the sinkhole at the edge of Norristown is slated to close. Ruth plans to make a “pilgrimage” home to see the hole one last time before it closes. Back in Norristown, Jack has a heart attack. Susie selfishly wishes for Jack to die, so that he can join her in heaven; down on Earth, Buckley begs Susie to let Jack live. Abigail, at the winery, receives news of an emergency—she calls the local hospital in Norristown and learns that Jack has had a heart attack. She boards a flight home. At the hospital, Abigail and Jack reunite, and Susie watches happily.

Susie watches as Ruth and Ray, both back home in Norristown, head out to the sinkhole to say farewell to it. Meanwhile, Len arrives at the hospital and gives Jack the keystone charm. Mr. Harvey has returned to town. As he winds through his old neighborhood, he becomes haunted by the memories of all the women he has killed, and Susie watches as their spirits fill his car. Ruth and Ray arrive at the sinkhole and stand at its edge for a few moments. Ruth spots Harvey’s car driving by, and becomes overwhelmed when her “second sight” allows her to see all of the spirits clinging to the vehicle—she faints in the

road. Susie suddenly tips forward and falls to Earth. Susie inhabits Ruth's body while Ruth's soul pushes up to heaven. Susie is overjoyed to be back on Earth—and especially to be in Ray's arms. Susie, feeling bold, suggests they go rest at Samuel's older brother Hal's bike shop just across the train tracks. Susie uses a spare key to let the two of them into the apartment over the shop, and Ray begins to suspect that something has happened to Ruth. Susie disrobes and takes a shower, and asks Ray to join her. Realizing that, despite the impossibility of the situation, Susie has fallen to Earth and taken up residence in Ruth's body, Ray joins Susie in the shower and makes love to her. Afterwards, Susie feels herself being pulled back to heaven. Ruth returns to her own body, after having received a warm welcome up in heaven for her tireless work on behalf of murdered women and children.

Jack Salmon is discharged from the hospital, and Susie watches as Lindsey, Abigail, and Buckley bring him home. Ruana and Ray attempt to leave a fresh-baked pie on the doorstep, but Abigail opens the door and invites them in. As their extended family sits in the living room, Samuel mentions his desire to restore the old Victorian house several miles away—Ray remarks that Ruth's father owns the property. Susie, who had been hovering in the living room, leaves and returns to heaven.

Lindsey and Samuel marry and begin restoring the house. Ray becomes a doctor, but finds himself believing in the fuzzy border between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Ruth, still in New York City, is attempting to write the story of her and Susie. One day, Susie spots Mr. Harvey in a diner in New Hampshire—he is stalking a young woman. Outside the diner, at the edge of a sharp embankment which leads down to a ravine below, Harvey attempts to engage the woman in conversation, but she rebuffs him. An icicle falls from the diner's overhang and strikes Harvey, knocking him off balance and into the ravine. Back in Norristown, a man shows his wife a charm bracelet he found on the ground earlier that day, and his wife remarks that the little girl it belongs to must be all grown up by now.

her family deals with the fallout of her murder. Susie, in heaven, gains omniscience, but longs for her life on Earth—for the tangible lived experiences she watches everyone she has left behind continue to have. Over the years, Susie witnesses the dissolution—and the rekindling—of her parents' marriage; the adventures of her younger sister Lindsey as she explores love, sex, and vengeance; the troubled youth of her baby brother, Buckley, who grows into adolescence in the shadow of his sister's death; and the complex relationship between her junior-high classmates Ruth and Ray as they use one another to reckon with the gulf Susie has left in both of their lives. Susie's arc ties in with all of the novel's major themes: desire, family and community, love and sex, justice and injustice, and the alienating effects of tragedy. Susie's journey towards acceptance of her own death takes years—she lingers in her own memories, in the memories of her family and friends, and in the vicarious act of constantly watching life on earth. Susie is a complex character whose feelings of injustice and anger at the brutality of her death and the shortness of her life are compounded by the fear that the impact of her loss is, with each year, lessening. As Susie grows to accept that she belongs, after all, only in her family's hearts and memories, in her heaven she does the hard work of growing up which she lamented not being able to do on Earth. Susie is vital and full of life even in death—an oxymoron that allows her to, on occasion, “break through” and reveal herself to her friends and family members, climaxing in her brief return to Earth in the body of her high school classmate, Ruth, during which she fulfills her dream of having a positive sexual experience with her junior-high sweetheart, Ray. Susie is both young and old, wise and naïve, gifted with an eternal spirit but bound emotionally to the present by her love for her family and her desire to watch, and thus come to know intimately, the lives, dreams, loves, and failures of those she has left behind.

Jack Salmon – Susie's father Jack delights in his role as a husband and father. Loving to the point of foolishness and at times dedicated to the point of madness, Jack is transformed by his grief in the wake of his daughter's death, and becomes desperate to solve her murder. After an encounter with George Harvey, during which he unknowingly helps his daughter's killer construct a ritual bridal tent in Harvey's backyard—allegedly in remembrance of Harvey's late wife—Jack realizes that Harvey knows something about Susie's death, and begins to suspect that he is her murderer. Jack can find no evidence linking Harvey to Susie, however, and his frustration begins to drive him mad. Driven by the encouraging words of his neighbor, Ruana Singh, Jack goes off into the cornfield one night to catch someone he believes to be Harvey, setting out for another kill—but it is just a pair of necking teens, and Jack is beaten badly both physically and psychologically by his failure. Lindsey steps in and attempts to help her father prove that he was always right, and was never crazy, but by the time the police begin to thoroughly investigate a piece of evidence she



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Susie Salmon – Susie, the novel's protagonist, is brutally raped and murdered by her neighbor, George Harvey, in the book's first pages. On the way home from school one afternoon, Harvey encounters Susie in the cornfield that connects her neighborhood to the junior high school, and lures her underground into a structure he has built specifically for the purpose of trapping, raping, and killing her, though he tells her at first that it is a hideout for neighborhood kids. After Susie's death, she ascends to heaven—passing by her classmate Ruth Connors as she goes—and, for the rest of the novel, watches as

retrieves from Harvey's house, it is too late—Harvey has already escaped. Shortly thereafter, Abigail leaves Jack and their children, and Jack must reckon with yet another major loss. In the years that pass Jack grows slow and somewhat debilitated, overwhelmed by his grief and pain. He remains loving and supportive of his children, and even when threatened by a heart attack, he remains a sensitive and engaged parent. Jack, like his son Buckley, feels—rightly—throughout his life that Susie is watching over him and guiding him, and this gives him the strength, even in his darkest moments, to carry on in pursuit of justice for his daughter, his family, and his own fatherly intuition.

Abigail Salmon – Jack Salmon gave his wife Abigail the nickname “Ocean Eyes” when they were still dating, and Susie, growing up, always assumed that the nickname referred to the color of Abigail’s irises. As Susie grows older, however, she realizes that the name refers to the depth, strangeness, and unknowability of Abigail’s often-distant gaze. A woman who, it is heavily implied, never meant to become a mother in the first place, Abigail feels as if her life has been sidelined by her children, though she loves them deeply. She treats Lindsey and Susie more as friends or confidantes than daughters, but Susie is still floored by the realization, as she plunges into adolescence, that her mother is a vast sea of secrets. Abigail is devastated by Susie’s death, but unlike the rest of her family, she longs to move on from it quickly. She becomes infatuated with the lead detective on her daughter’s case, Len Fenerman, and within a year the two embark on an ill-fated affair. When Abigail realizes that even adultery will not fill the gaping hole in her heart, she leaves her family and travels out west to California. She keeps in touch with them through phone calls and postcards sporadically over the years, but it is only when Jack experiences a life-threatening heart attack that she comes home for good. Abigail is a free spirit who longs for more than motherhood, but as the novel progresses, she comes to understand that her family—her husband, her mother, and her children—have formed the bedrock of her life and have made her who she is. Abigail’s journey is most directly tied to themes of desire, tragedy, and alienation. As Abigail grapples with feelings of restlessness, loneliness, and the active desire for isolation in the wake of her daughter’s death, Sebald paints a portrait of a complicated woman who wrestles daily with the joys and burdens of motherhood—a portrait not usually seen in the story of a dead child and a grieving family.

Lindsey Salmon – Susie’s sister Lindsey is just one year younger than her, and Susie takes pride in being the eldest. When Susie’s life is cut short, however, she must accept the pain—and, occasionally, the joy—of watching her younger sister soon surpass her in age and in experience. Lindsey is stoic, self-contained, and headstrong. She shows little emotion in the wake of her sister’s death, and it is only once she starts dating her classmate Samuel Heckler that she begins to open up and

let go. Susie, watching Lindsey and Samuel’s relationship unfold, feels a peculiar mix of jealousy, desire, pride, and happiness. However, as Lindsey, frustrated by the lack of forward movement in Susie’s case, takes matters into her own hands and begins investigating Mr. Harvey, Susie suddenly understands that though her little sister might surpass her, she will never stop loving her or fighting for her. Susie’s vicarious living is done most directly through Lindsey, but as time passes and as the gulf between them widens, each sister learns—slowly, painfully, but surely—how to live without the other.

Buckley Salmon – The youngest of the Salmon children, Buckley is only four when Susie is killed. At first, the Salmons shield him from the truth, but eventually help him to understand that his beloved older sister is gone, and is never coming back. Over the years, Buckley tells anyone who will listen that he often sees and talks to Susie, and that she comes to visit him at night. It is never fully revealed whether Buckley’s visions of Susie are real, or just the product of a child’s imagination. As he grows older, Buckley becomes quiet and introverted, marked not just by the loss of his sister but also by his mother’s abandonment.

Grandma Lynn – Abigail’s mother Lynn is loud and larger-than-life, and her appearances at the Salmon household, though rare, are always fraught. Though outlandish, superficial, and slightly self-absorbed, Grandma Lynn cares deeply for her daughter, Jack, Lindsey, and Buckley, and does all she can to help them put their lives back together in the wake of Susie’s death. Grandma Lynn senses that her daughter is having an affair, but is ultimately powerless to shake Abigail out of it. Once Abigail leaves for California, Grandma Lynn comes to stay, moving into Susie’s old room and taking on the role of the Salmon family matriarch in her daughter’s absence.

George Harvey – Susie’s murderer is a solitary, strange man who lives in a green house just down the street from the Salmon family. His brutal rape and murder of Susie Salmon instantly paints him as the novel’s incontrovertible and irredeemable antagonist, and as he evades the suspicions of neighbors and law officials alike, the reader is made to feel as helpless as Susie herself feels up in heaven, removed from the ability to influence those she loves toward seeing Harvey as not just odd and lonely but actually evil. As the months go by and Harvey’s odd behavior catches the eye of the Salmon family, Jack begins to suspect him of Susie’s murder, and starts attempting to compile evidence against him—but there is seemingly nothing to link him to Susie. Lindsey realizes that perhaps her father’s hunch is more than just that, and she herself breaks into George Harvey’s house over a year after Susie’s murder. She retrieves an important piece of evidence—a sketch from Harvey’s notebook depicting the underground structure in the cornfield in which Susie was murdered—but Harvey explains this evidence away as the tearful, guilt-ridden

attempt of a concerned neighbor to understand a horrible atrocity. Nevertheless, Harvey knows the police will soon be onto him, and he flees Norristown to go on the lam. In flashbacks, it is revealed that Harvey had a strange and difficult childhood—his mother, a kleptomaniac, frequently used him as a tool in her serial thefts and, eventually, was either forced into the desert by her husband, or fled of her own accord. Harvey, as an adult, has killed upwards of six girls and women, preferring younger teens and small children. As he hides up and down the Northeast Corridor, being pursued all the while by police, Harvey occasionally returns to Norristown to check up on his old house and neighborhood. Eventually he attempts to kill again, but is thwarted when an icicle falls on him, knocking him off balance and tipping him forward into an icy ravine. Harvey's arc deals with themes of justice and injustice, isolation, community, and desire. In the end, while he is not brought to justice by the law, a kind of cosmic justice is indeed served—and it is heavily implied that Susie Salmon, who in games of "How to Commit the Perfect Murder" always chose an icicle as her weapon, may have had a hand in Harvey's just desserts.

Detective Len Fenerman – The detective assigned to Susie's case, Len Fenerman is a sensitive and well-meaning but often blind or irresponsible man whose feelings for Abigail often get in the way of his police-work. Len is at first disinclined to believe Jack's suspicions about George Harvey, but after Lindsey retrieves a piece of evidence—illegally—from Harvey's house, Len is forced, too late, to see the truth. He misses catching George Harvey on his way out of town, as Len is busy making love to Abigail in a secret passageway in the local mall. Years after missing out on apprehending Harvey, new evidence forces Len to reexamine Susie's case, and to come to terms with the fact that George Harvey was not just Susie's killer but the killer of a string of women and girls all along the Northeast Corridor. Fenerman, a widower, is a victim not just of his own grief and desire, but Abigail's as well. His arc represents the dark side of sexual longing and desire for connection alike, showing the disruptions that desire can engender, and the ways in which it can steer one off the beaten path.

Ruth Connors – One of Susie Salmon's classmates. A rebel, a feminist, and a loner, Ruth Connors excels in art and poetry but her adult sensibilities often land her in trouble with her teachers. Susie and Ruth had just begun a tentative friendship in the weeks before Susie's murder, and as Susie's soul ascends to heaven, she passes by Ruth Connors, forever changing the course of Ruth's life. Ruth becomes obsessed not just with Susie, but with the plight of murdered women everywhere, and seeks to hone her "second sight" when she moves to New York City after high school graduation, attempting to investigate and write about the lives of murdered girls and women. On a visit home nearly ten years after Susie's death—to oversee the closing of the **sinkhole** on the edge of town—Ruth and Ray

Singh, who had had an extended dalliance in high school inspired by their mutual obsession with Susie, reconnect with one another, and take a trip out to the "mouth" of the Earth. When Ruth observes George Harvey's car driving past the sinkhole, she experiences a vision of murdered women in long gowns stuffed in the back of Harvey's car, and passes out. In this moment of cosmic transference, Ruth ascends to heaven, and Susie inhabits Ruth's body. While Susie, in a fulfillment of her earthly desires, makes love to Ray, Ruth—up in heaven—receives the thanks and admiration of the women whose lives she has dedicated her own to understanding and, in a way, avenging. After Ruth and Susie switch back, Ruth finds herself transformed by the experience, and feels renewed in her life's purpose of finding a way to convince the public of what she has always known: that the dead are all around, and that their souls are closer than we think.

Ray Singh – Susie's junior-high sweetheart, Ray Singh's English accent, Indian heritage, and serious smarts make him an outsider in the small city of Norristown, PA. He and Susie share just one kiss shortly before she is murdered—and after her death, Ray is singled out as a suspect in her murder because of a love poem he wrote her and tucked into one of her schoolbooks, found in the weeks after her disappearance. Ray never quite recovers from the isolating effects of having been a suspect, and strikes up a friendship with the loner Ruth Connors, who is just as obsessed with Susie and her death as Ray is. He and Ruth do the work of carrying on Susie's legacy, organizing a candlelight vigil on the first anniversary of her death and speculating together endlessly on what their lives might have been like if Susie had lived. Ray goes to college at Penn and studies to be a doctor, but is constantly dogged by questions about the afterlife, the spirit world, and the idea of the human soul. On a trip home, Ray and Ruth reconnect on a visit to the **sinkhole** at the edge of town—there, after a fateful collision of events, Ruth and Susie switch places, and Ray makes love to Susie-as-Ruth. The experience transforms him entirely, and though he returns to his life and his studies, he becomes a confirmed believer in the soul, the afterlife, and the power of desire to "break through" the well between worlds.

Ruana Singh – Ray's mother, Ruana, is a fierce and independent spirit. Her separate encounters with both Jack and Abigail charge their lives with meaning in the face of despair. She tells Jack that if her child had been murdered, she would find out who was responsible, and "quietly" kill them when she was absolutely sure, while a chance encounter with Abigail leaves Abigail dreaming of the possibilities of a life somewhere else. The free-spirited Ruana is a conduit for the Salmons' desires, and a proponent of justice no matter the cost.

Hal Heckler – Samuel's older brother Hal is just as involved with and invested in the Salmons' healing. He runs a bike shop on the edge of town, and, in the wake of Susie's murder, he asks everyone who comes through whether they might know

anything about Susie's killer. Eventually, Hall discovers a lead in the form of a Hell's Angel customer whose mother was murdered, years earlier, by a man who made dollhouses—George Harvey. Hal is a friend to Buckley and a support to all the Salmons—especially Grandma Lynn, who nurses a benign crush on him over the years.

Franny – Susie's intake counselor, guide, and mentor in heaven. A social worker in her life on Earth, Franny is a nurturer by nature, and helps Susie to understand both the mechanics of her heaven and the ways in which her desires, emotions, and needs influence the course of her afterlife. Franny urges Susie to remember that watching life on Earth is not the same as living it, but allows Susie the time and space to come to this understanding on her own.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Samuel Heckler – Lindsey's first boyfriend and eventual husband, Samuel Heckler is an unlikely boy-next-door who comes to be a constant and healing presence in the Salmon family. His love of old, broken things resonates with his desire to help Lindsey—and, indeed, the entire Salmon family—heal in the wake of Susie's loss.

Holly – Susie's roommate and best friend in heaven.

Nate – A friend of Buckley's.

Clarissa – Susie's best friend. Clarissa matured faster than Susie, wearing eye shadow and platform shoes and going steady with an older boy named Brian Nelson.

Brian Nelson – Clarissa's boyfriend. When Jack Salmon comes upon Clarissa in the cornfield—first believing her to be George Harvey and then, in a fit of delusion, believing her to be Susie, Brian beats Jack into submission, causing him a knee injury that inhibit Jacks for the rest of his life.

Joe Ellis – A neighborhood kid often seen as a bad boy or a menace. George Harvey blames a spate of animal killings on Joe in order to cover up the fact that he himself has been killing animals in an attempt to stave off his desire to kill girls and women.

Principal Caden – The principal of Susie's junior high. He seems deeply affected by Susie's murder, and organizes a memorial service for her at the local church.

Mr. and Mrs. Dewitt – A pair of teachers at Susie and Lindsey's school. Mrs. Dewitt teaches English; Mr. Dewitt coaches soccer.

Reverend Strick – The local reverend.

Artie – A boy who attends a gifted students symposium and summer camp with Lindsey. He apparently had a crush on Susie while she was alive, and attempts to ask Lindsey several questions about what Susie was actually like.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE

The opening chapters of Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* depict a graphic and despicable act of violence. Mr. George Harvey, who lives across the street from the Salmon family, is a killer of girls and women, and he has selected fourteen-year-old Susie Salmon as his next victim. One evening, as Susie walks home from school through a cornfield, Mr. Harvey lures Susie into an underground structure he has built, describing it to her in alluring terms as a kind of hiding place or clubhouse for neighborhood kids. There, he rapes and murders her, and then dismembers her and locks the pieces of her body in a safe. He deposits the safe into a **sinkhole** on the edge of town, commonly used by the residents of Norristown to dispose of old appliances and pieces of furniture. The injustice of this horrible crime begins to seem impossible to remedy as the local police assigned to Susie's case flounder in their investigation; it appears as if Susie's murder will never be solved, and justice will never be served. As the novel progresses, Susie—narrating from beyond the grave—learns that she is not George Harvey's only victim. He has killed many girls and women, and their murders too have gone unsolved for years. In the end, even though Susie's sister Lindsey, her father Jack, and later the police force discover George Harvey's guilt, Harvey evades capture by fleeing Norristown, leaving Susie's family and Susie herself without any sense that justice has been served. Ultimately a kind of cosmic justice is indeed served when Harvey is killed by a falling icicle, but Susie's family remains unaware of Harvey's death, and is left to find a sense of closure in the absence of legal justice. Through her novel, Sebold—a victim of sexual violence herself—suggests that perhaps legal, procedural justice provides a false comfort, and that the only true balm against the humiliating injustice of such violent crimes is the healing that comes from within.

Jack Salmon is distraught after his daughter's death, but despite strenuous efforts he is initially unable to uncover anything that might help the investigation bring her killer to justice. After an afternoon spent with Mr. Harvey, whom Jack saw constructing a strange edifice in the yard, Jack becomes convinced that Harvey knows something about Susie's death. Indeed, the structure Jack saw Harvey building was, Harvey privately admits, a ceremonial bridal tent, but Harvey insists that Jack is simply mad with grief. Jack's desire to bring Harvey to justice burns like an ember beneath the rest of Jack's life,

and it begins to overwhelm and consume him. Later, Jack visits the Singhs' house in order to meet with Susie's high school sweetheart Ray and apologize for the fact that Ray was considered a suspect in the early days of Susie's disappearance. While talking with Ray's mother, Ruana, Jack divulges his suspicions about Harvey after having had them dismissed by the detective in charge of Susie's case, Len Fenerman. Ruana tells Jack that, if she were him, once she was "sure, [she] would find a quiet way and kill [Harvey.]" One night, while watching the street from his window, Jack sees a light moving towards the cornfield and believes it is Harvey, out on a walk. Jack takes a baseball bat from the hall closet and, with Ruana's words echoing in his ears, follows the light out to the cornfield. When he encounters the person he believes to be Harvey, he threatens to "finish" him—only to realize that the person he has followed is Susie's friend from school, Clarissa, who has come to the cornfield to meet her boyfriend, Brian Nelson. Believing, in a moment of madness, that Clarissa is actually Susie, Jack runs toward her, prompting Brian to tackle and beat Jack. Susie, watching the scene from heaven, turns away from the violence, wishing that her poor father would "go away and leave [her] be." In this sequence of events, Sebald fuels her argument by coming at it from the other side—suggesting that sometimes the search for justice is both violent and futile, and only ends up creating more pain for those who seek relief.

George Harvey dies in a manner both unremarkable and seemingly fated. While on the run from Norristown, he attempts to cajole a woman he encounters at a bus station into a conversation, asking if she is "traveling alone." The woman calls Harvey a "creep" and walks away, and shortly after she does, Harvey is struck by an icicle hanging overhead. He stumbles forward into a ravine in front of the station. According to Susie, it takes "weeks" before the snow melts and his body is found. Harvey's death may appear to be a kind of justice brought down from on high—and Sebald purposefully leaves this open as one way of interpreting Harvey's death. Although Susie does not make any mention of her direct involvement in the icicle incident, earlier in the book she admits to "always [choosing] the icicle" when she and her friends in heaven play a game called "How to Commit the Perfect Murder." Thus, Susie's death appears to have been avenged, but whether by chance or by divine intervention remains unknown. Susie does not linger on her description of Harvey's death, and offers no emotional or analytical commentary: she simply moves on to talking lovingly of her sister, Lindsey. Justice has found Harvey, but this fact is delivered in way that makes it feel like almost a footnote to the action of the novel. By this point in the novel, justice is far from the minds of the characters, who have come to accept what happened to Susie and chosen to honor and remember her rather than languish in the injustice of her death.

Justice is a nebulous concept in *The Lovely Bones*. The pursuit of justice as a kind of revenge or punishment is shown to be

dangerous and even self-destructive. Ultimately, fate intervenes on Susie's behalf, suggesting that the universe takes its natural course and doles out its own kind of justice. Thus, all the strife and anger involved in seeking justice are shown to have been in vain. The book shows that while the justice system may give a feeling of closure, it cannot replace the necessary process of healing by coming to terms with injustice in one's own time and on one's own terms.



TRAGEDY, GRIEF, ALIENATION, AND ISOLATION

Susie Salmon's unjust and tragic death sends a shockwave through her quaint and quiet hometown of Norristown, PA. In its wake, divisions rip through the community, and the Salmon family in particular becomes isolated from their friends and neighbors as the investigation into Susie's murder drags on. As Sebald examines the alienating effects of grief and loss, she argues that suffering a tragedy is deeply isolating. The tragedy Susie endures tears her away from the earth and her loved ones, forcing her to inhabit a lonely and imperfect heaven and watch as her family suffers, grieves, and ultimately alienates themselves not just from their community, but also from one another. Sebald argues that tragedy and alienation are a kind of vicious cycle, as isolation begets tragedy, and tragedy in turn engenders further alienation. Through examining the motivations behind her characters' often-deliberate attempts to seclude themselves from one another, Sebald shows how this cycle feeds on itself and spins on endlessly through the years—and how perhaps nothing but time can inspire the distance needed to break the cycle.

Mr. Harvey, Susie's rapist and murderer, is a solitary and strange figure in the neighborhood. He explains away his solitude—both physical and emotional—by telling his neighbors that he is a childless widower. In fact, he has been alone all his life, moving from place to place and killing girls and women everywhere he goes. Mr. Harvey is also a dollhouse maker—an odd hobby, but a harmless one. The houses Harvey builds are ornate and beautiful, but empty. He sells his dollhouses to local stores, and never sees them full of dolls or furniture, or used as instruments of play and joy. The dollhouses represent Harvey's ever-spiraling inward isolation.

Abigail and Jack, Susie's parents, are of course the ones most devastated by their daughter's death. The different ways in which they deal with their grief create a distance between them, which grows until it has become unbridgeable. After embarking upon a doomed affair with Len Fenerman—the detective in charge of Susie's murder investigation—Abigail absconds to California, where she purposefully isolates herself, taking an anonymous job in a winery, severing nearly all contact with her family, and writing only occasional postcards to the children. Her betrayal is especially felt by Lindsey—whom

Abigail had promised she would never leave.

When Susie is on her way up to heaven, she “passes by” her high school classmate Ruth Connors. Ruth feels Susie’s presence, and though she attempts to explain it to her parents, they think she is just being dramatic. The isolation Ruth feels in the wake of having borne witness to Susie’s departure from Earth is profound, and it changes the course of Ruth’s entire life—even though Ruth had very little emotional connection with Susie while Susie was alive. Ruth had already been a loner, but the alienation that Susie’s tragedy adds to her life forces her onto a new trajectory. Ruth, who has a supernatural sensitivity to places charged with the energy of the dead, begins using her gift to compile a list of murdered women, primarily in New York City, where she moves after graduating high school and leaving Norristown. Ruth is yet another accidental but serious casualty of the tragedy of Susie’s death.

Susie, too, is isolated in her “perfect world” of heaven. Her physical isolation in her own section of heaven is a metaphor for the emotional isolation and alienation which her rape and murder forced upon her. Susie has been through something tragic and terrible—something that no one on earth can understand. In heaven, Susie is understood and is ostensibly free—but this freedom comes at the price of her ability to connect with those still on Earth.

Through her complicated and flawed characters, Sebald demonstrates the harmful cycle of tragedy, grief, alienation, and isolation, which prevents many of the characters from connecting, healing, and growing for many years of their lives. By the end of the novel, however, Susie, having watched her friends, family, and community struggle to come to terms with her murder—and the emotional repercussions it has had back on Earth—seems to feel less alienated; her family, too, has reluctantly and painstakingly managed to move on. Susie accepts the fact that she now exists only in her family’s memories, and though this seems as if it would isolate her even further, she seems to have gained a wider understanding of the inescapable cycle of tragedy and isolation that can grab hold of families and communities and refuse to let go. Rather than look for ways in which this cycle can be perpetuated, Susie chooses to accept the fact of her death and move on, just as her family has—she ends the novel by wishing her reader a “long and happy life,” thus closing the loop.



LOVE AND SEX

Susie Salmon’s murder is directly preceded by a gruesome rape at the hands of George Harvey, a neighbor and acquaintance of her parents. At fourteen, Susie had been on the verge of coming into her own as a young woman: she had developed feelings for a classmate, Ray Singh, and privately nursed a crush on the singer David Cassidy of *The Partridge Family*. Susie’s transition into the world of love—and indeed, her budding sexuality—were abruptly and

violently interrupted by an unspeakable act of evil. Subsequently, she watches from heaven as her friends and family embark upon their own romantic and sexual relationships that blossom, wither, grow, and change. Susie watches her mother Abigail begin an affair with the detective covering Susie’s murder, Len Fenerman; she watches as her sister Lindsey falls in love with and eventually builds a life with Samuel Heckler; and she watches as Ray Singh and Ruth Connors navigate their complicated attraction (or lack of attraction) to one another. Susie herself continues to love Ray from afar. Through describing these various relationships, Sebald shows that death, grief, and tragedy cannot stand in the way of the power of love, sex, romance, and intimacy—love is stronger than death, and sexual attraction has the power to destroy lives, but also to help in healing and redeeming them.

As the investigation goes on and the Salmon family becomes more and more frustrated with the lack of leads, Jack and Abigail lean more and more heavily on the police—specifically on Len Fenerman, the lead detective. One day, Abigail kisses Len as Susie watches from heaven. Susie realizes that her mother has been denying for years the “needy part of her,” and is now unleashing it upon Len, hoping that “on the other side of his kiss there could be a new life.” Abigail’s decision to begin an affair with Len is a way for her to cope with the loss of her daughter and the grief she feels for herself, her child, and her family. Rather than closing herself off to the possibility of happiness, excitement, and catharsis, Abigail dives headlong into it, either not realizing or not caring that it may derail her life even further.

Susie had a crush on Ray Singh when she was alive, and her death doesn’t change this. Susie watches Ray graduate high school, go on to college, and all the while maintain a friendship and a flirtation with Ruth Connors—a relationship based in their mutual obsession with Susie’s death. Susie keeps close tabs on Ruth and Ray as they experiment with kissing one another, and notices the slight shifts in their feelings as they grow closer over the years. Though Ruth initially purports to feel no real desire for Ray, she eventually realizes that she is in fact attracted to him, though the two of them never act on their feelings. In the novel’s climax, Susie passes into Ruth’s body in a moment of divine intervention. Mr. Harvey, who has returned to Norristown to survey the neighborhood he left, drives past Ruth and Ray on the street, and in an overwhelming moment Ruth sees all the women he has killed “stuffed in [his] car in blood-colored gowns.” Susie falls to Earth and inhabits Ruth’s body, while Ruth ascends to heaven. During her short time in a body, Susie fulfills her long-held desire to make love to Ray, and to have a positive sexual experience with someone she loves. Ray realizes that Ruth is really Susie, and though the moment seems bizarre and supernatural, he consents to have sex with Susie-as-Ruth. Susie re-ascends to heaven shortly after their lovemaking, and looks down upon Ruth and Ray as they hold

one another, contemplating the magnitude of the experiences they have just had separately, but which will now bind them together in a completely unique way. This moment serves to allow Susie the gift of a positive experience of love and sex, after her body was brutalized, destroyed, and disrespected so completely during her final moments on earth. It demonstrates the redemptive power of healthy romantic and sexual love, and humanizes Susie by demonstrating that, even in death, she has “needy parts” of her own.

Lindsey’s relationship with her high school sweetheart, Samuel Heckler, is the relationship Susie watches with the most interest, intensity, and occasionally jealousy. As Susie watches Lindsey share her first kiss with Samuel, and eventually sleep with him, marry him, and carry his child, there is a marked tension between the joy Susie experiences and the envy she feels toward her sister. Susie was brutalized, raped, and humiliated during her first sexual encounter, and now she watches her sister move through the phases of a relationship joyfully, envying the fact that Lindsey has “surpassed” her. Eventually, after her encounter with Ray, Susie comes to a place in her own healing where she is able to be happy for Lindsey, and celebrate the strides her sister has made toward her own recovery, finding joy, safety, and comfort in her romance with Samuel.

Love and sex are always complicated topics, in life as well as in fiction, and the way they are approached in *The Lovely Bones* is no different. Love and sex are fraught—tinged with fear and sometimes even horror—but ultimately serve as a vehicle for fulfillment, transformation, and even redemption for many characters who have experienced great sorrow, trauma, and loss.



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

The Salmon family is the heart and soul of the narrative of *The Lovely Bones*. Over the course of the novel, readers follow the Salmon family over the span of nearly a decade. Through Susie’s eyes, readers observe the family’s most intimate moments, their struggles with one another and the world around them, their failures and triumphs, their connections and breakdowns. The idea of family, though, is complicated on several levels. Susie’s “family” in heaven comforts her in moments of need and despair, and through them she begins to understand that, although nothing will ever replace her mother and father, family can come in many forms. Sebald argues that the families one finds and makes are as important and special as the family one is born into. Through her characters’ journeys, Sebald celebrates the love that family engenders, even after years—or a lifetime—spent apart.

Susie’s recollections of her childhood are sweet and happy, but from beyond the veil of death she also reflects on the oddities, schisms, and undercurrents of pain and longing which she

noticed while still alive but was afraid of confronting. Susie describes taking a **photograph** of her mother early one morning, when her mother did not realize she was being watched. Susie finally understood the nickname Jack had always used for Abigail—“Ocean Eyes”—as meant not to describe the color of her irises but the depths and unknowability of what lay behind her eyes. Susie comes to understand, while in heaven, that her mother had perhaps never even wanted to be a mother, and when Abigail leaves for California, the rest of the Salmons, too, understand the rifts that have arisen but remained ignored in their family over the years. When Grandma Lynn arrives after her daughter leaves town, the gap between families that are made and born grows more complicated. Though a blood relative, when Grandma Lynn steps into a maternal role in her daughter’s family, a new kind of family results—a family that is pieced together, and which is even stronger for all its losses.

Susie finds company and happiness in heaven, and even reunites with her grandfather, who had died many years earlier. Though Susie continues to long for her family back on earth, she does create a kind of family with the people she meets in her heaven. When she falls to earth and then is forced to return, Susie finds it much easier to go back to heaven than it had been to arrive the first time, as she is returning to the comfort of her new, chosen family of kindred spirits.

At the end of the novel, though Susie has moved on from studying life down on earth as closely as she once did, she admits that she still checks in on her family every once in a while. She can’t help thinking of them any more than they can help thinking of her. Susie accepts that she only exists in her family’s memories now, as she is “meant to be,” knowing that she will always be a part of the family she was born to, though she left them too soon.

Lindsey and Samuel’s love, which begins when Lindsey is in junior high and takes them through their college graduation and beyond, demonstrates the two of them coming together to make their own little family. Samuel and Lindsey nourish and understand one another, and Samuel’s knowledge of Lindsey’s deep pain allows him to be close to her and take care of her in a way that few couples experience. In the final pages of the novel, Susie reveals that the two of them have a daughter named Abigail Suzanne: their baby’s name honors their family’s past even as the child herself represents its future.

One of the great injustices of Susie’s death is her inability to experience what it means to be a part of a family as one goes through life and grows older. As Susie attempts to soothe the pain she feels over the loss of her family, she discovers that family is more than just blood. Family consists of the connections one chooses to foster, the love one chooses to give, and the love one allows oneself to receive. In the place of a biological family, Sebald shows, the bonds and affections of a chosen family can be just as strong, and in some ways even

stronger.



DESIRE AND LONGING

The characters in *The Lovely Bones* are defined by their desires: Susie, from heaven, longs for her family and friends back on earth, while Susie's family longs for their beloved daughter and sister; Abigail longs for Len, while Jack longs for Abigail; even Mr. Harvey is filled with a dark, evil, insatiable longing for connection and for dominance. In her exploration of the different kinds of desire and longing—for truth, for home, and for other people—Sebold ultimately suggests that desire can drive people to act on their worst and darkest impulses. Meanwhile, she shows how pursuing these impulses often leaves desire unfulfilled, as raw and needful as ever. Longing and desire in this novel are occasionally destructive forces—but more than anything, they are merely disruptive, serving to lead characters who allow themselves to be controlled by their own desire down unlikely, unpredictable paths.

In the wake of Susie's disappearance, everyone around her wants to know the truth—however horrible it may be—of what has happened to her. By the time it becomes clear that Susie is never coming home (that is, after a neighbor's dog finds a piece of Susie's elbow in a nearby field) the longing for truth has reached a fever pitch. As the investigation of Susie's disappearance morphs into an investigation of her murder, some characters experience an intensification of their longing for truth—a longing which carries them through the years—while others experience a diminishment of that longing, and resign themselves to the fact that Susie's death may never be solved, and her killer may never be brought to justice. Jack Salmon, Susie's father, and Lindsey Salmon, Susie's younger sister, both become convinced—rightly so, though no one believes them—that George Harvey is responsible for Susie's murder. Their desire to bring him to justice puts both of them in danger. Jack lands in the hospital after his suspicion leads him one night into the cornfield where Susie was murdered, and, later, Lindsey breaks into George Harvey's house, where he spots her jumping from a second-story window to escape with the evidence she has found: a sketch of the underground structure Harvey built in the cornfield. Thus, characters are led into danger by their desire to uncover the truth.

Longing for connection with another is also a major thematic preoccupation of the novel. The barrier separating heaven and earth mirrors the barriers between human hearts, minds, and souls, which often prevent connection and intimacy. As Susie strains to peer down through the barrier between her new life and her old one, she observes, in miniature, the everyday straining for love, affection, and connection between the people she has left behind on earth—especially that which occurs in the wake of the tragedy of her very own death. Ruth Connors longs for connection to the world beyond earth.

Gifted with a kind of clairvoyance, or an extreme sensitivity to the presence of departed souls, she longs to dwell in their world rather than her own, having faced rejection and judgment for being different all her life. Ruth moves to New York City, where she knows no one and lives in a walk-in closet that she rents from an older woman. She spends her days walking the streets of the city, waiting to experience a connection with a lost soul, and recording the stories of murdered women in poem form in a notebook that she never lets out of her sight. Mr. Harvey is motivated by a dark and twisted desire for connection through possession of his mostly pre-pubescent female victims. He is an example of the darkest possible side of desire at work. As Harvey claims victim after victim, he surrenders again and again to the longing that has haunted him all his life, and which drives him to commit heinous and strikingly violent yet carefully planned acts of rape and murder. Abigail's longing for connection—which is tied to her longing to soothe the pain of her daughter's loss—motivates her to pursue an affair with Len Fenerman, despite knowing the disastrous effects it might have on her and her family. Desire leads the novel's characters into the murky, dangerous, and in some cases, deeply immoral territory of trespassing, adultery, and violence. By showing her characters acting carelessly or dangerously in the name of their desires, Sebold reinforces her argument about the disruptive—and often destructive—power of longing.

Susie's own longing is of a different sort from the rest of the characters in the novel, since in heaven anything she desires is brought to her promptly. The one thing that cannot be granted to her, however, is passage back to earth, or the ability to will her family up to heaven to live alongside her. Though Susie's more banal longings are fulfilled by the mysterious laws of heaven, her deeper, more emotional longings remain unfulfilled. When her father is hospitalized with a heart attack, Susie's desire to have her father with her again leads her to hope ardently for his death, though she knows it will end his time on earth and separate him from the rest of the Salmon family—including Abigail, who has returned to Norristown at the news of his illness. Towards the end of the novel, in a moment of fate, chance, and intense longing, Susie is able to switch places with Ruth, whose body she inhabits while Ruth travels up to heaven to receive recognition for her tireless work on behalf of murdered women and children. This moment seems to support the idea that, contrary to the broader pattern of the novel, risky actions taken in the fulfillment of one's desire *can* work out for the best. However, it is worth noting that, after returning to heaven from her visit to earth, Susie continues to longingly watch the lives of Ray, Ruth, and her family. Her longing to be with them has not been fulfilled by just one encounter.

As the characters in *The Lovely Bones* navigate the landscapes of their longing, they are driven to actions that are dark and

devious more often than they are driven to act in ways that are pure and rooted in goodwill. Longing and desire are powerful, and can be disruptive and destructive motivating forces, and as Sebald's characters are driven forward by the engine of their desire, they stumble into their basest selves and make decisions which put them at odds with their former selves and the world around them. Through this theme, Sebald shows how desire has the power to alter the course of one's life completely and irrevocably, and suggests that though they are unavoidable parts of life, longing and desire are more often than not destructive forces rather than redemptive ones.



SYMBOLS

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



THE SNOW GLOBE

In the novel's prologue, Susie reflects on being very young and playing with a snow globe that belonged to her father Jack. A penguin sat inside the snow globe, and Susie recalls being sad for the penguin every time she played with the globe, because she thought he must be lonely. Susie's father reassured her that the penguin was fine and in fact happy—he was "trapped in a perfect world." Susie, who narrates the story of her murder and the years which follow it, lives in her own heaven—a place tailor-made to her preferences, where her dreams of going to Fairfax High School, owning multiple dogs, and spending her nights singing and playing music are all fulfilled. Susie is "trapped," though—she is compelled not to commit to her role in the afterlife, but instead to continue, at all hours, looking down on those she has left behind. Susie is all alone in a "perfect world," just like the penguin she played with as a child. The snow globe, then, symbolizes Susie's alienation and isolation from the world of the living, which she feels—justly—that she has been ripped away from far too soon.



THE SINKHOLE

There is a sinkhole eight miles from Susie's neighborhood, run by the Flanagan family, who make their living by charging people to dump old appliances and furniture into the hole. After raping, killing, and dismembering Susie, Mr. Harvey places her remains in a canvas sack, locks the sack in a safe, and brings the safe out to the Flanagans, claiming that it is an old safe inherited from his father, which no one alive can remember the combination to. Susie's body is dumped into the sinkhole in one final, utter, and morbid act of violence and extreme disrespect, and the futility, injustice, and rage Susie feels watching him commit this even further humiliation against her is palpable. By the end of the

novel, however, as Susie watches her friends Ruth and Ray return to the sinkhole on the eve of its closing—the Flanagans, years after Susie's death, are planning on filling it in and shutting down business—Susie looks at the sinkhole not with a sense of injustice or hatred, and is even mildly grateful to be locked in a safe, kept away from moles, rodents, and insects which might otherwise feed on her flesh and humiliate her even further. In day-to-day speech, people often refer to sinkholes as metaphors for dark, alluring forces, or physical or emotional traps. The sinkhole of an eating disorder, the sinkhole of a toxic relationship, or the sinkholes of longing and mourning are all mechanisms which have the force to suck one down and disappear one completely. The Flanagan sinkhole, then, represents the pit of despair, humiliation, and horror which Susie—and, more broadly, the entire Salmon family—must do years and years of painstaking emotional and physical work to extricate themselves from. Being mired in the sorrow, guilt, anger, and feelings of futility which Susie's murder engenders threatens to disarm, disband, and disassemble the Salmon family as a unit and as individuals, and it is only through the passage of time, the commitment to moving forward, and the love they have for one another that the Salmons are able to eventually pull themselves out of the sinkhole of their grief.



SUSIE'S PHOTOGRAPHS

Susie is an omniscient narrator, able to see not just the actions of her friends and family back on earth, but also to intuit their hopes, dreams, fears, and motivations. In her life on Earth, Susie—an aspiring wildlife photographer—used her camera, a gift from her parents, to take photos of everyone and everything. When used at precisely the right moments, her camera allowed her to access a sliver of her soon-to-be heavenly powers, and capture the depths of someone's soul. For example, one morning, Susie stumbles upon her mother Abigail, who has not yet dressed or put on her makeup, sitting alone on the porch. Susie sees her mother not as just a mother, but as a woman full of mystery and depth, and in the instant she takes the photograph of her, Susie attempts to capture the moment forever while simultaneously drawing her mother out of it through the click of the shutter. In a section of the book entitled "Snapshots," Susie, from heaven, describes the moments she glimpses as the years pass—time on Earth is spinning forward, but Susie, in heaven, is stuck with just moments snatched from on high. Just as on Earth, Susie is able to witness—but not partake of or ever fully capture—the moments, feelings, and choices that will come to define her family's lives. Her photographs, then, become a recurring symbol of this tension and futility, and represent the vast gulf between the inner and outer lives of a person. Susie, on Earth and in heaven, is an observer by nature, but even with her heavenly gift of total surveillance, there remains something unknowable and elusive about the lives of humans.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay edition of *The Lovely Bones* published in 2002.

Prologue Quotes

☛ Inside the snow globe on my father's desk, there was a penguin wearing a red-and-white-striped scarf. When I was little my father would pull me into his lap and reach for the snow globe. He would turn it over, letting all the snow collect on the top, then quickly invert it. The two of us watched the snow fall gently around the penguin. The penguin was alone in there, I thought, and I worried for him. When I told my father this, he said, "Don't worry Susie; he has a nice life. He's trapped in a perfect world."

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Jack Salmon

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage serves as the prologue to *The Lovely Bones*. Though short, it does a lot of work—like the snow globe it tells of, a whole world is contained in a small space. This prologue is a parable of sorts. The young Susie plays with a snow globe, worried for the solitary, isolated penguin inside, but her father urges her not to worry. Though the penguin is indeed trapped, he is “trapped in a perfect world.” The idea that entrapment is not really entrapment—and isolation is not really isolation—will be played with and questioned as the novel reveals its central setup: the murdered Susie Salmon will soon be “trapped in a perfect world” of her own. When she ascends to heaven, Susie is granted an eternal place in the afterlife, and is told that anything she desires can be hers. Though her heaven is a “perfect” place, she is nevertheless cut off from what she wants most—life itself. The snow globe foreshadows Susie's feelings of being trapped, and is an ironic symbol meant to complicate readers' notions of what a “perfect world” really is—or whether one can even exist at all.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ My murderer was a man from our neighborhood. My mother liked his border flowers, and my father talked to him once about fertilizer. My murderer believed in old-fashioned things like eggshells and coffee grounds, which he said his own mother had used. My father came home smiling, making jokes about how the man's garden might be beautiful but it would stink to high heaven once a heat wave hit.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), George Harvey, Abigail Salmon, Jack Salmon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Susie Salmon, the novel's narrator and protagonist, lets her audience know within the first three sentences of her story that she is the victim of a murder. Subverting common tropes of the murder-mystery novel, Sebald chooses to ascribe to Susie an omniscience and a direct address that allows her to communicate the hard facts of her own murder—as well as the events that precede it and follow it—directly. By getting these details out of the way early on, so to speak, Susie frees up time and space to focus not on the hows of what happened to her, but the whys. Susie is a narrator much more concerned with what lies underneath—thus, in this passage, she offers a metaphorical anecdote about her murderer, George Harvey, that focuses more on delivering an impression of him than describing him in subjective terms. Harvey seemed docile, unremarkable, and even helpful—but Jack Salmon knew that Harvey's garden was full of rotting things, and would eventually begin to stink. Though no one intuited that Harvey himself was rotten on the inside, as Susie looks back on her memories of her childhood from her omniscient and heavenly perspective, she is able to see the small, strange clues and ironic turns of phrase that, though once inconsequential, now take on a whole new meaning.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ Eventually I began to desire more. What I found strange was how much I desired to know what I had not known on Earth. I wanted to be allowed to grow up.

"People grow up by living," I said to Franny. "I want to live."

"That's out," she said.

"Can we at least watch the living?" asked Holly.

"You already do," she said.

"I think she means whole lives," I said, "from beginning to end, to see how they did it. To know the secrets. Then we can pretend better."

"You won't experience it," Franny clarified.

"Thank you, Brain Central," I said, but our heavens began to grow.

Related Characters: Holly, Franny, Susie Salmon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Susie, new to heaven, spends her first several days learning how things work and reviewing her murder with her intake counselor, Franny. Franny is empathetic and caring but practical: she warns Susie not to dwell on the circumstances of her death, and not to beat herself up for having allowed Mr. Harvey to lure her underground. When Susie and her friend and roommate Holly express their desire for something, they're told that all they need to do to get it is to want it and understand why. What the girls really want, of course, is to live—but this is the one thing they cannot have. As a compromise, the girls decide that watching the living might enable them to live vicariously through those they have left behind, and in this way, learn the "secrets" of life and eventually grow up themselves. Franny warns the girls that they will not really experience the things they are watching, and will forever be removed from life on Earth. Susie and Holly decide to watch anyway, though, and as they do, their heavens expand to allow them a view of the lives they have left behind.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞☞ When the roll came back from the Kodak plant in a special heavy envelope, I could see the difference immediately. There was only one picture in which my mother was Abigail. It was that first one, the one taken of her unawares, the one captured before the click startled her into the mother of the birthday girl, owner of the happy dog, wife to the loving man, and mother again to another girl and a cherished boy. Homemaker. Gardener. Sunny neighbor. My mother's eyes were oceans, and inside them there was loss. I thought I had my whole life to understand them, but that was the only day I had. Once upon Earth I saw her as Abigail, and then I let it slip effortlessly back, my fascination held in check by wanting her to be that mother and envelop me as that mother.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Abigail Salmon

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Susie's father's nickname for her mother, Abigail, has always been "Ocean Eyes." Growing up, Susie thought that the nickname referred to the color of her mother's eyes. As Susie takes Abigail's photograph one morning, though, before anyone else in the house is awake, she sees her mother in a strange new light and comes to realize that the nickname refers not to the color of Abigail's eyes but to their unknowable depths. Susie sees "loss" in her mother's eyes, though in this memory she herself was still alive—the loss was the loss Abigail felt when she thought of her own identity, her own agency, her own independence. Susie realizes that her mother sees herself as two distinct people: as Abigail, who is excluded from the duties of being a mother, a wife, and a neighbor, and as the woman who must shoulder all of those identities with a smile. It is painful for Susie to realize this, and though the photograph is proof of its truth, she initially attempts to reject this idea of her mother as a woman split in two, or as a woman begrudgingly attending to the family she never really wanted in the first place.

☛☛ The bottles, all of them, lay broken on the floor, the sails and boat bodies strewn among them. He stood in the wreckage. It was then that, without knowing how, I revealed myself. In every piece of glass, in every shard and sliver, I cast my face. My father glanced down and around him, his eyes roving across the room. Wild. It was just for a second, and then I was gone. He was quiet for a moment, and then he laughed—a howl coming up from the bottom of his stomach. He laughed so loud and deep, I shook with it in my heaven.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Jack Salmon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

One of the major concerns of the novel is the blurry line between the world of the dead and the world of the living. This boundary is explored many times, through many different characters who have experiences making contact with Susie's spirit—but hardly anyone is so aware of Susie's presence as her father, Jack, who dedicates his life to seeking answers and justice for his daughter. Susie attempts to alleviate her father's pain in this moment by revealing herself to him, and by letting him know that she is still there—that she still loves him, that she has not left him, that she still believes in him. The boundary between heaven and earth is revealed to be porous on both sides; just as Susie breaks through to Jack, his big, booming laugh of joy and relief is audible and even tangible to Susie, far away though she is in her "perfect world."

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛☛ I did begin to wonder what the word heaven meant. I thought, if this were heaven, truly heaven, it would be where my grandparents lived. Where my father's father, my favorite of them all, would lift me up and dance with me. I would feel only joy and have no memory, no cornfield and no grave.

"You can have that," Franny said to me. "Plenty of people do."

"How do you make the switch?" I asked.

"It's not as easy as you might think," she said. "You have to stop desiring certain answers."

"I don't get it."

"If you stop asking why you were killed instead of someone else, stop investigating the vacuum left by your loss, stop wondering what everyone left on Earth is feeling," she said, "you can be free. Simply put, you have to give up on Earth."

This seemed impossible to me.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Franny

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This passage continues the novel's mission of complicating the idea of a "perfect" heaven. The heaven Susie finds herself in is not at all like what she had imagined on Earth, and she explains that to Franny here. Franny informs her that her heaven can be exactly what she always thought it would be—free from the painful memories, obsessive observation, and anxiety about what she's missing that have marked Susie's time in heaven so far. To do so, though, would require abandoning the past all together—this is "impossible" to Susie, whose sense of injustice, lack of fulfillment, and need to live vicariously seems only to be growing more pronounced the longer she stays in her heaven. Susie is not yet willing to make the trade that will allow her to forget her past—it is still too important to her, and precious in spite of all the pain it carries. Susie's own unwillingness to move on mirrors that of her family's, and Susie feeds off their reluctance to forget her as she decides to stay in her current heaven rather than move along to a place of forgetfulness and pure joy.

☛☛ Under a rowboat that was too old and worn to float, Lindsey lay down on the earth with Samuel Heckler, and he held her. Samuel's back was flush against the ground, and he brought my sister close in to his body to protect her from the dampness of the quick summer rain. Their breath began to heat the small space beneath the boat, and he could not stop it—his penis stiffened inside his jeans.

Lindsey reached her hand over.

"I'm sorry..." He began.

"I'm ready," my sister said.

At fourteen, my sister sailed away from me into a place I'd never been. In the walls of my sex there was horror and blood, in the walls of hers there were windows.

Related Characters: Lindsey Salmon, Samuel Heckler, Susie Salmon (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Susie's reluctance to move on from those on Earth begins to affect her detrimentally by keeping her from moving along to the place of pure joy she always dreamed of, but she feels justified in doing so because she is watching those on Earth struggling to move on from her as well. Witnessing this moment of intimacy between Lindsey and Samuel, though, awakens a kind of jealousy in Susie. The flip side of her joyful vicarious living is bearing witness to those she loves passing her by, and adjusting to the normalcy of her absence. As she watches Lindsey achieve a milestone Susie dreamed of but never got to experience on Earth—a positive, healthy sexual encounter—she realizes that the longer she watches, the more she will be forced to see those she loves surpass her, forget her, and grow tired of clinging to her memory. In this passage, Susie realizes the depth of the bargain she is making by choosing to linger in the part of heaven that allows her to look down on all she has left behind.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ And I watched that flat red mouth move across an invisible line that separated her from the rest of the world. She pulled Len in and kissed him on the mouth. He seemed to hesitate at first. His body tensed, telling him NO, but that NO became vague and cloudy, became air sucked into the intake fan of the humming hydrant beside them. She reached up and unbuttoned her raincoat. He placed his hand against the thin gauzy material of her summer gown... I knew what was happening. Her rage, her loss, her despair. The whole life lost tumbling out in an arc on that roof, clogging up her being. She needed Len to drive the dead daughter out. He pushed her back into the stucco surface of the wall as they kissed, and my mother held on to him as if on the other side of his kiss there could be a new life.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Detective Len Fenerman, Abigail Salmon

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 148, 152

Explanation and Analysis

Susie's omniscience allows her to see what her family is getting up to even in their darkest, most secret moments. As Susie watches her mother make the decision to embark on an affair with the detective investigating her daughter's murder, Susie understands that the action is motivated by the desire to move on, and to forget. Just as she realized earlier on that there is a half-life to grief, and that everyone she loved on Earth will eventually move on from her, Susie

now realizes that this moving-on will sometimes not just be a natural, slow progression: sometimes it will be an act of a desperate, willful desire to forget.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ My neighbors and teachers, friends and family, circled an arbitrary spot not far from where I'd been killed. My father, sister and brother heard the singing again once they were outside. Everything in my father leaned and pitched toward the warmth and light. He wanted so badly to have me remembered in the minds and hearts of everyone. I knew something as I watched: almost everyone was saying goodbye to me. I was becoming one of many little-girl-losts. They would go back to their homes and put me to rest, a letter from the past never reopened or reread.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Buckley Salmon, Lindsey Salmon, Jack Salmon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Deepening the arc of Susie's story, in which she realizes that her loss is something that people *want* to move on from, while she is desperate *not* to move on from those she has lost, this passage demonstrates Susie's reckoning with the fact that a memorial service in her honor also symbolizes an end to the grieving process for many of her friends and neighbors. Though her family will still carry the pain of her loss—they cannot help it—almost everyone else in Norristown is ready to compartmentalize their sadness over Susie's loss and move on to other things. Susie laments the idea that she will become obsolete just as much as she laments that this is the case for countless other "little-girls-lost" just like her.

Snapshots Quotes

☝☝ [Ruth] had become convinced that she had a second sight that no one else had. She didn't know what she would do with it, save taking copious notes for the future, but she had grown unafraid. The world she saw of dead women and children had become as real to her as the world in which she lived.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Ruth Connors

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 227-228

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which tracks Ruth as she begins her new life in New York City, continues the book's work of complicating the barrier between the world of the dead and the world of the living. It is unclear whether Ruth's second sight has developed because Susie's soul passed by her on the way up to heaven, or whether Susie sought Ruth out on her way off of Earth because she knew, on some level, that Ruth already had a sensitivity to the realm of the dead. The book never reveals which came first in this peculiar chicken-egg situation, but it does show Ruth leaning into rather than shying away from her odd and isolating gift. Ruth, like Jack, is aware of the blurriness between realms, and longs to explore how the dead linger in the land of the living—and also how the living desire to dip their toes in the world of the dead.

☝ Years passed. The trees in our yard grew taller. I watched my family and my friends and neighbors, the teachers whom I'd had or imagined having, the high school I had dreamed about. As I sat in the gazebo I would pretend instead that I was sitting on the topmost branch of the maple under which my brother had swallowed a stick and still played hide-and-seek with Nate, or I would perch on the railing of a stairwell in New York and wait for Ruth to pass near. I would study with Ray. Drive the Pacific Coast Highway on a warm afternoon of salty air with my mother. But I would end each day with my father in his den. I would lay these photographs down in my mind, those gathered from my constant watching, and I could trace how one thing—my death—connected these images to a single source. No one could have predicted how my loss would change small moments on Earth. But I held on to those moments, hoarded them. None of them were lost as long as I was there watching.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Abigail Salmon, Ray Singh, Ruth Connors, Nate, Buckley Salmon

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 230-231

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Susie watches time seem to literally fly by, she comes to see her lingering in the world of the living as a duty of sorts. Only she can observe the quiet, private moments that will come to define the lives of those she has left behind. Just as she alone was able to observe, through photography, a moment in which Abigail was untethered from her life and her family, now Susie is able to observe the moments in which her friends and family find themselves changed, guided, or influenced by the impact of Susie's loss. Susie—who is, it must be said, desirous of attention and affection—“hoards” these moments close to her, wanting to be loved and remembered but also wanting to be able to preserve the small moments that are adding up day by day, year by year, and making her loved ones into who they will be.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ At twenty-one Lindsey was many things I would never become, but I barely grieved this list anymore. Still, I roved where she roved. I collected my college diploma and rode on the back of Samuel's bike, clinging on to him with my arms wrapped around his waist, pressing into his back for warmth . . . Okay, it was Lindsey. I realized that. But in watching her I found I could get lost more than with anyone else.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Samuel Heckler, Lindsey Salmon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

Susie's vicarious living has always been most focused on her younger sister, Lindsey. When Lindsey received her first kiss, lost her virginity, went up against Mr. Harvey, Susie was there, watching, both trying to feel what Lindsey felt and jealously lamenting the fact that those feelings would never be real. In this passage, Susie admits to still becoming “lost” in Lindsey's experience, clinging to the moments of her sister's life she observes them, and taking pride, comfort, and joy in them as if they were moments of her own. This is the closest Susie can get to living, and though she is constantly aware that she is an outsider and a member of the realm of the dead, this fact seems to bother her less and less as the years go by.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☞ When her father mentioned the sinkhole on the phone, Ruth was in the walk-in closet that she rented on First Avenue. She twirled the phone's long black cord around her wrist and arm and gave short, clipped answers of acknowledgment. The old woman that rented her the closet liked to listen in, so Ruth tried not to talk much on the phone. Later, from the street, she would call home collect and plan a visit. She had known she would make a pilgrimage to see it before the developers closed it up. Her fascination with places like the sinkhole was a secret she kept, as was my murder and our meeting in the faculty parking lot.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Ruth Connors

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

The sinkhole—a symbol of the bottomless sorrow, guilt, and grief that has opened up in the middle of the Salmon family's lives—is a secret obsession of Ruth's which mirrors her obsession not just with Susie, but with murdered women and children everywhere. To Ruth, the sinkhole is not just a symbol of sorrow, but also of the systems of cunning, evil, and cruelty that swallow the stories of the murdered children and women which she has tried, painstakingly, to intuit, uncover, reconstruct, and understand during her years living in New York. Ruth's desire to make a "pilgrimage" to the sinkhole mirrors her desire to dedicate herself to obtaining if not justice, then at least visibility and empathy for the stories of the wrongfully dead she has collected over the years.

☞ Above his bed the clock ticked off the minutes and I thought of the game Lindsey and I had played in the yard together: "he loves me/he loves me not" picked out on a daisy's petals. I could hear the clock casting my own two greatest wishes back to me in this same rhythm: "Die for me/don't die for me, die for me/don't die for me." I could not help myself, it seemed, as I tore at his weakening heart. If he died, I would have him forever. Was this so wrong to want?

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Lindsey Salmon, Buckley Salmon, Jack Salmon

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

Susie's "life" in heaven is just as fraught with moral dilemmas and complicated quandaries as any life on Earth. As Susie watches her father suffer a heart attack, she is filled not with pain or worry but with anticipation, and even joy—she knows that if he dies, he will be able to join her in heaven, and she will have him forever. She also knows, though, that this is a selfish impulse—life is for the living, and Jack Salmon still has much living to do and many people who depend upon him. Nonetheless, Susie wonders if she is "wrong" to desire what she does—an end to the constant watching, and the beginning of a real sense of togetherness, wholeness, and happiness she has not felt since her life on Earth was cut short.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☞ On the flight to Philadelphia, she sat alone in the middle of a row of three seats. She could not help but think of how, if she were a mother traveling, there would be two seats filled beside her. One for Lindsey. One for Buckley. But though she was, by definition, a mother, she had at some point ceased to be one too. She couldn't claim that right and privilege after missing more than half a decade of their lives. She now knew that being a mother was a calling, something plenty of young girls dreamed of being. But my mother had never had that dream, and she had been punished in the most horrible and unimaginable way for never having wanted me. I watched her on the plane, and I sent a wish into the clouds for her release. Her body grew heavy with the dread of what would come but in this heaviness was at least relief. The stewardess handed her a small blue pillow and for a little while she fell asleep.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Buckley Salmon, Lindsey Salmon, Abigail Salmon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

Abigail Salmon never really wanted to be a mother, and after the loss of Susie, she effectively abandoned the role and the label by absconding to California. Abigail thought she was getting what she had desired—freedom, independence, and agency over her own life. The lingering guilt, however, that she has felt in her years away has caused her to wonder whether Susie's death was in fact a "punishment" for her lack of maternal feelings—the

universe's recognition of her reluctance to be a mother, and its cruel way of handling the problem for her, so to speak. As Abigail prepares to return to her family for the first time in about five years, she revisits these feelings of fear, guilt, and regret, but also finds herself awash in the "relief" of surrendering once again to the life she left behind. Susie's role in causing her to feel this relief, once again, is a blurring of the boundaries between the realms of the dead and the living.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ At some point, to counter the list of the dead, I had begun keeping my own list of the living. It was something I noticed Len Fenerman did too. When he was off duty he would note the young girls and elderly women and every other female in the rainbow in between and count them among the things that sustained him. That young girl in the mall whose pale legs had grown too long for her now-too-young dress and who had an aching vulnerability that went straight to both Len's and my own heart. Elderly women, wobbling with walkers, who insisted on dyeing their hair unnatural versions of the colors they had in youth. Middle-aged single mothers racing around in grocery stores while their children pulled bags of candy off the shelves. When I saw them, I took count. Living, breathing women. Sometimes I saw the wounded—those who had been beaten by husbands or raped by strangers, children raped by their fathers—and I would wish to intervene somehow.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Detective Len Fenerman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 271-272

Explanation and Analysis

Most of the characters in this novel are, to put it mildly, obsessed with death. Len Fenerman is one of the characters most consumed with violence and injustice, though he is also one of the few characters whose interiority is not very thoroughly explored. Much of Len's past is a mystery, and though Susie hints at his inner world and his emotional life, Len remains stoic and aloof for much of the book. In this passage, however, Susie watches with tenderness and solidarity alike as she observes Len giving thanks, throughout his days, for the lives which have not been ruined or taken by the violence he works every day to keep at bay. Len is regretful of his role in letting Harvey get away, and the loss of Susie seems to loom larger for him than many of the other cases he has worked in his career. His

lingering feelings of impotence with regard to this failure—and his underlying fear of repeating it again—mirror Susie's feelings of being "trapped" in heaven and unable to help, guide, or influence those who she knows need it most.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ While he scanned the windows of my old house and wondered where the other members of my family were—whether my father's leg still made him hobble—I saw the final vestiges of the animals and the women taking leave of Mr. Harvey's house. They struggled forward together. He knew he could not outrace them. He sat in his car and prepared the last vestiges of the face he had been giving authorities for decades—the face of a bland man they might pity or despise but never blame. As the officer pulled alongside him, the women slipped in the [car] windows and the cats curled around his ankles.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), George Harvey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 297-298

Explanation and Analysis

As Mr. Harvey returns to Norristown on one of his odd, quiet victory laps, he finds himself this time overwhelmed by the haunting memories of all of the women, children, and animals he has killed over the years. This passage serves both to tie in with the novel's repeated blurring of the line between the world of the dead and the world of the living, and speaks to the cosmic justice that the novel deals to Mr. Harvey in the absence of any real legal justice. The ghosts of Harvey's kills "curl" around him almost sensuously, reminding him tauntingly and teasingly of all the lives he has taken, and the ways in which his own life has, for fear of being caught, become untethered, empty, and ghostlike.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☞ As I watched my family sip champagne, I thought about how their lives trailed backward and forward from my death and then, I saw, as Samuel took the daring step of kissing Lindsey in a room full of family, became borne aloft away from it. These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections—sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent—that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. The events that my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future. The price of what I came to see as this miraculous body had been my life.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Lindsey Salmon, Samuel Heckler

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 319-320

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Susie describes the “lovely bones” that have grown up around her absence from Earth. Just as a wound heals over, so too have the lives of Susie’s friends and family healed. Susie understands that the “bones” of these new lives, in all their joys and sorrows, are “lovely” despite the pain which necessitated them in the first place. The “miraculous body” that has come into being in Susie’s absence came at the cost of her life, and she sees this for the first time as not necessarily a bad thing. Surely, the loss of a child and a sibling is something that is never good, or preferable, or easy. But now, looking down on the people her loved ones have become and the lives they have created for themselves and one another, she sees that beauty, growth, and happiness have grown up around her absence after all—and that those she loves might never have been as strong, as intrepid, as loving, or as grateful for their own lives had she not been lost to them.

☞ And there she was again, alone and walking out in the cornfield while everyone else I cared for sat together in one room. She would always feel me and think of me. I could see that, but there was no longer anything I could do. Ruth had been a girl haunted and now she would be a woman haunted. First by accident and now by choice. All of it, the story of my life and death, was hers if she chose to tell it, even to one person at a time.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker), Ruth Connors

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

As the rest of the extended Salmon family—including the Hecklers and the Singhs—come together in celebration, Ruth Connors stands alone in the cornfield where the girl who knows her better than anyone else was murdered. Susie and Ruth, though they have not—and perhaps never will—had the chance to discuss the magnitude of the switch they underwent, are connected now in an even deeper way than they were before, when their connection had been rooted in Susie’s having passed by Ruth on her way up to heaven. Susie knows that just as she knows Ruth better than anyone, Ruth knows her—Ruth has done the work of keeping Susie alive over the years not through her allegiance just to Susie’s story, but through her courageous pursuit of an understanding of the lives and deaths of murdered women and children all over. The two women were once bound merely by accident, but now they are allegiant to each other by “choice.” Ruth accepts her hauntedness just as Susie accepts that she will, more than likely, always be one who haunts. Susie and Ruth’s stories mirror and invert one another’s in odd, miraculous ways, and in this final moment, Susie acknowledges all that Ruth has come to mean to her.

Bones Quotes

☞ And in a small house five miles away was a man who held my mud-encrusted charm bracelet out to his wife.

"Look what I found at the old industrial park," he said. "A construction guy said they were bulldozing the whole lot. They're afraid of more sinkholes like that one that swallowed the cars."

His wife poured him some water from the sink as he fingered the tiny bike and the ballet shoe, the flower basket and the thimble. He held out the muddy bracelet as she set down his glass.

"This little girl's grown up by now," she said.

Almost.

Not quite.

I wish you all a long and happy life.

Related Characters: Susie Salmon (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the novel, Susie provides a coda of sorts as she zooms away from what has been the main action of the novel—the lives, dramas, joys, and pains of the Salmon family as they negotiate the loss of one of their own—and focuses instead on a couple who seem to have no connection at all to Susie and her murder other than the fact that they have found one of her most precious items. This passage demonstrates the insularity of grief, the

randomness of the world, and the small moments of connection, coincidence, and chance that come to define lives on Earth. As the couple who has found the bracelet muse over who its owner could be and where she might be now, Susie admits that she is “not quite” grown up—she is trapped, eternally, at fourteen, and though she has learned the lessons of the world through observing her family and watching them grow, she knows that there is still much of the human experience she has left to absorb—if she chooses, that is, to stay in the part of her heaven, which keeps her connected to what she has left behind.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PROLOGUE

Susie Salmon recalls a **snow globe** that, in her childhood, always sat on her father's desk. Inside the snow globe was a penguin in a striped scarf. Susie often worried about the penguin, because he was alone, but Susie's father always reassured her that the penguin had a "nice life," and was "trapped in a perfect world."

The snow globe, and the penguin in it, are a symbol of Susie's imprisonment in her own "perfect world"—heaven. Susie's concern for the penguin's loneliness foreshadows the isolation and alienation she herself will feel once she becomes "trapped" in a supposedly "perfect" afterlife.



CHAPTER 1

Susie Salmon, the novel's narrator and protagonist, introduces herself to the reader, and states that she was murdered on December 6, 1973—back when "people [still] believed things like that didn't happen." Susie's murderer, she says, was a man from the neighborhood—an acquaintance of her parents who once talked with them about his garden, and gave them tips on fertilizing. Susie's father joked that though their neighbor's garden was made beautiful through his old-school fertilizing technique of making use of coffee grounds and eggshells, it would "stink to high heaven once a heat wave hit."

By opening the novel with this rapid and stark revelation of the facts of Susie's murder, Sebald creates a kind of radical transparency in the narrative. Transparency, and the lack of it—between family members, neighbors, and between the worlds of the living and the dead—will become a major motif throughout the book. The irony between the transparency of Susie's reflection about her life on Earth and her family's failure to see her murderer as a dangerous individual is also highlighted through the metaphor of his stinking garden.



On December 6, 1973, it is snowing, and Susie takes a shortcut home from school through the cornfield behind her junior high school. "Don't let me startle you," says a nearby voice: it is Susie's neighbor, Mr. Harvey. Susie is of course startled, but she says hello anyway. Mr. Harvey asks Susie if she's "the older Salmon girl," and then inquires after her parents. Susie answers flatly that her parents are fine. She is "rooted to the spot" partly out of politeness and respect for the "natural authority" of Mr. Harvey's age.

Because the reader knows that Susie is going to die, every moment of her initial interaction with her killer, Mr. Harvey, is full of heightened suspense. This use of dramatic irony—in which the reader knows more than the character within the story—creates a tension which Susie, as she narrates the rest of the novel from heaven, will repeatedly feel as she is unable to help, influence, or guide those she has left behind on Earth.



Mr. Harvey offers to show Susie something he has built in the cornfield. Susie, wary, tells Mr. Harvey that her mother will want her home before dark. Mr. Harvey points out that it is already after dark, addressing her by her first name. Susie, reflecting on this moment, wishes that she had realized how "weird" Mr. Harvey's behavior was—she had never told him her name. In the moment, Susie says, she figured that perhaps her father had mentioned his children's names to Mr. Harvey—her father was always telling friends and neighbors embarrassing anecdotes about Susie had her sister Lindsey.

Susie, reliving her murder and the events leading up to it from heaven, is angry just as much at the injustice of the crime as she is at her younger, more naive self for not exercising more judgment and self-preservation. Susie's desire to go back and change things is a fruitless one, but is nevertheless overwhelming and frustrating.



Susie reveals that in the weeks after her murder, Mr. Harvey will run into her mother on the street, and express his condolences to her for the “horrible tragedy.” From heaven, watching this exchange take place, Susie will still be “fitting [her] limbs [back] together,” and will remark upon Mr. Harvey’s audacity to her intake counselor, Franny.

Back in the cornfield, Mr. Harvey promises Susie that what he has to show her will only take a minute. Susie follows him. After a little while, Mr. Harvey stops and turns to Susie, and tells her that he has made a “little hiding place.” Susie protests that she doesn’t see anything. She is aware that Mr. Harvey is looking at her strangely, but is also aware that since losing her baby fat, many men have looked at her in this way. Susie, from heaven, wonders why she didn’t do everything she could to get herself away from Mr. Harvey. Franny, however, reminds Susie that there’s no point in mulling over her mistakes—she must simply accept her death.

Mr. Harvey squats down and knocks against the ground. He explains that he has built a wooden trapdoor down into the earth. At this point, Susie is no longer weirded out: she is genuinely curious. Mr. Harvey opens the door and takes her down into the earth. Inside, Susie finds herself amazed by the hiding place. She tells Mr. Harvey that the space is “neato,” and recalls being “completely reverted,” transfixed by the space. Franny, Susie’s intake counselor, remarks that Mr. Harvey’s luring Susie into the hole was “like taking candy from a baby.”

Susie can still see the hole like it was yesterday, and, she says “it was; Life is a perpetual yesterday for [the dead].” She recalls the hole as being the size of her family’s mudroom—the ceilings were low, and Mr. Harvey had to stoop to fit inside. A bench and a shelf had been dug out of the ground, and a battery-powered lamp in the corner of the room provided light. She noticed a razor and shaving cream on one of the shelves, and remembers thinking that that was odd.

By the time a neighbor’s dog finds Susie’s elbow three days later and brings it home with a “telling” corn husk attached, she reveals, Mr. Harvey will have closed the underground room up.

As Susie, up in heaven, is still gruesomely repairing her body—which, this passage reveals, Mr. Harvey will soon dismember—she is overcome by feelings of injustice and desire to see her killer exposed, even as he attempts to hide in plain sight.



In the cornfield, Susie knew that something was wrong, but she was too tied to the desire to be polite and, in some small ways, the desire to know what Mr. Harvey would show her to do anything to rescue herself. Franny, Susie’s “intake counselor,” is a matter-of-fact woman who knows well the temptation to endlessly reflect on one’s past mistakes. She urges Susie to not get stuck in this endless feedback loop, but as readers will come to see, accepting death and moving on is not so easy for Susie.



As Susie recalls how strongly her curiosity took hold of her, she stops for a moment, chastising her younger self for getting into a bad situation. In a reversal, it is now Franny, the cool-headed and simplistic intake counselor, who marvels at the unfairness of Susie’s entrapment at the hands of her neighbor.



As Susie reflects on the “perpetual yesterday” of her life on Earth, the details are marvelously clear but maddeningly unchangeable. Susie knew that something was wrong almost right away once she got down into the underground structure, but once she was in there, her fate was already sealed.



The injustice of Mr. Harvey’s getting away with literal murderer is underscored by the gruesome find of Susie’s detached elbow.



Mr. Harvey asks Susie if she would like a “refreshment,” which Susie thinks is an odd word to use. Initially charmed by the space, Susie is now beginning to feel frightened and out of place. Susie tells Mr. Harvey that she has to get home. Mr. Harvey tells her to “be polite and have a Coke,” insisting that the other kids would if they were here. He explains that he has built the underground structure for the kids in the neighborhood, so that they can use it as a kind of clubhouse. Susie feels that Mr. Harvey is lying, but she sees it as a “pitiful lie,” and feels sorry for the lonely Mr. Harvey. She accepts a Coke and drinks it.

As Mr. Harvey’s behavior becomes increasingly odd, Susie continues to make excuses for him. She feels sorry for him, and knows that he is a solitary man. She goes along with his instructions because he is both an authority figure and an object of pity—surely Harvey knew, when planning this evil act, that Susie would find herself beholden to both of those assumptions about him and thus allow herself to be tricked.



Mr. Harvey asks Susie if she’s warm in the room, and instructs her to take off her parka. She does. Mr. Harvey tells Susie that she is pretty, and she thanks him, though she is beginning to get a serious case of the “skeevies.” When Mr. Harvey asks Susie if she has a boyfriend, Susie insists that she has to go. “I don’t know why you think you’re leaving,” Mr. Harvey says, and blocks the way out.

Mr. Harvey is no longer escalating his control over Susie just intellectually or emotionally—he is now physically influencing her. As Susie makes her first attempt to leave, Mr. Harvey, knowing that she is already trapped, drops all pretenses and reveals that she is now effectively his prisoner.



Susie pleads with Mr. Harvey, but he instructs her to take off her clothes, insisting he needs to check and make sure that she is still a virgin. Susie promises him that she is, but Harvey tells her that he is checking on behalf of her parents, who only want “good girls.” Susie begs Harvey to let her leave, but Harvey tells Susie that she belongs to him now.

Mr. Harvey chooses to prey upon Susie’s respect for his “authority” as he attempts to trick her into sex, or at least into disrobing for him. All pretenses have been completely stripped away, and there is only raw, dark desire on Harvey’s part now.



Susie begins to struggle physically against Mr. Harvey, fighting as hard as she can, but nevertheless Harvey overpowers her, forces her down to the ground, and lies on top of her. Susie, frightened, thinks of her mother, knowing that she must be nervously checking the dial on the oven clock, worried about why Susie hasn’t yet come home from school.

Susie attempts to fight back and free herself, but the odds are stacked completely against her. Trapped though she is in this physically and psychologically isolating space, she still thinks of her family—foreshadowing the fact that even in heaven she will continue to worry about them.



Mr. Harvey begins kissing Susie, and she is revolted by his “blubbery” lips. Susie has already had her first real kiss, with a boy named Ray Singh from her high school. He kissed Susie by her locker the day that her class turned in their yearbook pictures, and when the yearbook came out at the end of the summer, Susie saw that under the fill-in-the-blank questions next to each student’s name, Ray had filled in the statement “My heart belongs to” with “Susie Salmon.” Susie remembers that when Ray kissed her, his lips were chapped.

Mr. Harvey’s gruesome assault on Susie is contrasted with the sweetness of her first kiss. Mr. Harvey’s lips are described as blubbery and wet, whereas Ray Singh’s were dry and chapped. Sebald perhaps uses Ray’s dry lips as a contrast to Mr. Harvey’s wet ones as a means of coding desire—Mr. Harvey’s dark impulses can no longer be held back and are overflowing, whereas the shyness and sweetness of Ray and Susie’s first kiss was chaste and awkward.



Susie begs Mr. Harvey to stop, combining the words “please” and “don’t” futilely and repetitively, until Harvey reaches into the pocket of Susie’s parka and stuffs a hat her mother had hand-knit for her—complete with tinkling bells—into Susie’s mouth. As Mr. Harvey begins to rape Susie, she imagines that she can hear her mother calling her home for dinner, announcing that string beans, lamb, and apple crumb cake are served.

After Mr. Harvey finishes, he forces Susie to lie still beneath him and listen to their hearts beating together. Susie is shell-shocked, humiliated, and miserable, but amazed by the fact that she is still alive. In a “gentle, encouraging” voice, Mr. Harvey urges Susie to get up, but she cannot move. Mr. Harvey reaches up to the ledge where his razor and shaving cream sit, and retrieves a knife. Mr. Harvey removes the hat from Susie’s mouth and instructs her to tell him that she loves him. She acquiesces, but, from heaven, she states that “the end came anyway.”

CHAPTER 2

Susie says that when she first entered heaven, she thought that everyone around her saw exactly what she saw. She assumed that everyone’s heaven resembled the building of the local high school in Norristown, Fairfax High School. When Susie was alive, she says, she often made her father drive her past the building just so she could imagine herself as a student there. High school in Susie’s county starts in tenth grade, and by the middle of her ninth-grade year, when she was murdered, Susie could hardly think of anything but finally getting to go to high school. She imagined that she would go by the name “Suzanne,” that she would wear her hair feathered, that she would have a great body, and that her fellow students would “worship” her for her goodness and ability to handle anything that came her way.

Susie realizes after a few days in heaven that the shot-putters, soccer players, and other people or “students” milling about the buildings “[a]re all in their own version of heaven,” versions which just happen to fit with Susie’s version. On her third day in heaven, she meets her roommate, Holly. Holly is sitting on the swings, reading a book in an unrecognizable alphabet, which Susie believes to be Vietnamese. Holly, who had had an accent on Earth, wanted no accent in heaven, and so she has none. Holly reveals she has been in heaven for only three days—just like Susie. Holly asks Susie if she likes it in heaven, and Susie answers that she does not. Holly, sadly, agrees.

Once again, Sebald shows Susie thinking of her family in a moment of extreme isolation. She is both comforted by the thought of them and further agitated by their ineffectual proximity. This foreshadows, again, her need once in heaven to continually check in on her family.



After the rape is over, Susie initially believes that she will escape with her life. She wonders if perhaps Mr. Harvey’s desire has been fulfilled, and now she will be allowed to return home. However, Mr. Harvey’s desire is a deeper well than Susie could imagine, and as she begins to realize its depths, she attempts one last time to crawl out of it.



Susie’s heaven is a place that reflects the fulfillment of her earthly desires. When Susie was alive, she wanted more than anything to be a popular high-schooler, adored by her classmates and looked up to as a paragon of goodness. In heaven, Susie gets to realize her dream of being in high school. Little does Susie know that her dream will, on Earth, also come true in a way, as her murder and its investigation paint her all through Norristown as a saint-like figure, gone too soon.



Susie explores the mechanics of the afterlife, beginning to understand that heaven is a complex and multi-faceted realm in which everyone’s desires are, in their own way, met. Heaven, in this way, provides a kind of comfort and justice. Holly and Susie bond instantly in heaven—their ideas of the perfect afterlife overlap, as do their frustration and disappointment with having been removed from life on Earth.



Franny, who is Susie and Holly's intake counselor, guides them through their early days in heaven. Franny, in her mid-forties, is old enough to be the girls' mothers, and Holly and Susie soon realize that Franny has been assigned to them because both of them miss their own mothers. On Earth, Franny had been a social worker for the homeless and destitute, and in heaven, her dream is to serve others and be rewarded only by gratitude. Franny, too, died horribly on earth, after being shot in the face by a man looking for his wife. On the fifth day, when Holly and Susie complain to Franny of their boredom, Franny tells the girls that all they have to do is desire something, understand why, and wait for it to come. Holly and Susie conjure for themselves a duplex which looks out onto a park.

As Susie begins to desire more and more, she realizes that what she really wants is to be allowed to grow up, and learn all the things she never was able to on earth. Susie tells Franny that she wants to live, but Franny tells Susie that's not possible. Holly asks Franny if they can at least watch the living. Susie echoes Holly's desire to watch "whole lives from beginning to end, to see how they did it [and] to know the secrets." Franny tells the girls that even if they watch lives on Earth, they won't experience them.

Susie and Holly set out to explore. Sometimes, Holly and Susie get separated when Holly goes to the part of her heaven that does not overlap with Susie's, and though Susie misses her, it is an "odd sort of missing," as Susie knows the meaning of forever now and understands that she will always see Holly again. As she wanders her heaven, Susie laments that she cannot have the thing she wants most: for Mr. Harvey to be dead, and for her to be alive. Nevertheless, Susie begins to believe that if she watches closely, and truly desires to, she can change the lives of those she has loved and left behind on Earth.

On December ninth, Jack Salmon, Susie's father, takes a phone call from the police. The lead detective on the case, Len Fenerman, delivers horrible news: the police have found a body part. Jack asks the police if this means they're certain that Susie is dead—Fenerman replies that "nothing is ever certain," and this line is what Jack later repeats to Abigail when he shares the bad news. Abigail, Susie's mother, has been providing the police with detailed descriptions of what Susie carried and wore the day she went missing, including her jangly charm bracelet. Abigail is the only one who knows the meaning of each charm, and why Susie liked them. As Susie watches Abigail deliver these small nuggets of information to the police, she is touched, but also knows how futile Abigail's efforts are.

Heaven, in attempting to provide Susie and Holly with everything they desire, has given them each a mother figure. But as the girls are learning, the biggest desires are the ones that unfortunately can never be fulfilled. Franny will never be the girls' mothers, and though her presence is a comfort and she is helpful to them in navigating their new world, she cannot give them everything they want or replace what they have lost.



Susie's simple desires have all been met—her heaven mirrors her greatest dream on Earth, and her intake counselor is reminiscent of her own mother. But Susie's desire to rejoin the world of the living, or at least to understand the "secrets" of what it means to live a full life on Earth, is one that even Franny cannot help her fulfill.



As Susie comes to terms with the concept of eternity, she is also forced to reckon with the great injustice that has been done to her and to her family. Unable to quench her desire for justice or for a return to Earth, but still secretly wishing for both of these things, she sets out to try and test the limits of her powers, and attempt to cross the boundary between her new life and her old one.



Back on Earth, a maelstrom of pain, anxiety, and grief has formed around Susie's disappearance. As evidence begins to surface, a new chapter in the investigation begins, and the lead detective on Susie's case knows that things do not look good. Meanwhile, Susie's parents, overwhelmed with grief and isolated in their desire to be reunited with their daughter, grasp at any hint of hope and inundate the police with information they hope will be helpful, even in the face of doubt, disappointment, and piece after piece of bad news.



The next morning, Jack pours a bottle of scotch down the sink. Lindsey, Susie's younger sister, asks him why. Jack confesses that he is afraid he will drink the scotch if he keeps it around. Lindsey asks Jack who he was on the phone with last night, and whether it was a cop. She asks Jack not to lie to her. Jack tells Lindsey that the police have found a body part belonging to Susie. Lindsey sits down at the kitchen table, and announces that she is going to be sick, but first she asks Jack to tell her what body part the police found. Jack puts a metal mixing bowl in front of Lindsey and tells her that a neighbor's dog found Susie's elbow. Lindsey immediately throws up into the bowl.

Later that morning, Susie watches as the police rope off the cornfield and begin their search. The bad weather has affected the landscape, but even so the police can see a patch of land that has obviously been recently disturbed. As the police begin digging, they grow frustrated with their inability to turn up a body; Susie, however, reveals that later the lab will find dense concentrations of her blood mixed with the dirt.

The Salmons remain at home during the search. Buckley, Susie's four-year-old brother, is over at a friend's house—his parents have told him that Susie is merely on an "extended sleepover" at her friend Clarissa's. As Susie watches the police continue to dig, she grows frustrated that she cannot guide or help them. Eventually, a policeman raises his hand, and the other cops gather around him in a huddle to see what he has found. After a minute, Detective Fenerman breaks from the huddle and turns to the line of neighbors gathered at the edge of the police tape. He summons a woman who has a child in Susie's school, and a junior officer leads her over to the other officer's find.

Fenerman holds up a copy of [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), and asks the woman if her child is reading it in school. She answers yes, and confirms that her child is in the ninth grade—Susie's grade. The police cross-reference the woman's knowledge of the ninth-grade syllabus with confirmation from Susie's English teacher, Mrs. Dewitt, and then Fenerman calls Susie's parents to tell them they believe they have found one of Susie's schoolbooks. Though evidence is mounting, Jack and Abigail continue to explain away the policemen's finds, refusing to believe that their daughter is dead.

Whereas Jack and Abigail react to the news about Susie's elbow being found with controlled anxiety tinged with hope, Lindsey knows what the news means and reacts violently and physically towards it. Lindsey, who will become the most stoic of the Salmons, experiences this one moment of physical distress and revulsion—her first and last public, outward display of grief over the loss of her sister.



As Susie watches the investigation get under way, she is relieved to see the police headed in the right direction. She knows that Mr. Harvey has destroyed all evidence of the structure in which she was murdered, but she also knows that the ground still contains the secret knowledge of what transpired there.



The search is not just a police effort, but a community one. The whole neighborhood has been shaken by the news of Susie's disappearance, and Sebald shows her readers just how invested people are in the search by revealing that a crowd of people are waiting just at the edge of the police's investigation.



Len Fenerman and the police force are turning up more and more evidence pointing to the fact that Susie has been murdered, but the Salmons continue to hold out hope. As the neighborhood is drawn into the investigation more and more, and teachers from Susie's school are called upon to bear witness to the police's findings, the sense that Susie is truly gone becomes more and more undeniable to everyone but her parents.



Two days later, the police find Susie’s notes from biology class. Along with her class notes there is another piece of paper, the writing on it in another hand: Ray Singh’s. From heaven, Susie explains that Ray had written Susie a love note and tucked it into her notebook on the day she disappeared—she had never gotten to read it. Ray Singh becomes the first suspect in the case, though he has an alibi. Ray’s father teaches postcolonial history at the University of Pennsylvania, and on the day of Susie’s murder, had brought Ray along with him to one of his lectures, resulting in an absence from school which initially was seen as evidence of his guilt. After Ray’s presence at his father’s lecture is confirmed, his innocence is as well. Rumors continue to follow Ray throughout school, however, and he becomes something of an outcast.

Watching all of this madness makes Susie crazy. She is miserable not to be able to steer the police towards Mr. Harvey’s house, right down the street from her parents’ house. She watches as Mr. Harvey carves parts for a gothic dollhouse he is building, watches the news nonchalantly, and wears his own innocence “like a comfortable old coat.” Killing Susie has calmed the “riot” inside of him, and he follows the investigation blithely and without worry that he will ever be implicated.

On December 15th, Len Fenerman knocks on the Salmons’ front door. In the living room, he sits down with Jack, Lindsey, and Abigail and reveals that the police have found yet another personal item of Susie’s. He holds up a plastic evidence bag with Susie’s hat inside, and upon seeing it, something breaks inside Abigail—she had wanted to believe that Susie was still alive, but now she knows deep down that her daughter is dead. Len reveals that testing the fibers of the hat showed them to be covered in Susie’s saliva, and explains that this means that whoever accosted Susie had used the hat to gag her. Abigail tears the hat from Len’s hands, hunches herself over it, and sobs.

Jack leads Len to the door, where Len tells him that going forward, the police are now working under the assumption that Susie has been killed. Lindsey overhears this, but it is something that she has already known, on some level. Abigail, in the next room, begins to wail. Jack protests, saying that there can’t be a murder investigation without a body, but Len insists that all evidence points to Susie’s death. Len leaves, and Jack, unable to face Lindsey or Abigail, heads upstairs to find the family dog, Holiday. He buries his face in Holiday’s neck and allows himself to cry. At four that afternoon, after hours of moving through the house apart, Jack and Abigail finally end up in the same room. Abigail says the word “Mother,” and Jack nods his head. He then makes a phone call to Abigail’s mother, Grandma Lynn.

Susie’s sweet memories of Ray Singh allow the reader to know that Ray is innocent—he was only ever kind to her, and his kiss was a bright spot in Susie’s young life. Watching him be singled out as a suspect and treated, for a time, like a criminal, drives Susie nuts—she has set out to attempt to influence lives and events on Earth, but finds herself enormously frustrated with the lack of influence she is able to exert on the world of the living. This comes as a disappointment to Susie, doubling her sense of injustice.



While an actual “riot” overtakes the city of Norristown, the man responsible for it—George Harvey—is able to enjoy the calm and serenity he feels in the wake of a fresh kill. This is an injustice that Susie can hardly bear, and it is made even worse by Harvey’s smug confidence in the fact that he will never be caught.



Finally, the Salmons begin to realize that the evidence in Susie’s case does all point to her murder. The hat is a symbol of Abigail’s love for Susie—it is an ugly thing, and childish with its added jingle bells, but it was made in an attempt to bridge a gap between them. As the reader learns that Abigail is and always has been a somewhat reluctant mother, her grief breaking to the surface at the discovery of the hat begins to make more and more sense.



As their grief reaches a breaking point and spills over, Jack, Abigail, and Lindsey find themselves unable to face one another. Their pain is so deep, their anger so raw, and their shame—both at not having been able to protect Susie and not having been able to accept the truth of her murder earlier—isolate and alienate them from one another. Holiday, the only member of the family other than Buckley who is blissful in his ignorance, is the only one who can provide any of them any comfort. Abigail and Jack come together at last, somewhat begrudgingly, over the painful realization that they must now begin to share the news Len has just delivered.



Susie watches as Lindsey sits alone in her room and works on numbing and “hardening” herself. Abigail tells Lindsey that she does not have to go to school for the last week before Christmas, but Lindsey chooses to anyway. In homeroom, Mrs. Dewitt, the English teacher, tells Lindsey that the principal wants to see her. Lindsey gathers her things as her classmates, all around her, whisper about her, and then heads to the principal’s office. Principal Caden tells Lindsey that he is sorry for her loss; Lindsey combatively asks what exactly her loss is. Mr. Caden sits beside Lindsey on the sofa in his office and tells her that he is available if she wants to talk about the loss. Lindsey petulantly pats her pockets and sweater, telling the principal that she wasn’t aware she had “lost” anything.

Mr. Caden tells Lindsey that she is the only Salmon girl now—she must carry on her sister’s legacy, and carve out her own as well. Mr. Caden tells Lindsey that Mr. Dewitt—Mrs. Dewitt’s husband—is coaching a girls’ soccer team in the spring, and asks Lindsey if she would be interested. Lindsey replies that she does not want to play soccer on a field twenty feet away from where her sister was murdered. Mr. Caden, flummoxed, apologizes again for Lindsey’s loss and excuses her from the office. That night, Susie watches as Lindsey does pushups, bicep curls, and breathing exercises alone in her room, focusing on nothing but her own breath.

Susie, in the main square of her heaven, watches from a gazebo—on Earth, she had always been jealous of a neighbor’s gazebo, and so in heaven she has her own. Susie looks down at her family’s kitchen, considering a drawing of Buckley’s which Abigail placed on the fridge just hours before Susie’s death: a thick blue line separating the air and the ground. Susie sees the line Buckley drew as a real place—an “Inbetween,” where heaven and Earth meet.

In heaven, Susie finds herself desiring simple things and receiving them right away. Susie loves dogs, and so her heaven becomes filled with every breed of dog imaginable. Holly and Susie have dresses in every shade, pattern, and length they desire, and at nights, they gather with the other residents of heaven and collectively play music in a kind of Evensong—a church service consisting of music, prayers, and songs.

Susie has watched her parents begin to drown in their grief, and as she turns her attention to her younger sister Lindsey, she begins to notice something peculiar. Lindsey’s grief is insular, and she chooses to press on with something difficult—returning to school—even knowing that she will be the subject of pity, gossip, and misunderstanding. Lindsey is angry, and lashes out in her grief rather than allowing herself to feel sadness or a sense of injustice. This marks her as separate from the rest of her family, and thus doubly alienated by her sister’s loss.



Mr. Caden reaching out to Lindsey is well-meaning, but Lindsey points out the obvious: nothing can distract her, physically or psychologically, from her sister’s loss. Lindsey is at once denying the loss, and shoving it in people’s faces—she herself is still figuring out how to negotiate the new terrain on which she finds herself. At home, Lindsey retreats into herself, seemingly attempting—as she did at school—to completely isolate herself from anyone who might attempt to help her.



Susie’s heaven continues to fill with the small, trivial things she desired on Earth, though actual influence and fulfillment continue to elude her. In this passage, Sebald shows Buckley—the youngest Salmon, and the only member of the family still in the dark about Susie’s death—being able to seemingly sense things beyond the world of the living.



There is peace and plenty in heaven, and Susie slowly begins to find a community of friends and family whose desires overlap with her own. The meditative and slightly mournful ritual of the Evensong symbolizes Susie’s reluctant transition into accepting that her life is in heaven now, not on Earth, and only in heaven will she be able to find fulfillment.



CHAPTER 3

The oddest thing about looking down on Earth from heaven, Susie says, is the ability to see souls leaving bodies in real time and flying up to heaven. Susie explains that when a soul departs earth it often passes by another living being, occasionally touching them lightly on the arm or cheek before continuing up to heaven. Though the dead are never seen by the living, some are sensitive to their presence.

On Susie's way up to heaven, she touched a girl named Ruth—a classmate of hers, though the two had never been close. Ruth was standing in Susie's way on the night her soul "shrieked" away from Earth, and Susie could not help but graze her—she was so distraught, and as her soul departed and whooshed past the last living person Susie would ever see, she couldn't stop herself from reaching out to touch Ruth's face. The morning after Susie's death, Ruth complains to her mother of an odd dream in which a pale ghost ran toward her, but Ruth's mother chastises her for letting her imagination run away with her. Ten days later, when news of Susie's death reaches the junior high, Ruth begins putting two and two together.

Ruth begins writing poetry to express her feelings about the experience of being "passed by." She also becomes obsessed with Susie, going through old yearbooks and cutting out anything that has to do with Susie. The last week before Christmas, Ruth comes upon Susie's friend Clarissa and her boyfriend, Brian Nelson, giggling in the hallway. Brian has a hand inside of Clarissa's shirt. If it had been anyone else, Ruth would have looked away, but because she knows that Clarissa was Susie's best friend, she stays and watches. Brian asks Clarissa to come with him to the cornfield, but Clarissa coyly refuses. After the two of them leave, Ruth burgles Clarissa's locker, looking for anything to do with Susie. All she finds is a large stash of marijuana, which she smokes all in one sitting that evening in her parents' garage.

Susie watches her school friends day and night from her gazebo. The freedom to observe the whole school is "intoxicating," and Susie watches the dramas and passions of both students and adults play out all over campus. An art teacher makes love to his girlfriend in the kiln room; the assistant football coach leaves anonymous chocolates for the married science teacher; the principal "moon[s]" over the assistant football coach.

In developing one of the book's major conceits, Susie reveals that the world of the dead and the world of the living often brush up against one another more closely than one might believe. Just how close the dead can come to the living, and how directly they can influence them, is something that Susie will question and reckon with again and again as her story unfolds.



Susie's departure from Earth was a frightening, discombobulating, and isolating experience. As her soul departed, she consciously chose to attempt to connect with a living person one final time—that person was Ruth, and the implications this encounter will have for both women is vaster than Susie ever could have realized.



Susie didn't realize how deeply she'd affect Ruth when she touched her on her way up to heaven. Now, as news of Susie's murder spreads through the school, Ruth is by far the classmate most affected by Susie's death. As she observes Clarissa and Brian, it seems as if she's wondering how they can act like everything is normal. Realizing how close Clarissa was to Susie in life, Ruth is both upset by Clarissa's seemingly detached attitude and desirous of whatever secrets Clarissa might have about Susie, and so she attempts to get closer to Susie by infiltrating one of Clarissa's private spaces.



For Susie, watching her own family is sad and demoralizing; watching her friends, classmates, and teachers, however, is intoxicating and intriguing. Susie begins to realize the wide range of her new perspective, and the secret actions and desires it allows her to bear witness to. It seems as if her desire to absorb the "secrets" of life from afar is coming true after all.



One night, after watching Ruth, Susie runs into Franny in the middle of the central square of her heaven. Susie is cold and shivering, and when Franny asks her why, Susie confesses that she cannot stop thinking about her mother. Susie wants Franny to hold her, but Franny only squeezes her hand. Susie knows that Franny is not her mother, and she cannot pretend that she is. Susie returns to the gazebo.

Susie remembers the morning of her eleventh birthday. She woke up early and did not think anyone else in the house was awake. She stalked through the house looking for her presents, and eventually found a not-yet-wrapped camera—just what she had asked for. Susie took the camera, loaded it with film, and immediately began **photographing** a neighbor through the blinds. Susie ran to the back of the house, hoping to get a better view from the yard. On the back porch, she saw her mother.

Abigail was not yet wearing lipstick, and Susie realized in that moment that her mother only put makeup on for other people. As her mother looked out at the yard, Susie noticed that her stare stretched “to infinity,” and finally understood her father’s nickname for her mother—“Ocean Eyes”—as a descriptor not of the color of her mother’s eyes but of their depths. Susie took a **photograph** of her mother, wanting to preserve the sensation of seeing her in this new light. When Susie got the roll of film back weeks later, she found that there was only one picture in which her mother was truly herself—the first photo Susie took of her, before the camera shutter’s noise startled her back into reality.

Back in the gazebo, Susie watches as Lindsey gets up in the middle of the night and creeps across the hall into Susie’s empty bedroom. She touches Susie’s things, examining her clothes and her pin collection, before finding the **photo** of Abigail tucked beneath a tray on Susie’s dresser. Susie, from heaven, is slightly sad—she had wanted to remain the only one who knew that their mother was “someone mysterious and unknown.”

Though Susie is tapping into the powers of her relative omniscience, she finds herself still feeling a sense of isolation—she misses her mother, and it turns out that her relationship with Abigail is as fraught in death as it was in life.



Susie, even on Earth, was obsessed with watching other people. Her passion for photography belies a desire to not just see everything and witness all walks of life, but to capture and possess the things she sees—to immortalize them and make them material so that she can study them, learn from them, and keep them for herself.



In this passage, the eleven-year-old Susie sees for the first time that her mother is not exactly who Susie always thought she was. Susie’s gift of perception, and her desire to see everything, had pitfalls on Earth just as it does now in heaven. Susie wanted to see everything, and wound up seeing something she didn’t expect—she saw her mother in a strange new light, and because the moment was immortalized in a photograph, Susie was unable to go back to knowing her mother as she knew her before.



Susie is possessive of what she sees and captures, and as she watches her younger sister Lindsey become a secondhand observer of the secrets once only known to Susie, Susie becomes slightly jealous.



The first time Susie “breaks through,” it is by accident—two days before Christmas, just weeks after her death. As she watches Jack clean his den, she reflects on the craft they had worked on together in that room: building ships in bottles. Jack called Susie his “first mate,” and let her hold the bottles as he finished the ship inside. Susie watches as her father begins to smash his precious creations, “christen[ing] the walls with the news of [Susie’s] death.” As she looks down on the wreckage of all the glass bottles, Susie appears, just for a second, casting her face in the shards of broken glass. Her father laughs loudly and deeply upon sensing Susie’s presence, and she feels his laughter up in her heaven. Jack and Susie both realize, from their separate worlds, that the line between the worlds of the living and the dead is a blurry one.

As Susie hones her powers of observation, she realizes that there is an unintended—and unpredictable—consequence or side effect to her behavior. She watches her father wrestle with his grief, and as she does, she wishes there was something she could do to ameliorate it. Her desire becomes so intense that she “breaks through” the boundary between their worlds and appears to him. Susie is a perpetual observer, but in this moment, it is she who is being seen in a moment of desperation. As Jack and Susie wrestle with the implications of what has just happened to both of them, the novel delves deeper into one of its central questions about the nature of the afterlife and the separation between the earthly world and the spirit realm.



CHAPTER 4

Susie looks back on the hours after she was murdered, during which Mr. Harvey made moves to cover up the crime. First, he collapsed the hole in the cornfield and returned home with a sack filled with Susie’s body parts. He placed the sack in the garage and went upstairs to wash up. Years later, Susie notes, the new owners of the house will “tsk” over the dark spot on the floor of the garage, believing it to be simply an unsightly oil stain.

Susie’s death will ripple through the lives of her friends, family, and neighbors—past and future—in unimaginable ways. By revealing that the stain where her blood once leaked through a canvas sack onto the garage floor will become an object of ire for the house’s future residence, she reveals that the impact of the dead on the living is often greater and longer-lasting than one might realize.



Susie says it would be some time before she understood what the reader has “undoubtedly already assumed”—that she was not Harvey’s first kill. Though Harvey knew to watch the weather for ideal precipitation conditions that would rob the police of evidence, he was nonetheless fairly sloppy in his removal of Susie’s body from the scene of the crime.

Harvey’s sloppiness with Susie’s body is uncharacteristic—he is a serial killer of women, and an expert in how to cover his tracks, judging by the fact that he has not yet been caught. This sloppiness seems to mark Susie’s murder as different from his other kills, and the effects of this difference will affect Mr. Harvey’s life in ways he can’t yet see or imagine.



At Susie’s Evensong in heaven, she watches all of her dogs lift their heads when they smell something interesting in the air, then decide to track the scent, and decide what to do when they come up against the source of the smell itself. She remarks that dogs don’t shut down their desire to know something just because the smell is bad or dangerous, and sees her own behavior—obsessively watching Mr. Harvey—in this light.

Susie knows that her constant observation will eventually take a toll on her. Watching her family and friends is one thing—it seems harmless, though of course it causes her frustration—but watching Mr. Harvey is a harmful and painful ordeal. Still, Susie can’t look away as she marvels at the injustice of her killer moving through the world as a free man.



Susie remembers watching Mr. Harvey take the sack full of her remains to a **sinkhole** on the edge of town, which locals use to dump old appliances. Susie herself has been to this sinkhole with her father to dump an old refrigerator, and she remembers Jack describing the sinkhole as the Earth's mouth. Mr. Harvey knocked on the door of the house belonging to the family who operated the sinkhole and charged people to dump goods. When a woman answered the door and jokingly asked if he had a dead body in the safe, Mr. Harvey quickly covered with a story about how the safe had belonged to his father, and no one could remember the combination. Susie notes that the family who ran the sinkhole would never suspect, even after reading countless newspaper articles about Susie's death, that she had been what was in that metal safe.

As Mr. Harvey walked back to his car, he put his hand in his pocket and felt Susie's silver charm bracelet. As he drove back into town, he stopped at an industrial park that was under construction and tossed her bracelet into what he believed would be a man-made pond. He kept one of the charms—a Pennsylvania keystone, engraved with Susie's initials.

Two days before Christmas—the day she appears to her father—Susie watches Mr. Harvey reading a book on the native people of Mali. As he reads about the cloth and ropes they use to build shelters, he decides that he wants to build something again—an experiment, like the hole. Harvey begins to gather materials, and sets to work in his backyard.

Jack, having just smashed all of his glass bottles and seen Susie's face in the shards, is out for a walk to clear his head. He spots Mr. Harvey, hard at work in his back yard, wearing just a t-shirt despite the cold. Jack approaches Harvey and asks what he's working on, and Harvey answers that the structure is something called a mat tent. Mr. Harvey expresses his condolences for Jack's loss, and Jack thanks him. Mr. Harvey wants for Jack to leave, but when he doesn't go of his own accord, Harvey, wanting to avoid seeming antisocial or suspicious, asks Jack if he wants to help. Susie watches from heaven as her father builds a tent with the man who killed her.

After an hour, the basic structure is done, and Mr. Harvey goes back into the house. Outside, it begins to snow. Jack takes the snow as a sign from Susie, and asks aloud what she's trying to tell him. In Heaven, Susie tries to make a dead geranium in the yard bloom, but nothing happens. Still, Susie notices that her father is looking at Mr. Harvey's house suspiciously, having begun to wonder.

The sinkhole is one of the novel's most poignant symbols. When Susie's remains are tossed in the sinkhole, she is swallowed by the Earth, and it seems as if any chance of her murder being solved is swallowed along with it. But by the simple act of continuing to obsessively watch not just life on Earth but specifically the life and actions of her cruel, despicable murderer, Susie is still being "swallowed" by the Earth, dragged and pulled down by her desire to see what is going on in her absence. Susie's body, now trapped in the sinkhole, will never be free or able to be used as a tool in her own liberation and Mr. Harvey's comeuppance; likewise, Susie's mind, trapped in the Inbetween, will never be free if she cannot let go of the Earth's downward pull.



Mr. Harvey disposes of the last piece of evidence tying him to Susie, but recklessly he keeps one tiny piece of her. Sebald shows how Harvey and Susie are darkly united in their desire to possess pieces of the people who are the objects of their obsession.



Harvey's desires manifest in bizarre ways. His obsession with creating structures that he can fill—literally or metaphorically or both—with his dark longing marks him as a person who cannot be contained, whose impulses are unpredictable, and whose methodical planning lends him an advantage over his many victims.



Jack's curiosity pulls him toward Mr. Harvey—as Susie explained earlier, the Salmons see Mr. Harvey as an odd but harmless fixture in the neighborhood, and even as a pleasant person. As Susie watches her father create something with her killer, she feels a deep sense of rage, injustice, and desire to somehow steer her father toward the answer to the mystery of her murder. Sebald uses dramatic irony to its deepest effect in this passage.



Though Jack has been helping Mr. Harvey as if he were just another neighbor, he now begins to sense that something is wrong. Fresh from seeing Susie's face in the broken bottles, Jack is on the lookout for signs and signals from her.



Mr. Harvey emerges from the house with a stack of sheets in his arms, meant to be draped over the structure. When Jack reaches for the sheets, his hand touches Harvey's, and Jack experiences an "electric shock." Jack accuses Harvey of knowing something. The two men hold each other's eyes, and then turn back to work. As Susie watches the two of them finish up, the snow falls harder, and Susie feels despondent.

Jack's fatherly intuition comes roaring to life as he physically connects with Mr. Harvey. The importance of seemingly casual physical touch—just as Susie touched Ruth earlier—is once again coded as extremely important. Susie wishes she could signal to her father exactly what is wrong, but instead she grows more and more frustrated as she watches her father continue to work alongside Harvey.



Mr. Harvey stands inside the tent, thinking of how the tribes he has been reading about use the structure as a wedding tent. Mr. Harvey imagines receiving a virgin bride. Jack moves toward Mr. Harvey, but Harvey holds his palm out, and instructs Jack to go home. Mr. Harvey cannot think of anything to say, and instead whispers only "Susie." Mr. Harvey points out that all of their neighbors have just seen the two of them building something together—they are "friends" now, and no one will believe Jack if he speaks out against Harvey. Jack insists that Harvey knows something, but Harvey says that he cannot help Jack. Harvey retreats further into the tent and pulls one of the sheets down behind him, closing himself off from Jack.

Harvey reveals that his inviting Jack to build the tent has turned into another ploy. Now, the whole neighborhood has seen Jack and Harvey collaborating on something, and Harvey adds another layer of protection to his already carefully safeguarded veneer of normalcy. Harvey then envelops himself in his strange creation, shutting Jack out and leaving him isolated in the knowledge that he has helped a man who, by his own admission, had something to do with his daughter's murder.



CHAPTER 5

When Jack returns from building the tent at Harvey's that day, Abigail is not home. Jack goes up to his den and begins making notes, strategizing about how to get Harvey to open up and admit his guilt. He also writes that he thinks Susie is watching him, which makes Susie deeply excited.

Abigail is not home for Jack to share his new theory with—and even if she were, it doesn't seem like he would. Instead, he isolates himself in his room, trying to work out what he has just felt and witnessed. Meanwhile, Susie is overjoyed that she does have some measure of influence on and contact with her loved ones back on Earth.



Lindsey returns home, and Jack is relieved to have some noise and company in the house. Susie momentarily resents her younger sister taking the attention away from her, but concedes that Lindsey needs their father, too. Though Susie begrudges Lindsey Jack's attention, she does respect her way of handling Susie's death—completely stoically, allowing herself to think of Susie only in private moments when she is totally alone in her room.

The complicated mechanics of Susie's love and desire are explored in this passage. She wants those she is paying attention to to pay the same amount of attention to her, and she is especially peeved when her parents' attention is drawn away, even when it's her own younger sister who they turn their focus to.



Jack knocks on Lindsey's door, and Lindsey shouts for him to go away. Jack begs Lindsey to let him in, and, after a moment, she does. Jack asks Lindsey how she's doing, and thinks, sickened, of how she walks past Mr. Harvey's house on the way to school every single day. Lindsey tells Jack that she wants to be alone, insisting that she is handling Susie's death in her own way. Jack tells Lindsey that he understands, although he doesn't, and goes downstairs to place a call to Len Fenerman.

The Salmon family is having trouble connecting with one another. As Lindsey hides away in her room, she isolates herself from those around her, while Jack, by keeping his knowledge about Harvey a secret from his loved ones, isolates himself in turn. In choosing to share the information he has obtained with Len Fenerman, Jack expresses his desire for justice and his confidence in his intuition—which Susie helped him, in part, to access and understand.



Jack knows that the window of time during which physical evidence connecting a killer to a murder is usually found is growing smaller each day, and so he calls Len to tell him that he believes Mr. Harvey knows something about Susie's death. He explains the bizarre, ritualistic building the tent, and contextualizes Mr. Harvey's loneliness, as well as the fact that everyone in the neighborhood thinks him odd. Len assures Jack he will check things out, and warns Jack not to mention his theory to anyone, or to approach Harvey again.

Len listens to Jack, but seems dubious at best about the things Jack is telling him. As much as Len wants answers, he also knows, given how difficult it has been to obtain the few scraps of evidence the investigation has been able to gather, that one man's hunch is not a cause for action—especially when that man is a grieving father searching for any scrap of truth and justice.



Abigail is downstairs, having arrived home while Jack was on the phone. She is hiding in the bathroom, eating macaroons. Buckley knocks on the door over and over, shouting "Momma." Abigail "despise[s]" the word. When she finally emerges from the bathroom, Buckley asks her where Susie is. Jack, overhearing this, distracts Buckley by asking him if he wants to go to the zoo that week. Jack hates to deceive and bribe his young son, but does not know how to tell him that his older sister is dead.

Abigail resents her role as a mother now. Susie glimpsed her detachment from her role as wife, mother, and homemaker in the photograph she took of her—now, in the wake of Susie's death, simple aspects of motherhood have become unbearable to Abigail. Buckley is a casualty of his parents' grief many times over—no one is honest with him, and Abigail can barely even stand to look at him, mired as she is in her own grief and uncertainty.



On his first trip to George Harvey's house in the days after Susie's murder, Len Fenerman finds nothing remarkable or suspicious about the man. He finds him to be a lonely person, whose wife had died shortly before he moved into the house they were supposed to share together, and who spends his days and makes his living building dollhouses for specialty toy stores. On his second visit to Harvey's home, in the wake of Jack's phone call, Fenerman asks Harvey about his recent conversation with Jack Salmon. Mr. Harvey replies that Jack recently helped him build a bridal tent—he tells Fenerman that he builds one each year for his deceased wife, Leah; normally, he builds them inside, but this year wanted to construct it outside. He explains that during the construction, he tried to express his condolences to Jack, but Jack must have taken things the wrong way.

Harvey is an expert at explaining away the moments in which his darker self has come through. Just as he carefully constructed the bridal tent and the underground structure in the cornfield, so he has also built a public image of himself that relays sensitivity, loneliness, and empathy to all those around him. This allows Harvey to control and manipulate otherwise fraught situations, molding everything around him to fit his desire to move through the world unseen for who he truly is.



Fenerman asks where Harvey usually builds the tent. Harvey answers the basement, and volunteers to show the detective the space. Fenerman insists that he has intruded enough. Harvey asks how the investigation is coming along, and Fenerman cryptically answers that the clues will be found when they want to be found. Mr. Harvey suggests that a neighborhood kid, Joe Ellis, who has harmed some animals in the neighborhood, might have been involved, but Fenerman tells Harvey that Jack Ellis had an alibi. Harvey tells Fenerman that he wishes there were more he could do to help with the case.

Later, Len calls Jack Salmon to tell him that though Harvey is odd, there is nothing incriminating or suspicious about him. When Jack asks what Harvey said about the tent, Len relays that Harvey built it in honor of his late wife, Leah. Jack counters that a neighbor had once told Abigail that Mr. Harvey's wife's name had been Sophie, but quickly begins to second-guess himself. Once he gets off the phone with Len, Jack opens his notebook to write some things down. He writes "Leah? Sophie?" and Susie, observing from above, says that though Jack was unaware of it, "he had begun a list of the dead."

On Christmas Day, Buckley plays happily with his toys, but the atmosphere in the rest of the house is somber. Buckley soon announces that there is a man outside—it is Samuel Heckler, one of Lindsey's school friends, who has come to visit her. She gets up to greet him, leaving the game of Monopoly she and Jack are playing together. While Samuel and Lindsey converse in the kitchen, Buckley asks Jack where Susie is. Jack knows he has to explain Susie's death to Buckley, and uses one of the Monopoly pieces—the shoe, which was always Susie's chosen piece—to explain that Susie is gone, and is never coming back. Buckley, Susie says, will keep the shoe on his dresser for years, until the day it disappears seemingly into thin air.

In the kitchen, Samuel gives Lindsey a present. She opens it and finds a necklace inside—it is half of a heart. Samuel reveals that he is wearing a necklace which bears the other half. Susie watches excitedly as her sister kisses Samuel, and feels "almost alive again."

Harvey continues to demonstrate to Len his façade of remorse, empathy, and good-naturedness. Harvey is hiding in plain sight, just as he always has, and just as he plans to continue doing by offering other solutions to Susie's murder and expressing his regret that he cannot do more to secure justice for poor Susie.



Though Mr. Harvey is a master puppeteer of those around him and a brilliant constructor of façades both physical and psychological, he has made a crucial error—he has misremembered his own cover story (or else has a habit of referring to his victims as his late wives, which would be an example of his monstrous commingling of desire, love, and family) and thus provided Jack with a small nugget of hope that he can still expose Harvey going forward. Susie's omniscience allows her to see what her family cannot. Jack is alone in his lack of knowledge, though here he has begun to find a glimmer of light, while Susie is alone in her completed knowledge.



The Salmon family has been keeping up a number of illusions for Buckley's sake. On Christmas day, however, the contrast between their youngest child's joy and their own grief becomes too much to bear, and they reveal to Buckley that his sister has died and is never coming back. Meanwhile, Lindsey finally allows someone in—she has been keeping herself removed from everything around her for so long, but on Christmas Day several boundaries are breached within the Salmon family.



As Susie watches this exchange between Samuel and her sister, she is excited and rejuvenated. Nevertheless, Susie realizes on some level that Lindsey, in embarking on a relationship with Samuel, is both distancing herself from Susie's memory and surpassing her, slowly but surely.



CHAPTER 6

Two weeks before Susie's death, she leaves the house later than usual one morning, and arrives late to school. To avoid being written a tardy slip by the hall monitor, Susie uses a secret way in that she heard about from Clarissa—the back door to the stage in the auditorium. Susie carefully creeps through the backstage area before pausing to set her book bag down and brush her hair. She hears a disembodied voice: "You are beautiful, Susie Salmon," it says, and she looks up to see Ray Singh sitting on top of some scaffolding just above her. Susie's heart "plunge[s] to the floor."

Ray invites Susie to climb up on the scaffolding with him—he is cutting class. Susie does not want to be a "bad kid," but she climbs up anyway. Susie reprimands Ray for skipping English class, but Ray insists that, while living in England as a child, he saw every Shakespeare play performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and has nothing left to learn. Ray and Susie discuss *Othello* to pass the time—Ray is foreign and smart, which Susie notes makes him a "Martian" in their suburb of Norristown. After the bell rings, signaling the end of class, Ray leans forward to kiss Susie, but they are interrupted by a noise. The two of them tuck their feet up onto the scaffolding and go silent.

Three people walk into the auditorium—two teachers and a student. The student is Ruth Connors, and she is being chastised for drawing a nude woman in art class. As a result, a student Xeroxed copies of the drawing and spread them around the school. Ruth argues that the students were instructed to draw people from wooden models, and that adding breasts is no different than adding facial features, but the teachers warn Ruth against making "unnecessary additions" in the future. The teachers leave the auditorium, and Susie and Ray overhear Ruth Connors crying.

Susie attempts to climb down quietly off the scaffold, but Ruth sees her, and calls her name. Susie has the hat her mother has knit for her in her hand, and Ruth tells her that the hat is stupid-looking. Susie agrees. Susie asks to see the drawing—she is impressed. Ruth shows Susie her notebook, which is full of even more sketches. Susie admires Ruth's talent, and finds herself both "frightened and excited" by Ruth's drawings of women's genitals. After this encounter, Susie sees Ruth as special rather than weird.

Watching Lindsey receive her first kiss triggers Susie's memories of the events that led up to her own. Love, sex, and romance are a big deal to Susie—she is, after all, a fourteen-year-old girl, and even despite her traumatic rape at the hands of Mr. Harvey, positive remembrances of her reciprocated crush on Ray Singh continue to bring her comfort and even joy in the afterlife.



Ray is smart, exotic, and, in this passage, revealed to have a rebellious streak—all of these things make him more attractive to Susie, even though they make him something of an outsider in the small enclave of Norristown. As Ray and Susie explore their attraction to one another, they are interrupted—as attraction so often is—by more pressing issues. Dramatic irony is at work in this passage, as the reader is aware that Susie only has two weeks left to live—and so two weeks left to fulfill her dreams of romance with Ray.



Ray and Susie's burgeoning feelings of sexual attraction are mirrored by Ruth's own solitary exploration of fascination with the body and its sensuality. Neither Ray nor Susie is close with Ruth, but they both take pity on her as they overhear her being unfairly berated for a simple act of self-expression and artistic experimentation.



As Susie and Ruth experience a moment of connection, their conversation is charged with feelings of excitement. Susie is impressed by Ruth's drawings and exhilarated by her devil-may-care attitude towards the administration and her earthy interest in the human body, whereas Ruth is grateful for the attention and the kindness.



Weeks later, after Susie's death and the ensuing police search through the cornfield, Ruth begins walking through the field mornings before school, and even during it—she has noticed that her teachers do not complain when she cuts class, as “her intelligence [has always] made her a problem” in the classroom. One morning, when Ruth finds a pair of gloves—which Lindsey had purchased for Susie for Christmas, and placed at the edge of the cornfield—she looks up to the sky and says, “Thank you.” Susie grows to love Ruth, and feels that though they are on opposite sides of the Inbetween, they were “born to keep each other company.”

Ray, who has been coming and going from school without lingering in the weeks since Susie's death, due to the rumors still swirling about him, has often seen Ruth Connors walking alone on the soccer fields. One morning, he waits for Ruth there, and offers her tea from his father's thermos when she arrives. Ray asks Ruth if she is going to Susie's memorial service, but Ruth says she hadn't even known there would be one. These morning meetings then become a “ritual” for the two of them—they bond over their shared feelings of loneliness, read poems, and discuss their dreams for their futures. Often, they talk about Susie. Ruth shows Ray the gloves she found where the soccer field meets the cornfield, and the two of them wonder if Susie is in heaven, or if there even is a heaven at all.

One afternoon, Jack Salmon knocks on the door of the Singh house. He is “struck dumb” when Ray's beautiful mother Ruana answers the door. She invites him in and offers him something to drink. He tells her that he is looking for Ray, and wants to speak with him; Ruana tells Jack that she surely must realize that Ray is still at school. Jack reveals that he wanted to come by and catch Ruana first, in order to assure her that he means Ray no harm. Ruana tells Jack that Ray “loved” Susie, and Jack tells Ruana that he is happy that a nice boy like Ray cared for her.

Jack asks Ruana if things have been hard for Ray, what with the policemen's investigation of him. Ruana, however, tells Jack that he cannot have any sympathy for Ray and her family—she does not want him to try to understand their lives. Ruana tells Jack curtly that Ray will be home in twenty minutes, and that after talking to Ray first, she will allow Jack to talk with him about Susie. As Jack and Ruana wait in relative silence, Jack thinks about his own family, and about Abigail. In the two months since Susie's death, Jack and Abigail have been moving in opposite directions from one another. If one stays in, one goes out, and they rarely sleep in the same room anymore.

Though Susie is dead and gone, her relationship with Ruth Connors continues to grow. The two of them are connected by Susie's touch as her soul departed from the Earth, and as Susie looks down on Ruth, Ruth wonders incessantly about Susie. Their desire for one another is reciprocal, and it seems to echo across the divide of the Inbetween.



Ray and Ruth begin a tentative friendship based almost entirely, at first, around their mutual obsession with Susie Salmon. They are both reckoning with Susie's loss in very different ways, for very different reasons—Ray had feelings for Susie while she lived, and Ruth developed a relationship with Susie at the moment she died. Their musings on the afterlife, and what Susie's place in it might be, speak to their own anxieties about death, as well as their fears of letting go of the girl who has absorbed so much of their attention.



Jack has some business with Ray, but first needs to go through the straightforward yet aloof Ruana Singh. Ruana is fiercely protective of Ray, and careful to keep her family protected against outsiders. She and her family, it is implied, have not really been welcomed in Norristown, and she is wary of Jack despite his apparent good intentions.



Jack seems to be experiencing some kind of attraction to Ruana. It is not explicitly a sexual attraction, though he does find her alluring; it is an attraction, perhaps, born of the knowledge that he and his wife have been moving away from one another over the last several weeks, and that the idea of striking up a new closeness with someone who is in many ways a blank slate gives Jack a hope for some much-needed connection.



Jack tells Ruana that he knows who killed Susie. She asks if he's informed the police, but he tells her that the police have found nothing to link Jack's suspicion to the crime. Ruana asks what Jack is doing on his own, and Jack says he's following up on leads of his own—he confesses that he hopes that by talking to Ray he'll be able to get some more answers. Ruana asks Jack what the man's name is, and Jack tells her—it is the first time he has admitted that he is suspicious of George Harvey to anyone but Len Fenerman.

Ruana silently gets up and goes over to the window. She announces that Ray is coming down the street, and that she will go out to the street to meet him, and tell him that Jack is waiting for him inside. Before putting on her coat and boots, she tells Jack that if it were her child who had died, she would do exactly what he is doing now. She adds that when she was sure, she would “find a quiet way, and kill [the murderer].”

Susie describes Len Fenerman, who is “different from the rest of the force.” He is small, quiet, and thoughtful, and above all, he is an optimist. He has told Abigail that he believes that in time, Susie's killer will do something else “uncontrollable,” and reveal himself. Fenerman has come over to the Salmons' while Jack is at the Singhs'. Abigail tells Fenerman where Jack is, and Fenerman agrees to wait for him until he gets home. Buckley and his friend Nate come into the room, and Abigail helps them color on white butcher paper. Len watches Abigail, and after a few minutes tells her that she reminds him of his late wife.

Susie reveals that Len Fenerman keeps a stack of photos in his wallet of the victims whose murders he has investigated. Once the case is solved, he writes the date of its resolution on the back. There is no date on Susie's, and none on his wife's. Jack comes in, and hugs Nate and Buckley. He greets Len Fenerman, and Abigail sends the boys upstairs, explaining that Jack and Detective Fenerman need to talk.

CHAPTER 7

As Nate and Buckley climb the stairs, Buckley asks Nate if he can see Susie at the top of the stairs—Buckley explains that Susie was gone for a while, but has now returned. Susie explains that she has never let herself yearn for Buckley, afraid that she might “break through” again and appear to him as she did to her father. Franny, however, asks Susie where she thinks imaginary friends come from.

Though Ruana and Jack have just met, there is something about her that he seems to trust implicitly. He shares his most secret theory with her despite knowing little about her or what she believes—whether this is due to his intuition about her or merely his desperation to share what he believes to be true with someone who might listen is unclear.



Ruana's fierceness frightens but enlivens Jack. As she tells him that she would do anything to obtain justice for her child, Jack believes that this is what he, too, must do in the face of an incompetent police force, a flawed system, and an unshakeable intuition.



Len Fenerman is an optimist—he believes in the good in people, and also believes that his work will have a good outcome and will matter. Despite his job, which requires him to deliver terrible news again and again—and in spite of his past, which seems steeped in pain and violence, just like Abigail's present—he believes in the good. In this way, he is a lot like Susie.



Susie is obsessed with the living, while Len is obsessed with the dead. Both of them are trying to learn about the realm opposite to the one they inhabit, and both are constantly foiled in their attempts to understand the intricacies of each other's worlds.



Susie has been trying to control herself ever since she broke through to Jack, but now as Buckley tells his friend Nate that he is able to see Susie, she wonders whether she has been failing to keep herself hidden. Franny, filling in more details of the book's mythology, reveals to Susie that what many children think of as imaginary friends are often departed strangers or loved ones “breaking through” to them.



Buckley tells Nate that Susie came in and kissed him on the cheek last night while he slept. Nate asks if Buckley told his mom, but Buckley insists it's a secret, and Susie secretly told him that she isn't ready to talk to their parents yet. Buckley takes Nate into Susie's room, and urges him to be quiet. The two boys lower themselves onto their bellies and wriggle beneath Susie's bed. Beneath the box spring, there is a hole full of secret things—candy, trinkets, and, wrapped in a handkerchief which Buckley pulls down from the hole, a bloody twig.

Susie explains that a year earlier, when he was three, Buckley swallowed the twig while playing in the backyard with Nate. Susie had been supposed to be watching the boys, but instead was painting her nails. Nate came to get her to tell her that Buckley was choking, and Susie immediately carried Buckley into her father's Mustang, fetched the keys from their hiding place, and sped all the way to the hospital. Grandma Lynn predicted that Susie would have a long, healthy life, since she had saved her brother's; "as usual," however, Susie points out that Grandma Lynn had been wrong.

Nate and Buckley pass the twig back and forth, and Buckley grows nauseous at the memory of his near-death experience. Buckley remembers how in the hospital, his parents' eyes had gone from worried to calm, whereas now, in the wake of Susie's disappearance, their eyes seem perpetually flat.

Up in heaven, Susie feels faint. She falls asleep in the gazebo, and when she wakes, there is a house in front of her that she has never seen. It reminds her of the Victorian Gothic house from the book *James and the Giant Peach*, and there is a widow's walk at the top of the house—a kind of balcony which encircles the top floor, enveloped by a railing. For a moment, Susie thinks she can see a long row of women lined up along the widow's walk, pointing at her, but a moment later, she realizes they are not women but crows. As Susie turns around to go back to her and Holly's house, the crows alight from the building and follow her. Susie wonders if Buckley has really seen her, or if he is just a "little boy telling beautiful lies."

Buckley, aware that his sister is gone but seemingly the least emotionally affected by her death, instead treats her absence—and her apparent visitations—as something magical and exciting. Even rooting through Susie's old things is an adventure, and the sadness of her loss does not seem to resonate within him yet—perhaps because he is so young, or perhaps because he is still able to communicate with her and so does not have to miss her.



Susie's rescue of Buckley seemed to foretell that, in the cosmic order of justice, her bravery and selflessness would be rewarded with a long and happy life. This is not the case, obviously, and the fact that Susie points this out seems to indicate her disbelief in the role of the heavens, the cosmos, or the supernatural—whatever the governing force of the realms of the living and the dead might be called—in meting out justice on Earth.



Even though Buckley himself does not appear to be experiencing a deep range of emotions in the wake of his sister's passing, this passage makes it clear that the way grief affects Jack and Abigail trickles down and influences Buckley's perspective and mood.



This eerie emergence of a Victorian Gothic house will have resonance later in the novel, but for now, it seems to portend Susie's having to reckon with the spirits of other women who are victims, just like her. As the women on the widow's walk dissolve into crows, Susie begins to wonder how much she is affecting life on Earth—and whether these spirits have appeared to her to warn her against her meddling ways.



CHAPTER 8

Susie describes Mr. Harvey's nightly dreams of buildings in the three months following her murder. He dreams of thatched-roof dwellings in Yugoslavia, wooden stave churches in Norway, and the Church of the Transfiguration from Vologda in Russia. Mr. Harvey's dream of the Church is his favorite, and it is the one he has on the night of Susie's murder. These are "still" dreams, and he experiences them for a long while, until another kind of dream—"not still" dreams of women and children—returns to him.

Susie can see the whole of Mr. Harvey's life, all the way back to his childhood. Mr. Harvey, as a child in his mother's arms, sorts colored glass with his father, a former jeweler. As a child, when others asked Mr. Harvey what his father did, he answered "a builder," leaving out the fact that his father built "shacks of broken glass and old wood."

When the "not still" dreams come back, Mr. Harvey turns to his father's old sketchbooks, trying to "steep himself" in pictures of other places and worlds. In trying to ward off the not still dreams, Harvey begins to dream of his mother the last time he had seen her. She was dressed in white, running through a field on the side of the road after a fight in the New Mexico desert—George Harvey's father had forced his mother out of the car, and she had run away without stopping. Harvey and his father had watched the road, and Mr. Harvey's father explained that his mother was gone and would not be coming back.

CHAPTER 9

Grandma Lynn arrives in Norristown the evening before Susie's memorial. Grandma Lynn always hires a limousine from the airport, and drinks champagne in the backseat while wearing a mink fur coat. She insisted on coming in for the memorial—which had been Principal Caden's idea—despite Abigail's protests that she didn't need to. Abigail finds her mother embarrassing and outlandish, and the two, when around each other, circle each other's emotions in a "sad, partnerless dance."

As Grandma Lynn pulls up to the house, she calls out to Jack, who is sitting on the porch, that she needs a stiff drink. Lindsey runs away into the house, and Grandma Lynn remarks that Lindsey hates her. Inside the house, Abigail takes Grandma Lynn's coat, and Grandma Lynn asks if Jack is still "muttering about that man having done it." Lynn warns Abigail that she and Jack will be sued if he keeps looking into Mr. Harvey. What the women cannot see—but what Susie can—is that Lindsey is sitting on the top of the stairs, listening to them.

Mr. Harvey's obsession with structure and architecture is a metaphor for the carefully-structured, meticulously-arranged façade of his life and personality. As Mr. Harvey's cycles of restlessness and desire spin on and on, his attempts to comfort himself with thoughts and dreams of the physical manifestation of his carefully-executed control mechanisms begin to break down and fail.



The details of Harvey's life that Susie is able to access through her omniscience are strange and dreamlike in quality. It is hard to know what is real and not real, and hard to understand what kind of world Harvey really comes from.



Mr. Harvey turns his conscious thoughts to calming things in an attempt to stave off his impulses toward violence. His dreams and subconscious take hold of him anyway, however, and reveal an incident from his past which, though communicated only vaguely, seems to hint at a major loss and an atmosphere of strife and even violence in his childhood.



Grandma Lynn's larger-than-life personality and carefully polished exterior set her up as a character who will, like Lindsey, not so easily betray the feelings she's experiencing inside. She and Abigail don't connect well, and never have—their fraught relationship has laid the groundwork for Abigail's insecurity as a mother and caretaker.



Grandma Lynn arrives at the Salmon house in a flurry, immediately demanding a drink and loudly asking questions about the very sensitive investigation taking place before she's even all the way in the house. Lynn doesn't care what anyone thinks of her, and she's clearly a woman who does not compromise any part of herself even in the face of tragedy or strife.



Without her coat, Grandma Lynn is thin and “starved down.” She used to constantly tell Susie and Lindsey that they, too, needed to starve themselves down, and offered them diet pills each time she visited. When Susie was alive, she notes, “everything [her] grandmother did was bad.” Now, though, Grandma Lynn’s presence brings life and light back into the house.

After dinner, Lynn joins Abigail at the sink, and tells her that she “needs some help.” Abigail thinks that her mother is offering to help with the dishes—instead, Lynn announces her intention to grab her “bag o’ magic” and give Abigail a makeover. Abigail is reluctant, but Lindsey asks if Lynn will teach her about makeup, and then Abigail consents to be a model. As Grandma Lynn curls Abigail and Lindsey’s eyelashes, she intuits that Lindsey has a boyfriend. Lindsey bashfully denies it, but the truth is obvious. Grandma Lynn gets drunk on 7 and 7s, and does Lindsey’s makeup garishly.

The morning of Susie’s memorial, Lindsey sneaks into Susie’s room to steal one of her dresses to wear. She was careful to sleep on her back so that her makeover would remain intact overnight. Susie feels slightly jealous watching her sister open the double doors to her own still-messy closet and survey everything inside. Lindsey wants to look nice for Samuel, and as she looks through her sister’s closet, she realizes “with guilt and glee” that everything that once belonged to Susie now belongs to her.

Grandma Lynn appears in the doorway and asks Lindsey to zip up her dress. After Lindsey helps her grandmother, she confesses that she is already beginning to forget what parts of her sister looks like. Distraught, she begins to cry, and worries that she won’t look pretty for the memorial. Grandma Lynn helps Lindsey pick out one of Susie’s dresses. Lindsey asks what man Lynn and Abigail had been talking about the day before, but Lynn deflects, pulling a dark blue mini-dress out of Susie’s closet. Jack calls from downstairs that it will be time to leave in ten minutes. Grandma Lynn helps Lindsey to get ready in a hurry, touching up her makeup and picking out a pair of shoes. When the two of them get downstairs and into the car, Lindsey realizes that Lynn does not have any makeup on her own face.

Samuel is standing by the church door, dressed in all black. His older brother Hal stands beside him. Grandma Lynn introduces herself to Samuel as “the evil grandma,” and then the Salmons, together with the Hecklers, head into the church. Len Fenerman is inside, and though Jack asks him to come sit with their family, Len implies that he wants to stand by the door and carefully observe who comes to the funeral.

Grandma Lynn, obsessed with the physical and with making oneself seem beautiful and desirable, is very different from the rest of her family. Where her visits used to cause turmoil and arguments, now her levity and focus not on emotion but on presentation is a much-welcome relief, as the Salmons have begun to become lost in their own grief.



Abigail and Lindsey have been so focused on keeping themselves hidden and combing through the unstoppable waves of grief that both of them have forgotten about small, simple pleasures and the value of self-care. Lynn helps them to let loose for a little while, and feel good about themselves—something they haven’t done since Susie’s disappearance.



As Lindsey prepares to officially say goodbye to her sister, she sits with the uneasy intersection of loss and freedom. Lindsey is the oldest now, and as such she bears a responsibility to honor her sister’s memory but also to carve a new path for herself in the wake of her sister’s loss.



Though it’s implied that Lynn and Lindsey have had a strained relationship in the past, in this passage, Sebald shows them connecting over their grief. Lynn, who has been portrayed as a vain and self-centered woman up to this point, gives up the thing that matters most to her—her looks—in order to make sure that her distraught granddaughter feels and looks pretty.



Though Len Fenerman, too, is in mourning for Susie’s life, his place is at the door. It is his job to surveil the memorial for any suspicious persons or activities, in case Susie’s killer, hungry for a glimpse of what he has wrought or testing the limits of his unknowability, comes to the service.



That morning, Jack woke up with a hangover. Though the days since Susie's death have all been miserable, the idea of a day devoted entirely to mourning her—not sidestepping her death, or attempting to get through day-to-day life without thinking of her—is something of a relief.

Ruth arrives with her father and begins making small talk with Mr. and Mrs. Dewitt. Mrs. Dewitt, the English teacher, recently had Ruth turn in a poem all about Susie, and she plans to take it to the guidance counselor on Monday. Ruth notices Lindsey, in makeup, holding hands with Samuel, and worries that Lindsey is “subjugating” herself to traditional femininity.

Clarissa and Brian Nelson are there, and Clarissa greets the Salmons solemnly. Abigail cannot stop staring at Clarissa as if in a trance—she cannot help but focus on the fact that Clarissa is alive while her own daughter is dead. Clarissa notices that Lindsey is wearing a dress she had once lent to Susie, but she knows that she can never ask for it back now.

Ray Singh does not attend Susie's memorial. He says goodbye to Susie in his own way, by staring at a photograph that Susie had given to him while she still lived. As he looks at the photo, he comes to understand that it does not contain Susie—she is in the air around him, in his cold mornings with Ruth, and in the quiet time he spends alone. He places Susie's photograph inside a large volume of Indian poetry from his mother's bookshelf, symbolically letting her go.

At the service, everyone says nice things about Susie—Principal Caden, Mrs. Dewitt, and the Reverend Strick all speak—but Jack and Abigail sit numbly through the memorial. Lindsey, too, does not react to Samuel's attempts to squeeze her hand and reassure her. At the end of the service, as the family stands for the final hymn, Grandma Lynn leans over to Lindsey and whispers to her, telling her to look toward the door. Standing behind Len Fenerman, who is inside the doorway and singing along, is George Harvey. Lindsey locks eyes with him and immediately faints on the spot. In the ensuing commotion, George Harvey slips away unnoticed.

Though today is going to be hard, as it is an official goodbye to Susie, it is actually easier for Jack to get through a day dedicated to mourning his daughter's loss than it is to get through a day in which it is shoved to the sidelines or brushed under the rug. This passage demonstrates Jack's reluctance to simply try to move on.



This passage represents the first instance of Ruth's gaze on Earth echoing Susie's gaze in heaven. Though Susie was happy for Lindsey for getting together with Samuel, there is a hint of jealousy underneath. Ruth, too, feels concern and jealousy when she sees Lindsey and Samuel together.



In this passage, Clarissa's very existence represents a great injustice to the Salmons. She is alive, while their own child is dead. As the novel progresses, it will continue to play with this sense of injustice that Clarissa inspires in Jack and Abigail both.



Ray Singh has been obsessed with Susie since well before her death, and in this passage, he attempts to ward off his lingering feelings of pain, regret, sorrow, and longing for the girl he loved and lost.



The Salmon family, overwhelmed by grief, sit woodenly through their community's fond remembrances of and tearful goodbyes to Susie. Lynn and Lindsey, however, are shocked from their numbness when they witness a strange presence hovering on the outskirts of the memorial. Lindsey is then overcome by the realization that Harvey is her sister's killer—guided by the same kind of intuition or supernatural influence that made Jack so sure of this fact as well.



CHAPTER 10

The statewide Gifted Symposium takes place each summer, and invites gifted kids from seventh to ninth grade to get together for a four-week retreat. Samuel attends the retreat, though he is less of a brain and more artistic—his hero is his brother Hal, who recently dropped out of high school and now runs a bike shop out near the **sinkhole**. Ruth Connors is invited to the symposium as well, and as she pulls up in her father's car, she spots Lindsey right away. On her nametag, instead of "Salmon," Lindsey has filled her last name in with a simple fish symbol, hoping that the new kids she'll meet at the symposium won't immediately recognize her as the sister of the dead girl. She and Samuel have been quietly dating since Christmas, but are demure about their relationship.

The following morning, in the dining hall, Ruth and Lindsey run into one another at breakfast. Ruth knowingly asks Lindsey what the fish on her nametag stands for, and then introduces herself. Lindsey introduces herself as just "Lindsey," and Ruth asks Lindsey if her last name is Salmon. Lindsey replies, "please don't," and Ruth, who had been purposefully needling Lindsey, is suddenly filled with the painful understanding of what it must be like to have someone look at you and not be able to imagine anything other than "a girl covered in blood."

As the weeks go on, Lindsey and Samuel find themselves—unchaperoned and alone in the heat of summer—consumed by lust for one another. They often sneak away from the group to kiss in the woods. They have not yet had sex—Samuel wants for everything to be perfect, but Lindsey simply wants to get it over with. Meanwhile, the lonely Ruth writes obsessively in her journal about Lindsey and Samuel's relationship. Susie notes that Ruth writes everything down—her experience of having Susie's soul pass by her, her subsequent dreams about Susie, the imagined interactions she wishes the two of them could have. Ruth struggles to figure out and understand her own sexuality and her desire for women—she writes in her journal that it is not so much that she wants to have sex with other women as that she wants to "disappear inside of them forever [and] hide."

As Ruth, Samuel, and Lindsey all converge at the Gifted Symposium, they are all entering a new environment—the first place they have all been in a long time that does not exist in the shadow of Susie's death. Lindsey takes full advantage of this distance, attempting to hide who she is and what has happened to her and her family and focus only on herself, her relationship, and being a normal teenage girl for once.



Ruth knows Lindsey, but Lindsey barely knows Ruth, and is trying her best to distance herself from anything and anyone from Norristown apart from Samuel. Lindsey's pitiful "please don't" mirrors the desperate cries Susie made to Mr. Harvey while she was being raped, a device Sebald seems to be using to underscore the fact that Lindsey is an unwilling participant in the grief of her family and others around her—and thus indirectly another victim of Harvey's crime.



At the Gifted Symposium, Lindsey, Samuel, and Ruth find themselves alone and largely unsupervised. While Lindsey and Samuel explore their sexuality together and flirt with how far they are prepared to go, Ruth explores her own sexuality in isolation. Her obsession with women is both sexual and not-sexual. She wants to know how other women think, feel, and live, but this obsessive, compulsive need to spend time "inside" of other women's lives reads as sexual and thus serves to confuse Ruth and those around her.



The last week of the symposium always concludes in a camp-wide competition to create a final project. Though the competition has not yet been announced, the kids all know that it will be a contest to build a superior mouse trap. Samuel begins preparing early, collecting orthodontic rubber bands from kids with braces for his design, while Lindsey nicks tinfoil from the camp cook for hers. Lindsey and Samuel talk together about how they don't want to actually have to kill the mice. Samuel tells Lindsey that one of his friends, Artie, is building small coffins for the mice—Artie supposedly had a crush on Susie, and has asked Samuel a lot of questions about Lindsey, and how she's holding up.

Susie, meanwhile, has spent less of her time in heaven watching from the gazebo, as she can see Earth when she walks through the fields of her heaven. If she walks too far, the landscape changes, and she realizes that she has left the boundaries of her heaven when a throbbing headache descends upon her. As the months have gone by, Susie has begun to wonder what the word "heaven" truly means—she wants to know where her grandparents are, and how she can reunite with them. Franny tells her that she can have that kind of heaven if she wants—she will, however, have to stop asking why she was killed, and cease her investigation of "the vacuum left by [her] loss." Only in giving up Earth can Susie be free. Susie thinks that this proposition seems impossible.

On one of the last nights of camp, Ruth creeps into Lindsey's dorm. She tells Lindsey that she has just had a dream about Susie, and apologizes for the "incident" in the dining hall. Ruth crawls into Lindsey's bed and tells her about the dream—she was inside the earth, and could feel Susie walking over her in the cornfield. As she called for Susie, her mouth filled with dirt. Lindsey confesses that she never dreams about her sister. Ruth asks Lindsey if she is in love with Samuel, and Lindsey answers that she is; Ruth asks Lindsey if she misses Susie, and Lindsey answers: "More than anyone will ever know."

At the last minute, the theme of the competition changes. The kids at the symposium consider the fliers that have sprung up overnight around the camp: "CAN YOU GET AWAY WITH CRIME? HOW TO COMMIT THE PERFECT MURDER." As Lindsey arrives at breakfast, she is oblivious to the fliers, and joins the food line. Artie comes up to her and introduces himself, then gently announces that they have changed the nature of the competition: it is now about how to commit the perfect murder.

Even at the Gifted Symposium, which was at first a welcome respite from the atmosphere of crushing grief and overfamiliarity in Norristown, Lindsey cannot escape death—it is everywhere. As her time at the symposium goes on she finds it is harder and harder to shake her true identity, and the cracks in her armor begin to reveal themselves as camp draws to a close.



As Lindsey attempts to escape the world of her grief, Susie leans more heavily on hers. She is so consumed by her own sense of injustice and longing for life back on Earth that she cannot even imagine coming to a place of peace and acceptance. The struggle Susie endures to "move on" from her own death mirrors the struggle her family is having—Susie and her family both want to move on and also fear what moving on means.



Ruth and Lindsey share this tender moment of connection despite having been at odds all summer. While Lindsey is trying to move away from her grief and obsession with Susie, Ruth is leaning into hers—this creates a tension between them, but in this moment, Lindsey reveals that despite all her efforts to appear tough and removed, she still longs for Susie deeply—just like Ruth does.



As the competition changes to one of an even darker, more death-centric nature, it becomes clear to Lindsey that she will never be able to escape the constant reminders of her sister's death that infiltrate her daily life.



Word spreads quickly through the symposium: Lindsey's sister is Susie Salmon, the dead girl. Children chatter about how being stabbed to death is "cool," and consider Susie Salmon "famous." Nervously, children throughout the camp list people they know who have died, but none know anyone other than Susie who was murdered.

Lindsey and Samuel, having left the breakfast tent, huddle together under a rowboat down by the lake. Lindsey tells Samuel that she's okay; she knows that Artie was just trying to help her. As they lie together under the boat, Samuel becomes aroused, and Lindsey announces that she is ready to have sex. Susie watches, with admiration and jealousy, as Lindsey loses her virginity. In the walls of her own sex, Susie says, there is only "horror and blood;" in the walls of her sister's, there are "windows." Susie remarks that "How to Commit the Perfect Murder" is a frequently-played game in heaven. Susie always chooses an icicle, because the murder weapon melts away.

CHAPTER 11

One morning, while Lindsey is still away at the symposium, Jack Salmon wakes up early. He checks on Buckley, pulls on his jogging outfit, and takes Holiday out for a walk—an excuse to pass by Mr. Harvey's house. It is late summer, and still there has been no movement on Susie's case. Jack cannot stop Ruana's words from echoing in his head, though he has not shared them with Abigail—he is afraid she might say something about Jack's dark desire to Len Fenerman. Jack has noticed that Abigail is leaning more heavily on the police lately; she will not hear any of Jack's own theories, and won't even trust her own instincts. Though Jack knows on some level that Harvey is responsible, he vows to wait to move on him until he has "incontrovertible proof."

From heaven, Susie remarks on how her house and Mr. Harvey's house have the exact same layout. But whereas Susie's house is warm and full, Harvey's is cold and empty. He has few possessions, and spends most of his time in the kitchen building dollhouses—or, when his "lust" sets in, sketching blueprints for holes and tents. Harvey has noticed, over the last few months, that occasionally a police car driving through the neighborhood will slow in front of his house. Harvey has been careful not to alter any of his patterns, and sets alarms which remind him to open the blinds and close them, or turn lights off and on.

Lindsey cannot hide from the truth of who she is. In being so close to her sister's death she has become a proxy for other people's anxieties about death—and this is a role she will, she fears, have to play for the rest of her life.



As Susie watches Lindsey and Samuel lose their virginities and have a positive, consensual sexual experience, she is excited but also deeply jealous. Susie dreamed of sex and romance while she was alive, but was cruelly and violently forced to offer up her own body in fulfilment of one man's dark will. Lindsey, however, gets to choose to have sex with the person she loves, and the experience opens up new things for her, whereas Susie's violent and torturous experience with sex was the last thing she ever knew.



Jack's obsession with Mr. Harvey has only grown. His desire to bring him to justice is sharper than ever, bolstered by Ruana's words of encouragement and support of his fatherly intuition. Jack is frustrated by his inability to obtain proof (and the legal obstacles preventing him from doing more), and dreams of the day he will finally have the evidence he needs to help everyone else understand what he already knows, deep down, to be true.



Mirroring is a common motif throughout the novel, and in this passage, Susie demonstrates how Mr. Harvey's home is a mirror of her own—though what he does in his house is far darker and more twisted than anything that happens in the Salmon family home.



Harvey keeps things to count, as counting reassures him. He has several small things, kept from each of his victims—charms, wedding rings, perfume bottles, the heel of a shoe. He has forgotten the names of some of his victims, but Susie knows them all.

Harvey often falls asleep in the basement—he can keep odd hours in there, as no light gets out and alerts the neighbors to his uncommon patterns. As Susie follows Mr. Harvey down to the basement each night, she learns something terrible: Harvey is responsible for killing a spate of neighborhood animals, the deaths of which had previously been attributed to a neighborhood bad-boy, Joe Ellis. Harvey would kill the animals, then spread a chemical on their corpses which would dissolve their flesh and leave only bones. As Susie watches Harvey sit in the basement counting the animals’ bones, she realizes that he has killed animals in order to “take lesser lives [and] keep from killing a child.”

All summer, Jack has been calling the police repeatedly to report small things about Harvey, thus irritating the police. In early August, Len stops by the Salmon house to set some boundaries. Lindsey lets Len in—she has just returned from camp. Jack greets Len, and Buckley—who has begun to idolize Len—rushes to say hello as well. Jack shoos Lindsey and Buckley from the room and asks Len if he has any news. Len tells Jack that he needs to stop making calls about Harvey—there is no evidence to connect him to Susie’s death. Lindsey hovers in the doorway, listening to everything. Len insists that though odd, Harvey is not a killer. Lindsey steps into the room, and berates Len for “giving up.” Abigail comes downstairs, and as she sees Len, Jack notices something new, strange, and alive in her eyes.

That night, Jack writes in his notebook that “Abigail thinks Len Fenerman is right about Harvey.” Alone in his study, he considers how Abigail has shied away from him more and more recently, but seemed to “bloom” in Len’s presence. As Jack is about to turn out the light and head to bed, he sees something out the window—a beam of light, moving across the lawns and toward the junior high. Assuming that the flashlight beam belongs to George Harvey, Jack quickly gets dressed and heads downstairs, taking a baseball bat from the hall closet and heading out the door. Ruana’s words—*find a quiet way*—echo in his ears.

This passage shows Harvey’s need to keep mementos and “trophies” from each of his kills, despite his disregard for the names or identities of his many victims.



Susie acknowledges that Harvey has done yet another horrible thing—killed neighborhood animals and blamed it on a defenseless child—but has done it in the name of quenching his darker desire to take the lives of women and children. This passage raises the question of whether Mr. Harvey has some kind of a conscience and tries at least somewhat to restrain his violence, or whether he simply finds it easier and less risky to kill animals and thus advantageous to keeping the façade of his normalcy intact.



In this passage, Sebald demonstrates how Len’s presence has begun to deeply affect life in the Salmon household. Lindsey is contemptuous of him, and believes him to be inefficient and arrogant. Buckley idolizes him. Jack is desperate for his attention, and Abigail seems to be infatuated with him. Len is the last hope that any of the Salmons have in obtaining justice for Susie, but he cannot give them the easy answers that they want, and he sees their brokenness and desperation very clearly.



As Jack realizes that his marriage is being threatened by more than just the chasm of grief that has opened between him and Abigail, he is distracted once again by his obsession with bringing Harvey to justice. Jack does not stop to realize that his obsession has begun to derail his life, and that he is perhaps not faultless in Abigail’s having drifted away from him in recent months.



Jack reaches the soccer field, then the cornfield, following the beam until it goes dark. Jack makes his presence known, saying aloud “I know you’re here” into the darkness. Jack stalks through the corn, following the sound of whimpering. Susie, from above, can see that it is only Clarissa in the field—now crouching and frightened, only a child despite her blue eyeshadow and platform boots. Clarissa says Brian’s name aloud, and Jack loosens his grip on the bat.

Brian Nelson moves through the cornfield with a flashlight in hand, and suddenly hears “cries for help.” In a moment of delusion, Jack rushes up against Clarissa, believing her to be Susie. He begins calling Susie’s name aloud. Brian, overhearing Jack’s shouts, runs toward the noise. Brian pulls Jack off of Clarissa and begins to beat him. Susie turns away as her father is beaten again and again—she can do nothing, trapped as she is in her “perfect world,” just like the penguin in the **snow globe**. Quietly, she longs for her father to “go away and leave [her] be.”

CHAPTER 12

Early that morning, the sleeping Salmon family is awakened by police sirens down the street. Abigail instructs Lindsey to go wake Jack, who she assumes has fallen asleep in his study, but Lindsey finds that her father is missing. Abigail knows suddenly that Jack has gone off after Harvey and gotten himself into trouble, and speaks derisively of his foolishness. Lindsey insists they go out and find him, but Abigail refuses to let her. Soon, a call comes in, alerting Abigail that Jack has been beaten with his own baseball bat and is in the hospital, having surgery on his knee. Abigail leaves Lindsey and Buckley alone in the house to go to her husband’s side.

Lindsey calls Buckley’s friend’s Nate’s mother, who comes to take Buckley. She then calls Samuel, who sends his brother Hal to pick Lindsey up on his motorcycle and bring her to the hospital. When Lindsey walks into Jack’s room at the hospital, Abigail is not there. Lindsey, crying, comforts her sleeping father, and sings him a song that he used to sing to her and Susie at bedtime.

Jack, in the cornfield, feels confident that he has finally trapped George Harvey. He is fully prepared to take matters into his own hands. He realizes, however—too late—that his obsession has once again led him into trouble. As Jack struggles to understand what is going on and who he has encountered in the field, he realizes that he has made a mistake.



Rather than understanding what is happening, Jack is seized by the sudden delusion that he has found Susie in the cornfield. Brian Nelson believes that Jack is attacking Clarissa, and, honestly, he is not far off-base—Jack’s obsession seems to have driven him temporarily mad. Susie can hardly stand to watch her father’s embarrassment, and instead turns away, wishing for the first time that he would just forget her.



Abigail sees that her husband is struggling, and knows as soon as she realizes he is not in the house that he is in trouble—perhaps even danger. Rather than helping him, however, or allowing anyone else who cares about him to help him, she chooses to isolate herself in the house. It is a very dark and obsessive spiral her husband has fallen into, and by allowing him to fall deeper into it, Abigail is, in her own way, punishing him.



Lindsey is becoming more and more understanding of what her father is going through, and in the wake of this incident it is revealed that her allegiance lies with him rather than with the distant, aloof, and angry Abigail.



Susie backtracks in time to the moment Abigail got to the hospital. Upon arrival, Abigail finds her husband still in surgery, and immediately puts a call through to the police, requesting Len Fenerman join her at the hospital. Abigail paces near the nurse's station, wearing only a thin nightgown beneath her raincoat. As Len comes down the hallway, Abigail feels a rush of relief. He approaches her, and they touch hands, then retreat to the visitors' area to talk. Abigail explains what has happened—Jack followed Clarissa, thinking she was George Harvey. As Abigail and Len enter the visitors' area, she spots Hal Heckler sitting there, and recognizes him as Samuel's brother. Though Len wants to sit down, Abigail insists they go outside for a cigarette.

Out on a small concrete balcony, Len and Abigail smoke together. Abigail asks Len how his wife died, and he tells her that she committed suicide. As Susie watches her mother and Len converse, she sees her as the version of her mother from the **photograph**—the version of her mother who had never had Susie, Lindsey, and Buckley. Abigail asks Len why his wife killed herself, and he tells her that though he does not know, it is the question that most often runs through his brain when he is not thinking of her daughter's murder. Abigail asks him to say the words again—no one, she says, ever says the word murder, and she is grateful for Len's honest words. Abigail then takes Len's face in her hands and asks him to say the words again. He does, and then Abigail leans over and kisses him on the mouth.

Susie remembers, when she was alive, seeing the effect Abigail had on men. She recalls that on Thursdays, her father would come home early, and he and Abigail would have "Mommy and Daddy time:" on Thursday afternoons, Lindsey and Susie were told to stay quiet on the opposite side of the house. Susie recalls how one afternoon, when tucking her in for a nap before Mommy and Daddy time, her mother told her the story of Persephone and Demeter. Later, Susie was woken from her nap by the muffled sounds of her parents' lovemaking, but the gentle sounds of their laughter and moaning "usher[ed] her back under into sleep."

Susie remembers how, when her mother realized that she was pregnant with Buckley, she sealed the more mysterious parts of herself off. Susie realizes, watching her mother and Len embrace one another, that her mother has been "bottled up for years behind that wall," and the needy part of her has grown, rather than shrunk. Len pulls away from Abigail, and asks her to think of her husband and consider what she's doing, but Abigail only takes Len's hand and places it on her breast. Susie realizes that Abigail needs Len "to drive the dead daughter out." As Abigail and Len resume kissing, Susie watches her mother "h[o]ld o to him as if on the other side of his kiss there could be a new life."

Since her daughter's murder, Abigail has been unable to find answers or comfort in the words, actions, or arms of her husband. They are both too consumed by grief to be any good to one another, but rather than attempting to bridge the gap widening between them, they remain isolated in their pain. At the same time, Len has been a source of answers and reassurance—even if all he has to relay is bad news and falsely comforting platitudes. It makes sense that in a time of need, Len is now the first person Abigail seeks out.



Len and Abigail are both aloof figures, torn apart by grief. Abigail knows that because her child has died, she will never escape the pitying gaze of anyone who learns what has happened to her, but with Len, they share the bond of being on equal footing in this way. This is perhaps a large part of Abigail's attraction to him, and the reason why she throws caution to the wind and begins an affair with him. She wants to be seen as something other than just a bereaved mother—her grief and Len's cancel each other's out, in a way, leaving room for the people they once were, and the people they long to be.



Most parents go to great lengths to hide the sexual aspect of their relationship from their children. Abigail did this to a certain extent, but nevertheless Susie and Lindsey were on some level aware of their parents' passion and desire for one another—and the fact that this desire was prioritized and given space rather than shoved away.



Susie's mother, who had struggled so hard to cling to the parts of herself that were not solely based in motherhood, was surprised by a third pregnancy and became somewhat resigned to the idea that she would never be able to truly escape her role as a mother. This resentful part of Abigail has festered and grown, and now, in a moment of grief, need, anger, and confusion, it spills over in a dangerous way.



Hal Heckler, still in the visitor's area, watches Abigail and Len—hair and clothes mussed—walk back down the hall toward Jack's room. Farther down the hall, Hal stops Abigail just before she goes into Jack's room, letting her know that Lindsey is in there. He lets her know that he brought Lindsey over, and that Buckley is safe with a neighbor. Hal asks Abigail if she's okay, and she says that she is, though she still feels as if she is "climbing back to the surface" after her encounter with Len. Abigail enters the room, and sees Lindsey asleep in a chair next to Jack's bed. Susie watches from heaven, resolving not to "divide [her] family in [her] heart," though they are clearly divided on earth.

Susie watches the air above the hospital, which is "thick" with souls departing earth. Holly and Susie think that these deaths seem "choreographed from far away," and wonder if there is a heaven even larger and more all-encompassing than theirs. Franny joins them, and confesses that watching souls clamor to depart the Earth is her "secret pleasure." The souls of the dead are like snowflakes, she says: "none of them the same and yet each one, from where we stand, exactly like the one before."

CHAPTER 13

In the fall of 1974, when Lindsey returns to junior high, she is not just the sister of the dead girl, but the daughter of a "crackpot"—news of Jack's mishap in the field has spread throughout the neighborhood. Lindsey knows that Brian and Clarissa—who have gone onto Fairfax high school—are embellishing the story of what happened to them that night. Ray and Ruth, also now in high school, watch as Brian "holds court" with the other students; Susie, looking down, knows that Clarissa and Brian at last have slept together. Everyone Susie knew on earth is, "however haphazardly," growing up.

By October, Jack is just beginning to get up and around. Doctors have told him that his right knee will always be stiff from now on. Buckley has many questions about Jack's fake knee, and Jack spins stories about it being made from moonstone and coming from outer space. Buckley shares this information excitedly with Abigail, but Abigail is detached and removed. She finds herself more and more often daydreaming of Len as a way to cope with the grief and monotony of her life.

Hal Heckler seems to recognize what is going on between Abigail and Len. Rather than cast judgment or call Abigail out, he attempts to help her, actually, by letting her know what's waiting for her in the hospital room and giving her another extra moment to return to herself after the heat and distraction of her encounter with Len. Susie, like Hal, decides not to cast judgment on any of the people she loves—she knows that they are all just human, and are all doing their best in a terrible situation.



The world of the dead and the world of the living are again revealed to be closer and more frequently overlapped than one might ordinarily believe. Susie, Franny, and Holly marvel at the unique yet similar natures of all human souls.



Things are getting harder and harder for Lindsey, as she has to navigate and shoulder more and more of her family's private dramas in the very unforgiving and public world of junior high. As Susie looks down on the start of a new school year, she understands that time is going on—and people are growing up—without her, and that she will never get the chance to join them as they do so.



In this passage, Sebald once again shows the ways Jack and Abigail attempt to shield Buckley from the difficult and unpleasant dramas unfolding within their family. As Abigail becomes more and more detached, Jack fills in the role of having to explain things to Buckley and shepherd him in the right direction.



As November speeds by and the first anniversary of Susie's death steadily approaches, Jack—who has been on an extended leave from work—prepares to return to the office. He has not spoken George Harvey's name aloud in months, and has only written of him in his notebook, as he attempts to hone in on a strategy to pursue him and nab him once and for all. Jack desperately wants to get back to work, back to normalcy—and away from Abigail, who has only retreated further into herself as the months have gone on.

One afternoon shortly before Thanksgiving, Jack finds Lindsey attempting to shave her legs for the first time. Jack helps her, but realizes as he does that it should be Abigail teaching her daughter how to shave. As Jack observes Lindsey, helping her to avoid nicks, he asks if she wants to talk about Susie—they haven't spoken about her in a while. Lindsey retorts that there's no need to talk about Susie when she's "everywhere." Lindsey asks Jack if he is still convinced that Mr. Harvey had something to do with Susie's murder, and he tells her though that there is "no doubt in [his] mind," the police need a clear link to Susie in order to arrest him. Lindsey asks Jack if getting into Harvey's house would help. The two of them exchange a meaningful glance before Jack tells Lindsey to focus on shaving. Lindsey, though, knows what she has just been told.

Grandma Lynn arrives on the Monday before Thanksgiving, and immediately intuits that something is wrong with her daughter. That night, Lynn joins Abigail in the kitchen to help her dry the dishes. After a few minutes of silence, Lynn tells Abigail that the two of them need to take a walk—Lynn knows when something is going on. Abigail consents to go outside with her mother. Lynn explains that Abigail's father had had a long-term affair, which neither of them ever mentioned to each other over the years. Abigail asks her mother why she's bringing this up now, and Lynn looks at her daughter knowingly.

Abigail tells her mother that she has always felt very alone, and that now, in the wake of Susie's murder, she cannot express her feelings to anyone. She confesses to Lynn that she feels "it's all over now," and though Lynn does not know exactly what she means by "it," she decides not to press the issue any further. As the women turn and walk back toward home, Abigail tells Lynn that she wants to walk by George Harvey's house.

Jack seems to be healing and moving on, or at least finding a way to shove down the obsessions and compulsions that marked the majority of the first year of his life without Susie. He still nurses his private theories, however, knowing that there is no one else he can share them with safely.



Sebald demonstrates how Jack has become the major caretaker of his children, and the primary witness to the major milestones of their adolescence. He is the one who teaches and guides them, now, and this gives him a closeness to them and also an authority that they long to heed. Lindsey knows that her father has not relinquished his obsession with Harvey, but rather than berate him for it, she wants to learn more about his beliefs and help him to exonerate his damaged image—and to avenge their beloved Susie's murder, since ever since the funeral Lindsey seems to believe that Harvey is the murderer as well.



Grandma Lynn's presence once again breathes fresh life into the Salmon household and exposes the slights, secrets, and strange ways in which they have adjusted—or failed to adjust—to life without Susie. Lynn knows what is going on with Abigail, but doesn't know how to talk to her about it—she wants to help her daughter not to make the same mistakes that she has watched others in her life make. Lynn knows the importance of family, and longs to help Abigail keep hers intact.



It is unclear, when Abigail tells Lynn that "it" is over, whether she is referring to the affair she's been having or her marriage to Jack. Despite Abigail's infidelity and her condescension towards Jack, in this passage she briefly entertains his obsession with Harvey and expresses a desire to see for herself whether she can intuit anything from walking past Harvey's house.



Lynn asks Abigail to promise her that she will stop seeing the man she is seeing, but Abigail feigns ignorance. She asks Lynn, hypothetically, if she could use her father's old cabin in New Hampshire to get away for a little while, but Lynn does not answer her. Abigail smells cigarette smoke, and follows the scent. Lynn heads back to the house while Abigail follows the smell of foreign cigarettes to the Singhs' backyard. She finds Ruana there, enjoying a smoke. Ruana explains that her husband is hosting a party inside, and she has slipped away for some quiet. Abigail asks for a cigarette, and Ruana offers her one.

As Grandma Lynn passes by George Harvey's house on the way home, she senses something evil radiating from the house, and right away knows that Jack is right. She understands the magnitude of what her daughter is going through, and plans to offer her the keys to the New Hampshire cabin in the morning.

That night, Abigail dreams of India. She sees a young girl being led through the street to a pyre, where she is wrapped in a sheet and set on fire. The flames bring Abigail a kind of bliss—though the girl on the pyre is being burned alive, she had a body once, “clean and whole.”

CHAPTER 14

Lindsey cases George Harvey's house for a week. She has been training with the junior high boys' soccer team in hopes of qualifying for the all-male high school soccer team. The soccer field provides a view of Mr. Harvey's house, and as Lindsey runs laps alongside Samuel and the rest of the team, she watches him. He notices her watching him, frustrated that after almost a year, the Salmons still “remain bent on crowding him.” It has happened before, in other towns—the family of a girl he has killed suspects him, even when no one else does.

On November 26th, Lindsey watches from the soccer field as Mr. Harvey leaves his house. She hangs back from the rest of the boys and sits at the tree line, planning on claiming to have gotten her period if she is called out. She slips away through the trees and heads for Mr. Harvey's house, and calculates that she has about forty-five minutes to plunder through his home, knowing that he runs errands every afternoon. She punches in his basement window, using her sweatshirt as cushioning, and then drops herself through.

Abigail is outright denying what her mother knows to be true, while still hinting at the fact that she wants to abandon her marriage and her family. As Abigail is pulled away from her conversation with Lynn toward Ruana, she symbolically wanders from responsibility and reality toward something simpler, more pleasant and distracting.



Grandma Lynn realizes that her son-in-law is right. She also knows that her daughter is going through something awful, and resolves to help her in whatever way she can.



Abigail is longing for escape, but even in the dreams that show her other lands she cannot get away from the lingering presence of death and misery.



There is a silent antagonism between Lindsey and Mr. Harvey. Each knows what the other is up to, but because maintaining a veneer of innocence, anonymity, and civility is very important for both of them, it is a cold war being waged between them as Lindsey plots against Harvey and Harvey anxiously wonders what exactly she is planning, and how he can protect himself.



Lindsey puts her plan in motion, knowing exactly how she will cover her tracks every step of the way. She has limited time, but knows that it is now or never—she is her family's last chance in securing any workable evidence against Harvey before time, and interest in Susie's case, run out.



Lindsey looks around the basement, finding it neat and orderly, with nothing particularly odd sticking out. Susie wishes she could guide her sister to the crawlspace beneath it, where the bones of the dead animals lie, but she cannot. Still, Lindsey senses a dark energy in the basement, which sets her on edge. She leaves the basement and enters the first floor, surprised by how empty Harvey's house is. As she navigates through, she is struck by how the layout is exactly the same as her own house, and memories of her and Susie's childhood flood back to her.

As Lindsey moves through the house, Susie lists the names of the girls and women Harvey has murdered. Jackie Meyer, Delaware, 1967: thirteen years old. Flora Hernandez, Delaware, 1963: eight. Sophie Cichetti, Pennsylvania, 1960: forty-nine. Leidia Johnson, 1960: six years old, his youngest victim. Many more victims flood Susie's senses, but she knows she must focus on Lindsey, and so she does.

Lindsey heads upstairs and into George Harvey's room. She sees a sketchbook on the bedside table, and hears the sound of a car pulling up the driveway, braking, and the driver's-side door opening and slamming shut. Lindsey flips through the pages of the notebook, finding a drawing of the structure in the cornfield in which Susie was murdered. She rips out the page. Downstairs, the oblivious Mr. Harvey is making a sandwich when he hears a board creak.

Upstairs, Lindsey opens Harvey's bedroom window and goes through it. Mr. Harvey arrives upstairs just as Lindsey jumps—she lands on the ground, winded but unhurt. As Mr. Harvey reaches the window, he sees Lindsey Salmon running away, and her number—5—on the back of her soccer shirt.

When Lindsey walks in the front door of her own home Jack, Abigail, Grandma Lynn, and Samuel are sitting together, worried sick that she has come home late. Lindsey breathlessly tells Jack that she has broken into Mr. Harvey's house. She hands him the drawing, and as Jack studies it, Abigail, frustrated by her husband and daughter's obsessions with Harvey and with Susie's murder, announces that she is going to pick up Buckley. She leaves, and Lindsey grabs Samuel's hand. She tells her father worriedly that she thinks Mr. Harvey might have seen her.

The tension in this scene is deeply palpable, as Lindsey knows something is off but does not understand quite what, and Susie longs to be able to show her sister all that she knows by virtue of her omniscience. There is something deeply uncanny about the house, and it is not just the air of malevolence—Lindsey sees her and Susie's own childhood reflected in its layout, and this is nearly too much for her to bear.



Harvey himself has forgotten the names of most of his victims, but Susie proudly lists them in an act of defiance, and as a means of keeping their identities and legacies alive. Susie, so afraid of being forgotten, knows it is her duty not to forget the other women Harvey has harmed.



Lindsey has hit the jackpot—she has found a major piece of evidence that directly reveals Harvey's intimate knowledge of the structure in which Susie was killed, and could be enough to convince the police of his guilt. It seems that at last justice is in reach, though of course Harvey's presence in the house undercuts this moment with fear and suspense.



Lindsey has escaped with the evidence—and with her life—but Harvey has seen her. He knows what she has taken, knows what she plans to do with it, and, as Harvey is a very dangerous man, this marks Lindsey as a potential target.



When Lindsey arrives home with the evidence, her family's anxiety is soon replaced by relief and even joy and pride at her having successfully gathered something that can be used against Harvey—all except for Abigail, who has been trying so hard to distance herself from all of this. It is too much for Abigail, and she leaves the house to get away and have some time to herself.



As Susie, up in heaven, walks away from the gazebo, she considers how grateful she is that no harm came to Lindsey that day. Lindsey's death would mean her loss on Earth for the rest of their family—but would also mean the loss of Susie's ability to vicariously live through her sister's experiences. Franny stops Susie and hands her a map—she tells her to go there when she is feeling stronger.

Two days later, Susie follows the map—it leads her to an olive tree at the edge of a wheat field. A girl comes through the stalks and greets Susie, asking if she knows Franny. Susie tells the little girl that Franny gave her the map to this place. The little girl tells Susie that she must be “ready.” She introduces herself as Flora Hernandez. Susie begins to cry, sad but comforted to know another of Mr. Harvey's victims at last. Flora tells Susie that “the others” will be arriving soon, and sure enough, girls and women begin to stream through the field toward the olive tree. Susie finds strength and comfort in the arms and stories of her fellow victims.

CHAPTER 15

Susie delves into Mr. Harvey's childhood. He and his mother would often sneak away from home—and Harvey's father—and his mother would shoplift. His mother was often caught, and in those moments, he would experience the sickening feeling of fear. She soon began using George to hide the things she stole, calling him her “little accomplice,” and a successful steal would always put his mother back in a wonderful mood. Once, driving down a highway in Texas, George's mother pointed out a white wooden cross on the side of the road and told him that he needed to learn to look past the dead—sometimes there were good trinkets to be taken away from them. As his mother pulled over the car and picked over the cross, stealing two charms and a bunch of roses, George felt ashamed but also excited.

That night, the two of them slept in the truck. In the middle of the night, they were awakened by three men peering through the truck windows. George's mother told him to remain quiet, and explained that she was going to pretend to open the truck door—she needed George to reach forward and turn the keys in the ignition. They pulled the maneuver off, and as George's mother drove away, she hit one of the men and pitched his body up on the roof. George realized in that moment that being a “child or a woman” were the two worst things to be in the world.

Susie is not perfect—her impulses are often selfish, and in this case, we see that Lindsey's loss on Earth would be devastating to Susie for a very selfish reason: she would not be able to live vicariously through her spirited, adventurous younger sister any longer, and her favorite connection to life on Earth would be severed.



As Susie meets the other victims of George Harvey's violence, she is flooded with pain, but also comfort and happiness. She knows how important these women's stories are, and recognizes that though she has been self-centered in the past, she is just one of many voices, and one of many stories, which deserve to be told.



In revealing some of the details of her murderer's past, Susie is perhaps attempting to understand or explain where his dark impulses come from. The young George Harvey had a large role in helping his mother to commit crimes, and learned that there was a thrill in getting away with bad or illegal deeds. His mother's kleptomania—as well as her theft from and disrespect for the dead—is also reflected in the older Harvey's need to keep a trinket from each of his victims, and squirrel them away to obsess over privately.



George's adventures with his mother, though thrilling, are also dangerous. He realizes that it is terrible to be defenseless, as women and children so often are in the world. This is perhaps another piece of the puzzle, though it is unclear whether Harvey's desire to prey upon women and children comes out of a cunning, calculating plan to pick on the weak, or a compulsion to kill women and children and thus, in some twisted way, reclaim a sense of power, his own childhood, and his relationship with his mother.



Now, as Mr. Harvey watches Lindsey race through his yard, his heart beats wildly before calming. He sees that his notebook has been disturbed, and is missing a page. He takes the knife which he used to kill Susie and drops it into a hole in the basement, before retrieving his “charms”—tokens from the women he has killed—from the metal shelving down there. He places all of this, too, into the hole, and then calls the police—he tells them that his home has been broken into, calculating how he will tell “his version” of the story while also trying to figure out how quickly he can leave, and how much he can carry with him.

Jack calls the station and asks for Len Fenerman, but Fenerman cannot be located—the police tell Jack that two officers have already been sent to investigate. When the officers arrive at Harvey’s door, they find “a man who [i]s tearfully upset.” Though the officers, over the radio, obtain information about the nature of the stolen drawing, they are “impressed” by Harvey’s willingness to have his home searched—as well as his sympathy for the Salmon family. He explains that he does not wish to press any charges against the “poor” Salmon girl.

When the officers confront Harvey about the nature of the drawing taken from his sketchbook, he cunningly explains that he has been “trying to figure out” how Susie was killed—the murder upset him so much, that he wanted to try to get to the bottom of how her killer had committed the crime. The officers believe him, and let him know—apologetically—that Fenerman will probably be coming by tomorrow to go over the same line of questioning. Mr. Harvey stresses again that he does not want to press any charges against the Salmon girl and possibly exacerbate her “overwhelming grief.” Susie watches helplessly as the chances of Harvey’s capture diminish.

After picking Buckley up from Nate’s house, Abigail stops at a pay phone, calls Len, and instructs him to meet her in a store at the mall. He does not hear his house phone ringing once more as he pulls out of the driveway to go meet her. Abigail leads Buckley to a play-place at the mall, leaves her name with the monitor there, and goes off to meet Len. While she and Len rendezvous at the mall, the officers descend upon Mr. Harvey’s house and hear his tearful testimony.

Len leads Abigail down a hallway in the mall, and through a white door set flush into the wall. She knows Len is bringing her into the inner workings of the mall, and follows him through the tunnel. They begin to kiss. As their tryst unfolds, Mr. Harvey begins packing up his belongings. Abigail and Len make love as Mr. Harvey leaves his house for the final time.

Mr. Harvey is already planning to flee, knowing that even if he passes a police questioning with flying colors he will soon be under a microscope. Harvey still wants to cover his tracks, though, and he plans to buy himself time by painting himself as the victim of a burglary and a witch hunt at the hands of the obsessive, grief-stricken Salmon family.



Jack knows what Lindsey has found, and also knows that time is of the essence in terms of getting this new, groundbreaking evidence into the right hands. Len is missing in action, though, and so the police get to Harvey—and are able to hear his side of the story—first.



Harvey is a master of painting himself as a loner, a victim, and a caring member of the community who is simply unsure of how to connect with those around him. The story Harvey tells the police is convincing, and he really lays it on thick by expressing his sadness for poor Lindsey Salmon.



Sebald uses this passage to reveal that Len is unable to take Jack’s call—and thus catch Harvey—because he is rendezvousing with the distraught, needful Abigail. This painful coincidence underscores Susie’s futile position in heaven—she is unable to keep events like this from happening, and unable to steer those who could still help her away from distraction and temptation.



Len and Abigail make love as Harvey gets away—a cruel coincidence that speaks to the disruptive and even destructive role that desire plays in the world of this novel.



CHAPTER 16

A year to the day after Susie's death, the doorbell at the Singh house rings, and Ruana answers the door. Ruth is there, holding a sack of groceries. She asks if Ray is home, and Ruana tells her to go up the stairs to Ray's room. Ruth and Ray were recently discovered kissing at the shot-put circle, but their classmates do not understand that the two are not a couple—they were merely conducting an experiment. After the kiss—Ruth's first—she announced that she didn't feel anything, and Ray admitted the same. Ruth asked Ray if he felt something when he kissed Susie, and he said that he did. Ruth offered a bargain: in the future, during their kissing sessions, Ray could pretend she was Susie if she could pretend the same.

When Ruth walks into Ray's bedroom, he is dancing to a Jethro Tull record. He stops dancing as soon as he sees her. Ruth notices that one of her own drawings of Susie is hanging on Ray's wall. She tells Ray that she has bought candles at the grocery store and wants to go to the cornfield and light them to commemorate a year since Susie's death. Ray is hesitant, and Ruth offers to kiss him for a while if he wants—Ray agrees. He has begun to like Ruth and harbor feelings for her, though he has not told her. As they begin kissing, Ruth breaks away, and admits fretfully that she, too, feels something for him at last.

Ruth and Ray arrive at the cornfield. They hold hands in silence, and are surprised to find that they are not the only ones there—Hal and Samuel Heckler are there too. A bunch of yellow daffodils are on the ground, and when Ruth asks if the boys brought them, Hal says that they were already there when the two of them arrived. Several neighbors soon arrive as well, and a makeshift gathering begins.

Lindsey, at home in the living room, looks out the window and sees a stream of neighbors heading for the field. She tells Abigail that something is going on, but Abigail says she is "not interested." For weeks, Lindsey has been trying to break through the wall her mother has put up, but it is becoming more and more frustrating.

Sebald demonstrates in a number of ways how Ray and Ruth's mutual obsession with Susie has not only brought them closer together, but has allowed each of them to obtain a deeper understanding of their own selves. Ruth and Ray both desire Susie physically and emotionally. Ruth is attempting to understand her own sexuality, and also wants to "live inside" the bodies and lives of women, whereas Ray longs romantically and sexually for Susie—the arrangement they have made in which they each pretend the other is Susie allows them to transform their desires into fantasies and thus, in a way, make them a little more real.



Ray and Ruth have been exploring their sexuality and their grief together, hand in hand. Now, on the anniversary of Susie's death, they experience the realization that their private figuring-out of what Susie means to each of them has actually brought them closer together, and made them desirous of one another's company independently of their shared grief over and fascination with their mutual friend.



Ruth and Ray have at times felt isolated in their private and shared obsessions with Susie. They are surprised to find, when they arrive at the cornfield to honor her, that they are not alone in their lasting grief—everyone in the neighborhood is, in some way, still clinging to their memories of Susie and their horror at her death.



Lindsey cannot get through to Abigail, who has more or less shut down the part of herself that expressed grief for Susie. Abigail is uninterested in mourning her daughter any longer, and instead has become cold and removed from the rest of her still-grieving family.



By the time darkness falls, a large crowd has gathered for a candlelit vigil at the cornfield. Rumors of Mr. Harvey's flight—and thus his suspected guilt—have begun to ripple through the neighborhood, but no one has asked the Salmons about what they do or do not know. The memorial, Susie realizes, is as much for her as it is for the community, who are coming together in the horrific knowledge that “a murderer had lived among them.” Susie buzzes with energy as she watches the gathering crowd, but notices that no one has knocked on her family's door or let them know about the vigil. There is an “impenetrable barrier” around their home, still—her murder has painted the Salmons' front door a “blood red” and marked it as unapproachable.

Inside the house, Lindsey continues urging Abigail to take part in the vigil. Abigail insists that their family has already had Susie's memorial, and says, “That's done for me.” Lindsey asks her what she means by “that”—Abigail explains that she doesn't believe Susie is “waiting out there,” and that there are other, better ways of honoring Susie's memory. Abigail confesses that she wants to be more than a mother, and Lindsey understands this—she herself wants to be “more than a girl.” Lindsey asks Abigail if she is going to leave them. Abigail hesitates, and then lies, promising Lindsey that she will not leave.

Jack's car pulls into the driveway. Lindsey meets Jack in the mud room and asks him if he wants to go to the vigil; he does. Buckley rushes into the mudroom, and Jack wonders if it is appropriate to bring Buckley along. Lindsey tells Jack that she is sick of protecting Buckley. She explains to him that there is a party for Susie, and that the three of them are going to go. Buckley tells Lindsey that Susie comes to talk to him and spend time with him; Lindsey does not know what to say.

As Jack, Lindsey, and Buckley approach the field, Jack becomes emotional. He wants Susie to live on in the minds and hearts of everyone, but he also realizes that this vigil symbolizes everyone saying goodbye to Susie and letting her go—Susie, looking down from heaven, realizes this too. Ruth sees the Salmons approaching, and nudges Ray to go help them into the circle. Ray and Samuel welcome the Salmons into the fold together, and as Jack joins the mourners, he realizes how loved Susie had been. Together, the Salmons join their neighbors in mournful song.

In this passage, Susie sees how deeply her murder has affected not just her family but her entire neighborhood. Though everyone mourns her loss, there is also an undercurrent of shame and confusion beneath that grief. Her neighbors were blind to the presence of a violent murderer in their midst, and they mourn their own ignorance and simultaneously give thanks for their own safety just as much as they grieve Susie.



Abigail has done everything she can to shut down the part of herself that still grieves Susie's loss. She does not want to spend any more time thinking about the daughter she lost—she wants to move onto other things. She does not want her life to become defined by Susie's death. Lindsey empathizes with this, but also sees it as a warning sign that her mother is preparing to pull away drastically.



The Salmons have shielded Buckley from much of the fallout of Susie's loss. As Jack and Lindsey make the decision to offer him the chance to go to her memorial—though they're still unclear how much about Susie's death Buckley is aware of—they realize that he knows more than he lets on, and is possibly even in direct communication with the spirit of his dead sister.



Jack and Susie are united by their twin desires to have Susie live on forever. Neither of them is prepared to watch her memory fade into obscurity, so this makes the memorial, for both of them, more of a threat than a comfort. Though Jack joins the memorial and does take some peace and solace in it, Susie's observation from above is tinged with fear and anxiety.



Susie remembers one summer night, years ago, listening to one of their neighbors sing Irish ballads on his porch as a thunderstorm approached. Susie loved to dance in the rain, and though her mother always warned her she would “catch [her] death,” that night, Abigail watched Susie spin in the rain and remarked that she looked “invincible.” Susie turned to her and answered simply: “I am.”

In this flashback, Susie remembers a time when she truly believed she was invincible. She thought that life was forever and did not realize how precious and fleeting her time on Earth was. As Susie watches her memorial service, she realizes that she is not invincible even now, in the afterlife: there is still the chance she will be forgotten.



SNAPSHOTS

Susie reflects on her great passion in life—photography. She took so many **photographs** that Jack would make her choose which rolls she wanted developed—there were too many to send out all at once. Susie loved the feeling of stopping time, and thus possessing a moment and an image, that her camera gave her.

Susie’s obsession with photography during her life on Earth is a symbolic mirror of her obsession in the afterlife with watching and collecting small moments observed from on high. As the years go by, Susie hoards these moments—the good and the bad, the sad and the joyful, the strange and the overlooked.



One evening in the summer of 1975, Jack and Abigail make love. The next morning, she leaves for her father’s cabin in New Hampshire. Over the course of that summer, neighbors leave pies, cakes, and casseroles on the front porch for the Salmons. One afternoon that fall, Grandma Lynn calls and says she has been thinking about coming to stay. Jack argues that their family has just begun to start over, but Grandma Lynn insists—she wants to help him and the children. Jack wonders where Lynn will stay, and then the answer becomes obvious—Susie’s room.

As the Salmon family endures another loss, things in their household begin to change. Grandma Lynn’s arrival speaks to a new chapter in all their lives—one without Abigail and Susie, but one which no longer has the time to mourn either loss. The Salmons know now that they must keep marching forward in the face of their grief.



In December of 1975, a year has passed since Mr. Harvey packed up and left. There has been no sign of him. One day, Lindsey asks Hal Heckler to give her a ride to the police station, so that she can find out what they are doing to try and catch Harvey. While waiting at the station, Lindsey spots something familiar on Detective Fenerman’s desk—it is her mother’s red scarf. She confronts Fenerman, and asks him why he has it. Fenerman answers that she must have left it in his car one day. Lindsey suddenly understands everything. Hal ushers her from the station and takes her back to his bike shop, where she cries to Samuel in the back room.

Lindsey still wants justice for Susie. Though her family is moving on, she is not ready to give up on securing answers for her big sister. As she attempts to demand them from Fenerman, she finds something else, and begins to put the pieces of the puzzle of her mother’s disappearance together. The news shocks her, and she is devastated to learn that her mother has betrayed their father—and in a way betrayed them all.



Buckley, now seven, builds a fort. Jack does not help him—it reminds him of building the bridal tent with Mr. Harvey. Instead Jack watches from the house as Buckley, day after day, plays alone in the yard. When the fort is finished, Buckley shuts himself up inside it for hours at a time to read comics, often pretending in his saddest moments that he is strong like the Hulk. One day, in school, Buckley writes a story about a little boy who goes into a hole and never comes out. Buckley intuits from his teacher’s reaction that there is something wrong with the story. He folds the assignment up and brings it into Susie’s old room, tucking it up in the secret hole beneath Susie’s box spring.

In the fall of 1976, Len Fenerman visits the evidence room at the police station. The animal bones unearthed from Harvey’s crawl space are there. Finding them prompted a dig beneath the basement for Susie’s remains. Nothing turned up, though, and so Len ordered another dig through the cornfield. The dig turned up an old Coke bottle bearing both Harvey’s fingerprints and Susie’s, and Fenerman at last believes Jack, knowing he was right all along. Mr. Harvey has disappeared into thin air, leaving behind only his dollhouses. Fenerman attempts to trace Harvey through those who commissioned the dollhouses from him, but nothing has turned up. As Fenerman paws through the evidence box, he finds Susie’s old jingle-bell hat, and begins thinking of Abigail. Susie pities Fenerman, as he has failed both in solving Susie’s murder and loving Susie’s mother.

Meanwhile, in Connecticut, a hunter has just come upon something shiny on the ground—Susie’s Pennsylvania keystone charm. Sticking up out of the ground near the trinket are the “unmistakable bones of a child’s foot.”

Abigail makes it through just one brutal winter in New Hampshire before driving out to California to find work in a winery. A neighbor from New Hampshire told her that the work was easy to get, physical, and completely anonymous. As Abigail makes her way west, she sends Lindsey and Buckley postcards from every town she stops in. Once in California, she spends her days off from her new job wandering the streets of tiny upscale northern California towns. She cannot escape her grief, however, and finds herself frequently assaulted by memories of Susie.

Buckley is growing into a solitary boy whose childhood fancies are never allowed to flourish unfettered—everything he does is done in the shadow of his sister’s death, and all the emotional trauma from the events surrounding it that still linger over his family. The sensitive Buckley absorbs a lot of this trauma and grief, and he processes it in strange ways—by hiding out alone, and by spinning dark stories that try to make sense of the few details he has picked up about his sister’s murder, despite his family’s attempts to shield him from knowing too much about it.



Susie captures a “snapshot” of Len Fenerman in this private moment of shame, guilt, and self-loathing. Len refused to believe Jack, and rather than doubling down to make sure that all possible leads were thoroughly investigated, he engaged in a doomed dalliance with Abigail. By dividing his attention in this way, Len failed at both undertakings—his relationship with Abigail, and his fight for justice for her daughter. As Susie watches Len reckon with all of this, she is not angry at him—she pities him, knowing the depths of his shame and grief.



This “snapshot” reveals a gruesome new development—Susie’s charm has been found at the site of yet another of Harvey’s murders.



Abigail, torn apart by grief, shame, and self-loathing—much like Len Fenerman—cannot escape the reality of the loss she has suffered. The old saying “Wherever you go, there you are” proves true in this passage as Abigail finds that she cannot outrun the pain of her daughter’s loss, and instead has simply compounded her grief by adding the shame of having abandoned her remaining two children.



Jack organizes a memorial for Susie each year. As the years pass by, fewer and fewer friends and neighbors come, though students from the high school join the vigil each year. Susie does not like being remembered by total strangers—she feels as if she is being “resurrected and buried within the same breath.” She hates being remembered only as the “murdered girl,” and longs for those who actually knew her to commemorate her.

Susie is a rather vain character—she is obsessed with how she is remembered on Earth, and with how her loss has spread throughout her small community. Susie always wanted to be the most-loved and the center of attention when she was alive, and in death she is no different. It is very difficult for her to watch herself be forgotten, and to see the memory of who she actually was fade away and be replaced with the vague outlines of a voiceless victim.



Ray grows more and more handsome by the year, and Susie watches him with a longing “different from what which [she has] for anyone else.” As Ray prepares to go off to Penn to study medicine, Susie worries that he will forget her. However, Ruana slips a book of Indian poetry into Ray’s luggage, and as he unpacks in his dorm, the book—and the picture of Susie long ago tucked inside it—slip out.

In this section of the novel, many of the characters’ arcs overlap. Just as Abigail escaped to try to forget Susie’s loss, Ray tucked the picture of Susie away in an attempt to “bury” her. Now, as he begins a new chapter in his life, fate causes her to resurface in his dorm room. Ray can try to forget Susie, but he knows deep down that he never will.



Grandma Lynn gives Buckley a book about gardening. Abigail calls from California every once in a while. Her conversations with Jack are strained and hurried. Jack often tells Abigail that he misses her, but Abigail shows no signs of wanting to come back home.

Buckley and Lynn’s project of gardening together is symbolic of their attempt to build a new life in the wake of the losses they have suffered, but with Abigail’s calls—which only serve to remind her family of her betrayal—it is difficult to move on.



In June of 1977, Ruth moves to New York City. There she lives in an old woman’s walk-in closet and bartends to make her rent. She writes poetry and wanders the city, convinced that she has a “second sight” which allows her to see the world of dead women and children. Meanwhile, at Penn, Ray reads a study that describes a large percentage of nursing home patients observing a figure standing at the edge of their bed at night. These visions, the study says, are not a spirit or the Angel of Death, but a series of small strokes which often precede death. Ray wonders what it would be like to stand at the edge of a patient’s bed and feel their soul brush past him as they slip into death.

As Ruth and Ray grow up, they separately consider what their respective conceptions of the afterlife means to them. Ruth attempts to grow more and more attuned to the breaks in the barrier between the world of the dead and the world of the living, while Ray, whose profession demands of him practicality and objectivity, dreams in secret of whether the spirit world is in fact real.



Mr. Harvey has been “living wild” along the Northeast Corridor, crisscrossing through Pennsylvania and staying occasionally in the outlying areas of Boston. He still enjoys returning to Norristown to drive through his old neighborhood under cover of darkness.

Mr. Harvey is on the run, but cannot help returning to Norristown on late-night victory laps to check in on his old neighborhood. Harvey is a keeper of trophies, and he sees his undetected flight from Norristown as another victory—though it is intangible, and he cannot possess it in any other way than constantly returning to the place he left behind.



Buckley, now ten, spends more and more time in his fort, allowing only Hal Heckler, Nate, and Holiday the dog inside. Hal helps Buckley to waterproof the fort, and Grandma Lynn develops a little crush on the handsome young Hal.

This passage demonstrates the contrast between the impulse toward isolation and the desire for connection within the extended Salmon family as the years go by.



In December of 1981, Len Fenerman receives a call from a precinct in Delaware—a murder in Wilmington has been connected to a girl’s body found in Connecticut in 1976. A detective working the case has traced Susie’s keystone charm back to Len’s investigation. Len insists that Susie’s file is dead, but volunteers George Harvey’s name and some information about Susie. The investigator tells Fenerman that the body turned up in Connecticut still has teeth, and asks for Susie’s dental records. He agrees to send them over, but plans to wait until he is certain of anything, either way, to get in touch with Jack Salmon.

As Len begins to realize that the web of Harvey’s violence spreads larger than he ever could have imagined, he longs both for closure on behalf of Susie and all the Salmons and for an end to the compounding realization that he let a prolific and cruel killer of women slip through his fingers.



Hal Heckler has, for eight years, been asking his network of biker friends for help in tracking down George Harvey. One night, a man in the Hell’s Angels biker gang named Ralph Cichetti confesses to Hal that he believes his mother was murdered by a man she rented a room to. The man hadn’t gone by George Harvey, but Ralph tells Hal that the renter had built dollhouses. Hal places a call to Len Fenerman.

Many years have passed since Susie’s death, but those closest to her still crave justice on her behalf. Hal Heckler has been particularly determined to try and unearth whatever he can, and at last, a viable lead that could connect Harvey to Susie’s murder—missing though he is—comes through.



Susie watches as the years go by. The trees in her yard grow taller, and when sitting in her gazebo, she pretends she is on Earth, sitting on a tall branch in her own yard, or on a fire escape with Ruth, in the library with Ray, at the vineyard with her mother, or with her father in his den. Susie marvels at how her death has influenced the people she loved on Earth. She hoards the quiet moment she observes just as she hoarded her **photographs** back on Earth.

It is difficult for Susie to watch everyone she has loved attempt to move on from her. Still, she realizes with a kind of satisfaction that her loss has had a far greater impact than she—or any of her loved ones—could have realized. Susie squirrels these images and feelings away, seeing them as precious gems.



One night, at Evensong up in heaven, Susie sees Holiday racing through her heaven. She waits for Holiday to sniff her out, and is overjoyed when at last he comes bounding toward her.

Susie is at last, after years and years of clinging to “snapshots,” given a tangible piece of her life on Earth up in heaven.



CHAPTER 17

At twenty-one years old, Lindsey is many things that Susie will never become, but Susie no longer “grieves” this fact. She still lives vicariously through Lindsey, however, and now she watches breathlessly as Lindsey graduates from college and rides home from the ceremony on the back of Samuel’s motorcycle. As they near home, it begins to rain, and soon they cannot ride any further. Samuel pulls off the road, and the two of them take shelter beneath a tree. They remove their helmets and kiss as the rain falls around them. Susie watches them with envy, knowing that they are each other’s “one and only.”

Lindsey and Samuel, searching for more cover, tramp through the underbrush until they come upon an old Victorian house. Wondering if someone is inside, they venture up to the door and let themselves in. The house is abandoned and empty, and as the two of them explore it, Samuel marvels at the careful woodworking. Examining a large walk-in fireplace, he remarks that someone could be “walled into” the space, and an awkward silence passes between them as they both think of—but do not mention—Susie, and Susie is slightly disappointed. Samuel announces that he wants the house—he feels it “needs” him. Lindsey taunts him, calling him the “fixer of broken things,” and then the two make love in the empty living room.

At home, in his den, Jack Salmon plays with an old **snow globe** that Susie once loved. Hal Heckler has made it back from the ceremony on his motorcycle, so the fact that Lindsey and Samuel have not worries him. Buckley, now 12, knocks on the door, reassuring him that Lindsey and Samuel will be all right and reminding him that Hal and Grandma Lynn are still downstairs. Buckley leaves, and Jack flips through a stack of **photos**—the last of Susie’s film, which he recently developed. Looking through old photographs of Abigail, he begins falling in love with her all over again, reminiscing about their happier days before Susie’s death.

Back in the old Victorian house, Samuel proposes to Lindsey. He tells her that he wants to refurbish the house with her by his side, and make a life with her inside of it. Lindsey accepts, and Susie, up in heaven, runs joyously in circles—Lindsey and Samuel have fulfilled her “dream.” Lindsey and Samuel embrace, but soon Lindsey pulls away, knowing that her father will begin worrying soon. She tells Samuel that they’re only eight miles from home, and suggests they run for it. As Samuel and Lindsey sprint wildly through the rain in only their t-shirts and underwear, Lindsey remembers swimming at the local pool with Susie. As Susie, in heaven, watches Lindsey run, she knows that her sister is not running away from her or toward her. Lindsey, full of joy, stops running to kiss Samuel in the rain.

Susie’s jealousy of her sister Lindsey has dulled over the years. Susie still wishes that she could do the things Lindsey is doing and feel the things Lindsey feels, but sometimes Susie can almost trick herself into believing that she and Lindsey are one. The thing Susie envies most about Lindsey’s life is her having found fulfillment in romantic love—something Susie always longed for, but found her desire for met only with trauma and violence.



Lindsey and Samuel’s relationship, happy and fulfilling though it is, is still dogged by remembrances of Susie and awkward moments where her loss, and the impact it has had on both Lindsey and Samuel, enters unwelcomed into the room. In these moments, Susie—in true Susie fashion—feels sad to be overlooked, wishing that her presence would still be the most important thing in any conversation.



As a result of Susie’s death—one that has lingered through the years—being late at the Salmon house is never just being late. Lindsey and Samuel’s tardiness inspires fear and reflectiveness in Jack, who is inundated with memories of what happened the last time one of his children didn’t come home on time. He also misses Abigail deeply on this special day, which was a family celebration of how far one of their own has come in the face of unspeakable grief.



In the previous scene with Samuel and Lindsey, Susie was happy for them, but also wanted to remain the center of attention. In this scene, as she watches her sister achieve a “dream” that Susie has harbored—for Lindsey, and also for herself—for many years, she is overwhelmed with pure joy and exaltation. Susie realizes that Lindsey’s finding fulfillment and attempting to move on is not Lindsey relinquishing Susie, but simply trying to carve out a life for herself.



At four o'clock, while Hal and Lynn are baking brownies in the kitchen, the doorbell rings. It is Lindsey and Samuel at the door, soaking wet. Buckley fetches towels for them, and Jack lights a fire in the living room. As the Salmons and the Heckler boys sit cozily in the living room, Samuel tells Jack that he has asked Lindsey to marry him. Jack is thrilled, and the family erupts with joy. There is an undercurrent of sadness, though, and out of the corner of his eye, Buckley sees Susie standing in the room, watching them all celebrate.

There was no underlying sadness when Susie witnessed Samuel's proposal—but as he relays the news to the entire family, there is a definite tinge of pain and wistfulness that ripples through the room. Buckley, who has always purported to be the most sensitive to Susie's presence, even sees her standing there—with them, in a way, but also profoundly isolated from them and their joy.



CHAPTER 18

Ruth, in her walk-in closet, takes a phone call from her father. He tells her that the **sinkhole** at the edge of Norristown is closing soon, and Ruth knows she must make a pilgrimage home to see it before it does. She is fascinated with places like the sinkhole just as she is fascinated with death, but she keeps these obsessions of hers a secret.

Ruth, upon hearing the sinkhole is closing, wants to make a pilgrimage to go see it. The sinkhole apparently means a lot to Ruth, as a place that has swallowed victims of violence and as a landmark in her hometown.



Ruth moves through New York City always tilted forward, “with the expression of someone who [is] constantly on the lookout for something or someone that [hasn't] arrived yet.” As she walks briskly through the streets she thinks her strange friendship with Ray, which has always been tinged with a strange kind of desire. Ruth knows that it will be Ray she takes with her to the **sinkhole** when she returns to Norristown—she sees him every time she goes home to visit her parents.

Ruth's new life in New York is separate but not disconnected from her old life in Norristown. Ray Singh is someone who has never left her, and several years into their friendship the two of them are still figuring out exactly what they mean to one another. Their relationship remains an exciting unknown in Ruth's life, and one she returns to as a touchstone whenever she can.



As Ruth moves through New York, she stops and stands in certain places where she intuits that a girl or a woman has been killed. Sometimes, there are too many spots to list in her journal at the end of the day. Ruth is unaware that her obsession with murder and the paranormal has made her something of a celebrity up in heaven. Susie has told everyone else in her heaven about Ruth's dedication to amplifying the voices of the wrongfully killed, and Ruth has gained a veritable fan base in the Inbetween.

Ruth is tireless, curious, and dedicated to understanding and sharing the stories of victims of violence. For this reason, Susie has sung Ruth's praises up in heaven, and others in the Inbetween have become just as protective and admiring of Ruth as Susie herself—who is, arguably, responsible for Ruth's strange but dedicated obsession in the first place.



The day after Lindsey and Samuel's graduation, Susie joins Ruth on her walk. Ruth wanders through Central Park with her journal. She spots a baby whose sleeping nanny does not notice that she is about to crawl through the bushes separating the park lawn from the busy Fifth Avenue traffic, and wakes the baby's caretaker just in time. Ruth then sees the ghost or spirit of a little girl who, many years ago, was not as lucky—she strayed into the bushes and disappeared. Ruth records the disappearance in her notebook, then spends the rest of the afternoon watching children play in the park. She counts the living just as often as she counts the dead.

Ruth's obsession with the dead causes her a lot of stress, and fills her with a constant awareness of the pain and injustice that fill the world. She is like Susie and Len in this regard—constantly bearing witness to pain—and so, like Susie and Len, she also begins to keep a mental list of the living, the thriving, the happy, and the healthy in order to counter the pain of that constant witnessing.



That weekend, Buckley wakes early. Buckley is not athletic like Lindsey, and instead enjoys gardening. Buckley comes out onto the porch with a box of Susie's old clothes, which he plans to use to help stake his tomato plants. When Jack sees Buckley with Susie's clothes, he tells Buckley that he cannot use them for gardening. Buckley becomes upset and tells Jack that he has to "choose." He explains that he has a friend at school whose father died, and she is totally fine. Buckley accuses Jack of taking the Monopoly piece that once belonged to Susie—the shoe—out of his room. Jack insists that he doesn't know what Buckley's talking about. Buckley continues to berate Jack, yelling at him for focusing only on Susie and ignoring him, Lindsey, and Abigail.

Jack tells Buckley that he isn't feeling very well, and collapses into the grass. His arm tingles with pins and needles. Buckley rushes to Jack, but then realizes he needs help, and goes to get Grandma Lynn. As Jack lies in the grass, helpless, he says aloud that he has never chosen—he has loved all three of his children as best he can.

That night, as Susie looks down on her father lying in a hospital bed, she wonders in which direction she should usher him. She knows that if Jack dies, he will join her in her heaven, and she will have him forever—but she wonders if this is the wrong thing to want. Susie knows that Buckley wants Jack to live for the same reason—to keep him with him for as long as he can. As Buckley lies in bed at home, he whispers to Susie directly, begging her not to let Jack die.

Up in her heaven, Susie walks down a new brick path that has appeared before her. She knows that at the end of the path something will be revealed, and sure enough, as she moves forward she sees a figure before her. It is her grandfather—her father's father—and Susie is overcome with joy. She and her grandfather dance in one another's arms for hours. When the music stops, her grandfather tells Susie that he is going. When she asks him where, he only tells her that she is "so close." He then turns and walks away, disappearing off into infinity.

Buckley is the youngest of the Salmons, and his memories of the time surrounding Susie's death are the most distant both psychologically and emotionally. He has grown up in her shadow, though, and it makes sense that as he prepares to enter his teenage years—and soon adulthood—that he is rebelling against the trappings of his sister's memory, which he has only ever seen as a frustrating force that has distracted and, in Abigail's case, removed his parents from him. Buckley feels that his whole life has been unfair, and he is in many ways right.



Jack, in poor health after years of stress, strain, and strife, collapses under the weight of a heart attack as he reacts emotionally to the realization that he has pushed away his wife and his remaining children through his obsession with Susie. Jack, in his heart, knows he has loved all three of them, but acknowledges that his grief over Susie's loss has echoed through his life in obsessive and painful ways.



Susie's selfish desire to have her father with her forever represents all her other selfish desires coming to a head. Susie has longed to be the center of attention on Earth years after her death, and as she witnesses how this desire is tearing her family apart, she considers whether she is even justified in wishing for her own happiness if it comes at the expense of those she loves—who are still trying to live as best they can—on Earth.



Susie knows that there is a way for her to move on from her current heaven to a place of pure joy and no strife or worry. As she watches her grandfather pass into "infinity," she realizes that she is not ready to leave, though her grandfather seems to think she is "close." This tension between the desire to stay and learn more from those she is observing and the desire to be free from pain is a large part of what is keeping Susie in her "Inbetween" heaven indefinitely.



CHAPTER 19

When Abigail arrives at the winery for her shift, she finds a note from the caretaker waiting for her: it tells her that there has been an emergency back in Norristown. She dials home and gets no answer; when she asks the operator to dial the Singhs' number, Ruana picks up, and tells her that an ambulance pulled up to the Salmon house a few hours ago, but that she doesn't know who was taken away. Abigail begins dialing local hospitals in Norristown, until she finds one that tells her Jack was admitted recently. She asks what happened to him, and when the operator asks what her relationship to the patient is, she speaks words she has not spoken in years, and tells the operator that she is Jack's wife. The person on the other end tells her that Jack has had a heart attack.

Abigail rushes to the airport and boards a connecting flight to Philadelphia. When she lands in Chicago, she calls the hospital and asks to speak to Lynn; she lets her mother know that she is on her way. Lynn reveals that Jack has been asking for her, and also lets Abigail know that Lindsey and Samuel are engaged. Before she hangs up, Lynn warns Abigail of one more thing: Jack, in his groggy state, has been asking for Susie, too.

Abigail goes outside of the airport for a cigarette. She takes her wallet out of her back pocket and retrieves from it a school picture of Susie. She studies it carefully, taking in all the remembered details of Susie's face, until she hears the announcement for her flight over the loudspeaker. Turning around, she sees a tiny, struggling tree growing near the airport doors. She props Susie's picture against its trunk and goes back inside.

On the flight to Philadelphia, Abigail realizes that by abandoning her children she has relinquished her role as a mother. She reflects on how she never felt the calling to be a mother, and believes she has been "punished in the most horrible and unimaginable way" for never having wanted Susie in the first place.

When Abigail disembarks the plane in Philadelphia, she barely recognizes Lindsey, who is waiting for her at the gate, or Samuel, who stands by her side. She does not even notice Buckley, sitting off to the side, until she is halfway down the carpeted ramp toward him. When she sees him, she sees herself at twelve reflected in his chubby cheeks and heavy legs, and is shocked by the resemblance.

Abigail, who has cut herself off from her family for so many years, finds herself desperate to reconnect with them in this time of crisis. She fears that one of her children has been involved in another accident or emergency, and though this brings up painful feelings that mirror the fear she felt when Susie disappeared, she persists in trying to find out what has happened, and to whom. The truth sends her reeling—though she left Jack, she is still his wife, and there is an allegiance between them that is still alive after all these years.



Abigail knows that her mother has stepped into the vacant place she herself left behind when she departed Norristown, and now she seeks to let her mother know that she is coming back to fill that gap—if not forever, at least for a time. Lynn, however, knows that her daughter may not be prepared to handle the grief and confusion that still mark the Salmons' lives—especially Jack's.



Abigail's leaving behind of Susie's school picture symbolizes her recognition that this is not a time for grief and remorse—it is a time for action, for solidarity, and for helping her husband to heal. She cannot do that if she is still in mourning for Susie, and so she symbolically attempts to let her go.



Abigail carries a deep-seated sense of guilt and shame over her reluctance to be a mother. She fears that it resulted in her daughter's death, and it is implied that this is ultimately what drove her away from her family—the fear that her remaining children would also be affected by her lack of desire to be a mother.



Abigail has missed her children's lives, and is surprised by how much they have changed—in Lindsey's case—and by how much they mirror her despite her absence in Buckley's.



On the way to the parking garage, Abigail apologizes for lying to Lindsey—their eyes meet, and the secret of Len hangs in the air between them. Once in the car, Lindsey tells Abigail that the hospital won't let Buckley in to see Jack because of his age. Abigail assures Lindsey and Buckley she'll try and do something, but Buckley mutters “fuck you” under his breath and refuses to even look at Abigail. Samuel, trying to ease the tension, announces that everyone will feel better after they all get to see Jack together.

Things are tense between Abigail and her children, and while Lindsey struggles to keep her mouth shut and thus keep the peace, Buckley is as angry with his mother as he recently was at Jack, and refuses to make nice. Buckley has grown up in the shadow of loss and grief, and is no longer able to hide the anger and betrayal he feels at having been so overlooked by his parents in favor of a dead girl.



Abigail finds herself in the same hospital she came to eight years ago in the middle of the night, when Jack went out into the cornfield. She recalls her first kiss with Len, which took place on the balcony that day, and feels the impulse to flee back to California, but as she walks into the hospital room and sees Jack, everything else falls away. Abigail runs to Jack and grabs his hand, and he opens his eyes to look at her. Jack greets her warmly, calling her “Ocean Eyes,” and jokingly marvels at “what it took to get [her] home.”

As Abigail returns to the hospital, the errors and betrayals of her past rise up to haunt her. She has hurt her children, her husband, and herself by being so careless with her own heart and the hearts of her family. She does not want to stay and face the music, so to speak, but as soon as she sees Jack she knows that she must remain with him.



Grandma Lynn tiptoes out of the room and into the waiting area, intercepting a nurse carrying a message for Jack Salmon. Lynn reads the note: it is from Len Fenerman, and it promises that he will visit soon. Lynn folds the note neatly and places it in her purse.

Lynn does not want to interrupt her daughter's reunion with her son-in-law by bringing into the room one of the biggest things that tore them apart—Len.



CHAPTER 20

Mr. Harvey arrives at a tin-roofed shack in Connecticut. He killed a young waitress in the shack years earlier, and now, as he enters it, finds that the earth inside of it has been dug up. Mr. Harvey lies down on the ground and falls asleep next to the waitress's empty grave.

The dug-up grave indicates that the police are discovering the remains of Harvey's victims one by one. He knows his time is running out, but is powerless to stop the falling dominos all around him.



To counter the list of the dead, Susie has begun keeping a list of the living—she has noticed that Len Fenerman does this, too. Off-duty, he notes all of the girls and women he observes throughout his days—living, breathing women. Len sees wounded women, too—they come to him for help at the station, but he can also sense the pain of women he sees in shops, restaurants, or on the street.

Bearing witness to so much death and pain has left Susie feeling like she needs to pay attention to the lives that are healthy, whole, and safe just as much as she needs to pay attention to the lives that are lost or stolen. Otherwise, she would go crazy with the weight of all the sorrow and suffering. She knows that Len feels this way as well.



Len writes in Susie's file for the first time in a long time. He has obtained the name of another potential victim, Sophie Cichetti, and has obtained the Pennsylvania keystone charm, though it did not reveal any fingerprints or other evidence. Len plans on giving the charm back to Jack, though this is against protocol. Len, having gotten word that Jack is in the hospital, believes that the charm will be a talisman that might even speed Jack's recovery. Watching Len, Susie realizes that he has "followed the physical to try to understand things that were impossible to comprehend," and feels that in this way, they are the same.

Susie sees another similarity between her and Len in this passage. Len's job is all about finding physical evidence to help illuminate and make clear horrific acts of violence—he uses tangible things to make sense of the intangible, unbelievable nature of crime and violence. Susie, too, uses what she can see of the physical world to make sense of her removal from it—she attempts to understand the world of the living by observing but never actually experiencing it.



Outside the hospital, Abigail buys an enormous bunch of flowers from a vendor and brings them to Jack's room. Everyone else has gone home from the hospital, but Abigail is not ready to go back to the house just yet—she needs some time to think. She goes across the street to a diner, sits alone in a booth, and eats. A man across from her looks at her, and Abigail falls into her old habit—one she has not held onto in California—of sizing up every man she sees as Susie's potential murderer. As Abigail eats, she thinks that she cannot handle being home for more than a few days.

Abigail, after just a little bit of time back in the world she left, suddenly remembers why she left it. The pain, the curiosity, and the anger she feels about her daughter's death blind her to everything else, and create an endless and painful cycle of anxiety and obsession. Abigail considers, as she eats in the diner, whether she is prepared to commit to a full-time return to this life, or whether it is easier to simply flee again.



Back at the hospital, Abigail plans to wait for Jack to wake and then say goodbye and return to California. As Abigail sits at Jack's bedside, she takes his hand in hers, and wishes she could climb up onto the bed and lie beside him. She realizes that she is still in love with Jack, and wonders how she can love someone so much while keeping it a secret from herself every day.

Once she sits beside Jack, Abigail realizes that the love she feels for Jack—though she has tried to push it away—is stronger than the grief and shame she feels about Susie, and she must honor the light rather than return to the dark.



At about two in the morning it begins to rain. In Connecticut, rain falls on the tin-roofed shack where Mr. Harvey is sleeping—he is dreaming of Lindsey and the number on the back of her jersey flashing at him as she ran away from his house that fateful day. He has this dream whenever he feels threatened.

Mr. Harvey is threatened, and in one of his "not-still" dreams he returns to a similarly powerless and fearful moment—the moment he realized that Lindsey Salmon stood to bring him down.



Jack wakes at close to four in the morning. He wishes he could hold the sleeping Abigail, but he is too weak. Instead he watches the rain hit the windows of his room. Susie slips into the room to be near her mother and father, and is present in a way she has never been—she is beside them, not hovering over them. Jack begins to speak—it is unclear if he is addressing Susie or Abigail. He says, "I thought if I was still enough you might come back," and Abigail rouses from sleep.

The ambiguity of Jack's statement in this passage reveals his allegiance both to Susie and to Abigail. Just after his loss of Susie he had to contend right away with the loss of Abigail, too, and he has longed for a way to get both of them back in the difficult years since. Both of them have come back to him, in a way, though he knows that only one of them can make the choice to stay forever.



Jack asks Abigail how it was to see Buckley and Lindsey, and she admits that it was unbelievably hard. Jack confesses to Abigail that he fell in love with her all over again while she was away, and Susie, watching them, experiences deep envy for the love they share—for the fact that Jack loves Abigail in spite of, and perhaps even because of, her “brokenness.” Jack asks Abigail if she will stay, and she tells him that she will for a while. She reveals that she did not come back to “pretend”—she came back because she feared Jack was dying.

Jack tells Abigail that Susie appeared in the room just now, and presses Abigail to admit that she too sees Susie now and then. Abigail admits that she sees Susie “everywhere.” Jack asks what Abigail would say if he told her that Susie was in the room ten minutes ago; Abigail confesses that she would say he was “insane and probably right.” Susie watches as her parents kiss one another and together begin to cry.

Susie understands that her parents have always loved one another, and as she watches them discuss and attempt to wrangle the pain, fear, and brokenness that have kept them apart for years, she understands—somewhat begrudgingly; she is Susie, after all—that their love for one another has overwhelmed their grief over her loss.



Jack and Abigail’s mutual admission that they see their daughter “everywhere” allows them to embark on a new chapter in their relationship. Right after Susie’s death, each of them was always attempting to squash their grief, tamp down their pain, and “do the right thing” by moving on. Together, they now acknowledge that they will always bear the pain and guilt of Susie’s loss, but that they can rejoice in her ubiquitous presence in their lives rather than run from it.



CHAPTER 21

After Susie turns away from watching her parents, she moves on to watching Ray Singh, who is at home in his parents’ house, and reflects on their kiss. Susie remembers, after the morning on the scaffolding, that she avoided being alone with Ray. She was afraid of what she wanted most—his kiss. Susie remembers talking with Grandma Lynn on the phone about kissing—Grandma Lynn described one’s first kiss as “destiny knocking.” Susie revealed her crush on Ray Singh to her grandmother, and when Lynn asked what the holdup was, Susie confessed she was afraid she’d be bad at kissing. Grandma Lynn told her to “just have fun.” During the kiss itself, though, Susie felt “churned”—a combination of happy and frightened. After the kiss, Susie had wanted more, and could not wait to kiss Ray Singh again.

In the present, Ruth’s father cuts an article about the filling-in of the **sinkhole** out of the paper for Ruth to read. Ray arrives to pick Ruth up at her parents’ house so that the two of them can head for the sinkhole, and Ruth shoves the article in his face, complaining about the fact that the whole neighborhood will soon turn into subdivisions. Ray is charmed by Ruth’s impatience and curiosity, and notes that these traits in both of them are the reason their friendship has lasted so many years. As the two drive toward the sinkhole, they see Joe Ellis walking up ahead. Ruth reveals that her mother has told her that Joe Ellis still lives at home and cannot find a job. Ray sadly remarks that Joe “never got over” Mr. Harvey unjustly framing him for the killing of the neighborhood animals.

Susie’s memories of Ray Singh are just as alive in her mind now as they were on the day of her murder. Her infatuation with Ray Singh has never ended, and as she has watched him over the years, she has only become more curious about what could have been between them had her life not been unjustly cut short. Even years after the kiss, and trapped as she is in her perfect world, Susie still desires more from Ray, and still longs for him deeply.



Ruth and Ray’s friendship has endured over the years due to their mutual respect for one another and their corresponding concerns and curiosity about their hometown and the world around them. Their shared memories of all that transpired the year of Susie’s death have bonded them for life, and as they reflect on those whose lives have remained just as haunted by the fallout from Susie’s death—Joe Ellis included—their friendship deepens and renews itself again and again.



Susie looks down on Route 30, at a spot Ruth and Ray are about to drive past. She sees Len coming out of an apartment carrying a knapsack full of evidence—photos of the graves of the recovered bodies that have been linked to Mr. Harvey. Len is gearing up to go visit Jack in the hospital, and is thinking hard about what he is going to say. He feels guilty that all he has to give them after all these years is just one small charm.

Len arrives at the hospital and enters Jack's room. Abigail awkwardly welcomes him. Len tells Abigail and Jack not to get their hopes up—Harvey still hasn't been caught. He reveals that the police have found an item of Susie's—the Pennsylvania Keystone charm. Len reveals that the charm was found near another body in Connecticut, and that while the body was not Susie's, its recovery means that Harvey can be linked to murders in two other states. As Len retrieves that charm from inside his knapsack, Jack grows excited at the prospect of Susie's case reopening, while Abigail becomes filled with dread. Len hands Jack the evidence bag, and Jack reaches in for the charm. Abigail asks Len how he is certain that Harvey killed the other girls. Len answers that nothing is certain. Abigail, recognizing this as a fixed phrase that "prey[s] on hope," asks Len to leave.

As Susie turns south to catch up with Ruth and Ray, she instead runs into Mr. Harvey. He is driving a ramshackle orange car, and as he drives along, Susie can sense that the memories of his victims, kept at bay for so many years, are coming back one by one. As Harvey continues driving along, Susie can see that the spirit of the first victim of his violence is sitting beside him in the front seat.

As Ruth and Ray arrive at the **sinkhole**, they both remark on how nothing much has changed, though the sinkhole has definitely expanded. They look around and wonder aloud if Hal Heckler still owns the bike shop on the other side of the railroad tracks. Ruth and Ray stand at the edge of the sinkhole, and Ruth asks Ray if he ever thinks about where Susie's body ended up. Ray says that he does not. Trying to suppress the memories of Susie rising up in his mind, Ray steps away from the sinkhole to explore the surrounding area. Ruth, still standing at the edge of the sinkhole, feels Susie's presence, and addresses her directly. She asks Susie if there is anything she wants, and Susie vanishes.

Len, meanwhile, wants to give the Salmons what they so desire—closure—while knowing that he can only offer them a small shred of it. He knows that the charm will not suffice, but at least hopes that it will bring some comfort.



The complicated and painful dynamic between Abigail, Jack, and Len is put on display one final time in this fraught passage. Len, after all these years, still cannot offer the Salmons any closure or justice. Feeling guilty both for failing to catch Susie's killer and for breaking their marriage apart, Len offers the charm as a kind of peace offering, along with the knowledge that one day Harvey will be held accountable for all the pain he has wrought. Abigail, however, has no more energy left to waste on false hope, and she recognizes that that is all Len can offer her. In a moment of strength and refusal, she sends him away, indicating her maturation and her desire to move on.



Mr. Harvey has returned to Norristown to survey his old hometown, but this time, something is different. The barrier between the world of the living and the dead seems to have broken open, and Harvey is, whether he knows it or not, being haunted by his victims.



The ways Ruth and Ray handle the resurfacing of suppressed or painful memories is very different. Ruth goes in search of these memories and moments, hoping to acknowledge and confront them and thus exorcise them—she wants to be a servant of the dead, helping them to obtain what little justice they can and get some semblance of what they need in order to move on. Ray, on the other hand, is reluctant to engage with the dead, perhaps afraid of what an encounter with the spirit world will do to his pragmatic brain, or simply unwilling to face the pain and loss he has carried for so many years.



Susie checks in on her family. Hal, Samuel, and Buckley are at a bike show in a nearby town—the bike shop is abandoned for the day. Abigail is at the hospital with Jack, reading to him from the newspaper. Lindsey is at home alone. Mr. Harvey is driving through the neighborhood, and soon circles onto his old street. No one in the neighborhood notices his presence. As Harvey drives past his old house, one of its new inhabitants—a woman—notices his car stopped across the street from where her daughters are playing, and Harvey moves along.

Harvey passes the Salmon house, and can see Lindsey in the upstairs window. Susie sees a group of people beginning to come down the road towards Harvey's car—it is the final vestiges of the spirits of the women, children, and animals he has killed, emerging from his house. Harvey knows he cannot outrun them, and sits still in the car. A police vehicle pulls up alongside him, and an officer asks if Harvey is lost. Harvey admits, truthfully, that he used to live in the neighborhood. The officer suggests Harvey move along, and as he does, Susie watches Lindsey—safe inside, studying. She has decided to be a therapist.

As Ruth and Ray return to their car, Ruth remains silent, vowing not to tell Ray about her brief encounter with Susie at the **sinkhole** until she has written it down in her journal first. Ray spots a cluster of periwinkle flowers, and goes to clip some for his mother. Ruth stands by the car and waits. Susie feels a prickling along her spine, and watches as Mr. Harvey's car passes by the sinkhole. As the car goes by, Ruth sees all the women he has killed “stuffed in the car in blood-colored gowns.” Ruth begins walking towards them, and blacks out. That, Susie says, is the moment that she fell to Earth.

CHAPTER 22

As Ruth collapses into the road, Mr. Harvey “sail[s] away unwatched.” Susie tips forward helplessly, falling through the farthest boundary of her heaven. She is aware of Ray running towards Ruth, shouting her name—the next second, Susie is in Ruth's eyes, looking up. She can feel Ruth's back against the pavement, and the fresh scrapes where Ruth has fallen on the gravel. Ruth's spirit, meanwhile, pushes against her own skin, wanting out, and soon leaves Ruth's body and flies upward toward heaven. Susie-as-Ruth is filled with a “pitiful desire”—to be alive again, on Earth, forever. Susie realizes that she and Ruth have switched places, and that Susie is firmly in Ruth's body. As Susie adjusts to the “marvelous weight” now pinning her to Earth, she notes that she can no longer hear the voices of Franny or Holly up in heaven.

Susie, sensing that something is brewing, leaves Ruth and Ray to check in on those she loves most. She knows that Harvey is circling through the neighborhood, and wants to ensure that everyone she cares for is safe from the violent, dangerous man hiding behind the façade of meekness and geniality.



The police's catching up with Harvey mirrors the spirits of the women and animals he has killed at last catching up to him. Though the officer who stops him is not aware of who he is—too much time has passed—Harvey is put on high alert by the encounter. Susie is nervous that Harvey will come for Lindsey, who has always threatened him, and who was the reason he had to leave town—but Harvey is not concerned with killing Lindsey, as his instincts for self-preservation seem to win out.



Ruth's second sight is taking over—after she encounters Susie in a more corporeal, meaningful way than she has since the night Susie died, she is assaulted by the vision of all of Harvey's victims clinging to his ramshackle car. It is all too much for Ruth. In a moment of cosmic interconnectedness, Susie pitches forward toward Earth as the barrier between her world and the world of the living—which has, over the course of this chapter, been growing more and more porous—seems to give out, allowing Susie to finally realize her desire to pass through.



The switch that occurs between Ruth and Susie is not a clean reversal of position or consciousness. Susie briefly inhabits Ruth's body at the same time as Ruth's own spirit, and as Ruth struggles to make room for Susie's soul and consciousness, the two share the same body for just a moment. Then Susie, alone in a body once again, feels the deliciousness of being alive—the weight of life and the burden of humanity is heavy, but now she sees it as a “marvelous” gift that she longs to once again possess.



Ray asks Susie-as-Ruth what happened, but Susie—knowing he still believes her to be Ruth—does not know how to answer. Ray grows nervous, and offers to carry Ruth to the car, but Susie insists that she is okay. With Ray’s help, she stands up. In heaven, women are throwing rose petals as they greet Ruth Connors.

Ray looks into Susie’s eyes, and notes that something has changed. Rather than reveal what has happened, Susie says only, “Kiss me.” Ray hesitates, and asks “Ruth” what has happened to her. Susie-as-Ruth reaches her hands up to Ray’s face and pulls him toward her in a “precious, stolen” kiss. Afterward, Ray and Susie walk back to the car.

Ray asks Susie where she wants to go, and suddenly Susie knows why she has fallen to Earth—“to take back a piece of heaven [she has] never known.” She instructs him to drive to Hal Heckler’s bike shop. Ray asks Susie if he can kiss her again, and she lets him. Afterward, Susie tells Ray that when he kisses her, she sees heaven. He asks her what it looks like. She tells him that if he makes love to her, she’ll tell him.

At the back of the bike shop, Susie reaches over the doorjamb until she feels the spare key. Ray asks her how she knew to look there, and Susie answers that she was watched “hundreds” of people hide keys. Inside the little apartment over the bike shop, Susie tells Ray that she needs to shower, and tells him to “make himself at home.” In the bathroom, Susie runs the water and takes off Ruth’s clothes. She hopes that Ruth can see her body as Susie sees it—“perfect” in all its “living beauty.”

Susie steps inside the shower and calls for Ray to join her. Ray, for the first time, addresses Susie by her name, telling her he’s not sure if he should. Susie’s heart seizes, and she asks Ray what he just said—she points out that he called her Susie. Ray pulls back the shower curtain and looks into Susie’s eyes. He says her name again, questioningly. She begs him to join her in the shower, her eyes filling with tears. After a moment, he does. As Ray touches Ruth’s body, he realizes that Susie is inside of her. Susie confesses that she has been watching Ray and Ruth for years, and now she wants him to make love to her—slowly, he does.

While Ruth is welcomed to heaven by a gleeful, grateful showering of recognition, thanks, and devotion, Susie has rather clunkily fallen to Earth and is not even recognized by the man she loves and desires, shielded as she is within Ruth’s body.



Ruth and Ray have kissed many times before, so the request does not seem so odd to Ray, though he does seem to be concerned for Ruth’s bodily well-being. He has not yet intuited what has happened, though he does believe that “something” has changed.



Susie realizes that she and Ruth have each been given a chance to possess what they have always desired. For Ruth, it is an affirmation of her devotion to the dead, and for Susie, it is a positive sexual experience with the person she has longed for since childhood. Susie is direct and flirtatious, where in her life on Earth she was shy and afraid—she finally owns her desire and wields it proudly, knowing she probably does not have much time to waste.



Susie’s omniscience allows her to know things like where Samuel Heckler hides his spare key, but she does not quite reveal this to Ray yet. She provides a coy answer that does not deny who she is, but does not alarm Ray with an outright admission of her true identity, either. Susie luxuriates in her new body, excited for the chance to once again possess a physical form and put it to good use.



Ray, who has known since “Ruth” woke up on the pavement that something is different, finally admits to himself that he believes Susie has possessed Ruth’s body. Perhaps it is a slip of the tongue, at first, but this passage also demonstrates that Ray has been dreaming of and longing for Susie just as deeply as she has for him, and that his desire for her enables him to recognize her anywhere—even in the form of his best friend.



As they have sex, Ray asks Susie what heaven looks like, and she does her best to explain. Ray asks Susie if she will be gone soon, and she tells him that she thinks she will. The two of them move to the bed, and after they finish, Ray begs Susie not to go. Susie rests her head on Ray's chest and falls asleep. When she opens her eyes again, she senses that she does not have much time left. When Ray wakes, she asks him if he ever thinks about the dead, and tells him that the dead are everywhere, all the time, and that talking to them doesn't need to be "sad or scary."

Susie sees something at the end of the bed—she tries to convince herself it is a trick of the light, but as Ray reaches out to touch her, she realizes she can no longer feel anything. Ray slips out of the bed and stands up to go to the bathroom. Susie implores him to read Ruth's journals as the room fills with the spirits of dead men and women. Slowly, Susie makes her way to the desk in the corner and picks up a phone sitting there. She punches in the number to her house, and on the third ring, Buckley picks up. She tells him that it is Susie calling, but Buckley cannot hear her. As spirits continue to fill the room, Susie asks them who they are, but her voice no longer makes any noise.

Susie notices that she is standing up among the spirits, but Ruth is sprawled across the desk. From the bathroom, Susie hears Ray calling for her to pass him a towel. When she does not answer, he comes to the doorway, where he sees Ruth passed out. He runs to her and touches her on the shoulder, and she wakes up. They look at each other, and each realizes that Susie is gone.

Susie recalls a memory of riding a train once, during her life on Earth, backward into a tunnel. This, she says, is how it feels to leave Earth for the second time. She is accompanied now, not ripped away, and it is easier to leave than coming back in the first place had been. As she looks down, she sees her two old friends holding each other, unable to speak yet about what has happened to them, dumbstruck by the possibilities the experience has opened up for them.

Ray and Susie fulfill their desire for one another in a moment of passion but also of emotion, longing, and questioning. The excitement of their lovemaking is inextricably intertwined with the marvelous and baffling occurrence unfolding before them—Susie's return to Earth. Their experience of one another is heightened by this, and provides an opportunity both for Ray to instruct Susie in all she has missed on Earth and for Susie to instruct Ray on how to reconcile his fears of the dead with the reality that the dead are everywhere, all the time—an inescapable part of life.



Susie knows that her time to return to heaven has come—she was only granted a brief moment on Earth to fulfill her deepest desire, to participate in life and learn the secrets of adulthood. She attempts to reconnect with her family, but it is too late—she is already being pulled away by a group of spirits who have come to guide her back to the place where she truly belongs.



Susie watches Ruth and Ray return to one another, as she herself prepares to depart. She knows that they will be there for one another, and will help each other to process what has transpired between them.



Susie's second departure from Earth is not full of pain, confusion, or desperation. She is ready, she is fulfilled, and she knows that she is both flanked by a new kind of "family" and returning to the place she is meant to be.



CHAPTER 23

The next morning, Ray is awoken by the smell of his mother baking downstairs. He and Ruth are in his childhood bed together. After leaving the bike shop the previous evening, they returned to the Singhs' and fell asleep. Ruana checked on them in the middle of the night and saw them sleeping together, entwined but fully clothed. Around three in the morning, Ray woke up, and sat looking with warmth and love at Ruth's body. He went over to Ruth's bag and lifted her notebook out of it. He read her poetry and her accounts of murdered women. Some time later, Ruth sat up, and excitedly told Ray that she had "so much to tell [him.]"

At the hospital, a nurse helps Jack into a wheelchair—it is time for him to go home. Buckley, Lindsey, and Abigail ride down in the elevator with him, and when the doors open on the lobby, Susie knows that the four of them are "meant to be there together, alone."

In her kitchen, Ruana considers divorce. Something about the "crumbling, clinging postures" Ruth and Ray adopted together in sleep has forced her to try and remember the last time she and her husband went to bed at the same time or had a real conversation. Ray and Ruth come downstairs for breakfast, and Ruana hands them each a mug of coffee. She asks for their help in delivering a pie to the Salmon family, but Ray tells her that the two of them are still tired after having a "pretty intense day" yesterday. Ruth announces that she has somewhere to go, but promises to come back later.

Hal buys Buckley a drum set, and it is waiting for him when the Salmons all return from the hospital. Susie senses that during the forty-eight hours her mother sat by Jack's side, the world has changed—but she notes that it will change again and again, endlessly, over the years. Grandma Lynn offers to make everybody drinks while Hal teaches Buckley the drums. As Lynn places ice cubes in several tall glasses, she looks out the window, and swears she can see a little girl wearing "the clothes of her youth" in the yard. The next moment, though, the girl is gone.

As the Salmons unpack the car, Lindsey asks her mother if she is going to hurt Jack again. Abigail assures her that she is going to do "everything she can not to," but does not make any promises this time. Lindsey reveals that she knows what Abigail did, and then the two of them go inside to watch Buckley play his new drums.

Ruth and Ray are forever changed by the experience they have shared. They sleep entwined but clothed, demonstrating the combination of sexual and platonic love that has always defined their relationship and now binds them to each other in a new way. Neither of them will ever be able to fully communicate what transpired between them—or what they experienced separately from one another—but as they were in their youth, they remain connected by their mutual obsession with the potential of the afterlife and the role of desire in blurring the bounds of Earth and heaven, more strongly now than ever.



Susie no longer watches her family with envy, needing to be the center of their worlds—she is happy that they are managing to move past their grief and distrust and reconnect with one another, making a new life without Susie in it.



Ruana, who has always been aloof and independent, now sees that her own child has managed to form a bond so unique and so profound that it causes her to want to better her own circumstances, and pursue her own romantic, intellectual, and emotional desires.



Susie now understands that change is inevitable, and that it is not really a bad thing. She knows that it is the right thing for her family to move on—the patterns of grief, longing, and clinging to Susie's memory that they adopted in earlier years have kept them from healing together, and now they finally have the chance to start anew. Meanwhile, Lynn becomes yet another character to glimpse a break in the barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead.



Abigail has learned from her mistakes and now knows what she needs to do to be a good wife and mother. She cannot entrap herself in grief or longing again, and must simultaneously face the mistakes of her past while finding a way to keep from repeating them.



Abigail goes upstairs to Susie’s old room. She whispers “I love you, Susie” into the empty room, and though Susie has heard the words countless times from her father, she is shocked to find that she has been waiting for years to hear them from her mother. Abigail, Susie knows, has finally realized that persisting in her love for her dead daughter will not destroy her. Abigail notices a **photograph** on the dresser, and takes a closer look—it is the picture Susie took of her that quiet morning. As she watches her mother, Susie realizes that she is finally “done yearning” for her family and needing them to yearn for her. Despite this, she knows that she still will, and that they still will, always.

Abigail rejoins her family downstairs. Samuel has an announcement to make. He raises a glass of champagne in a toast, and says how grateful he is to have Abigail and Jack back home, and how honored he is to be marrying Lindsey. As Susie watches her family rejoice in one another’s love and company, she considers “the lovely bones” that have grown around her absence. She begins to see things in a way that lets her appreciate the world, even though she is not in it.

Hal spots someone through the blinds, and announces that Ray Singh is on the porch. Hal opens the door and calls for Ray, who is already on his way down the porch steps—his mother is waiting in the car. Abigail walks down the driveway and leans into Ruana’s car window to say hello to her. Ruana asks if Abigail will join her to smoke cigarettes once again, and Abigail tells her it’s a date. Then Ray and Ruana join the Salmons in the living room. Susie realizes that no one in the room will know when she is gone, just as they cannot know how heavily she hovers over them right now. Susie looks out to the cornfield and sees Ruth there, alone—a woman haunted, but by choice now. Susie knows that the story of her own life and death are Ruth’s to tell, if she chooses to.

During Ray and Ruana’s visit, Samuel mentions the Gothic Revival house on the side of the road that he and Lindsey are dreaming of refurbishing. Ray asks if the house has a big hole in the ceiling, and when Samuel says it does, Ray tells him that Ruth’s father owns it—he has bought up old places around the neighborhood and wants to restore them. Samuel marvels at the coincidence. Susie leaves the living room.

As the Salmons reach a place of healing, perspective, and acceptance, so too does Susie. It is as if watching her family achieve closure and peace—and realize that their grief does not have to envelop them or break them—helps her see that her own grief and longing do not have to be the cornerstones of her afterlife. Even though Susie and her family simultaneously achieve these emotional and intellectual breakthroughs, Susie knows that none of them will be able to help themselves from missing or thinking of one another—and that is okay, too.



Here the novel’s title is revealed to refer to the “bones” of a new life—the healed fractures, new structures, and strong frameworks of all Susie’s family has endured. She knows that their growth and happiness has cost them a lot, but also knows that her death, and her loss, allowed them to confront their darkest demons and emerge stronger and better than they were before.



In this passage, Susie and Ruth are once again connected by their loneliness and isolation. As the rest of their extended family and friends gather to celebrate Jack’s recovery and Lindsey and Samuel’s engagement, Ruth chooses to remain alone in the cornfield, while Susie considers departing the room, since no one even knows she’s there. They are both “haunted,” and Susie considers the role that choice plays in their respective isolations versus the role fate has played.



This moment of apparent destiny, so close to the novel’s conclusion, foreshadows a change in the fate of the Salmon family and inspires a collective marveling at the odd ways in which fate, chance, and happy accidents have shined down upon them even in the face of unbelievable grief. Knowing that her family will be just fine without her, Susie departs, taking leave of her post as their eternal watchman.



BONES

Susie explains that “you don’t notice the dead leaving when they choose to leave you. You’re not meant to.” She notes that Grandma Lynn died several years later, but Susie has not seen her in heaven—she is sure that Grandma Lynn will come to meet her “in her own sweet time.” Susie confesses that she still, sometimes, sneaks away to watch her family—she can’t help it, just as they can’t help thinking of her.

Lindsey and Samuel marry, and soon begin clearing the lot around the empty house on Route 30. Mr. Connors agreed to sell them the house if Samuel paid him in labor, as the first employee in a restoration business. As Samuel and Lindsey restore the house, Lindsey discovers that she is pregnant. The Salmons are all overjoyed, and Jack hopes that one day he will be able to teach another child to build ships in bottles, though he knows the act will always “hold an echo” of Susie.

Susie says that her heaven is neither perfect nor gritty. It is a fun place, though not necessarily beautiful. To pass the time and amuse themselves, those in heaven commit small acts of benevolent mischief, like causing Buckley’s garden to come up all at once one year. Knowing that Abigail had stayed and once again often found herself staring out at the yard, Susie gave her the gift of something to marvel at. Susie’s parents eventually give her possessions, along with Grandma Lynn’s, to Goodwill. They don’t let go of Susie entirely, and continue to share with one another the moments in which they think of or “feel” Susie.

Ray becomes a doctor, and experiences more and more moments in which he chooses “not to disbelieve.” He knows deep down that he made love to Susie, and even in the black-and-white world of science and surgery, Ray hangs onto this truth. If he ever finds himself doubting it, he calls Ruth, who still lives in New York City, and is still trying to find a way to write down and communicate what she experienced when she went to heaven. She wants everyone to believe what she already knows: that the dead are in the air all around, and are the oxygen people breathe.

Susie has finally reached a place of acceptance where she feels ready to move on. She understands now that everything must happen in its own time. Just as it took her many, many years to feel that she could move on from her family, she knows now that Grandma Lynn will navigate her own heaven in her own way, and in her own time.



Lindsey was told early on after her sister’s death that she now represented the future of the Salmon family, and carried the burden of keeping her sister’s legacy and memory alive. Lindsey’s happiness, health, and success in love represents the fulfillment of this prophecy. Life is uncontainable, and grief is not unending.



Heaven is not perfect, or at least not the part of heaven where Susie still lingers. Susie’s experience of heaven as described by Alice Sebold defies many of the commonly-held cultural or religious expectations of the afterlife, and renders it a place where joy is just as common as boredom, and where desire still reigns. (In a way, it seems more like a kind of Purgatory.) As Susie’s family slowly begins to heal and move on, realizing that she belongs now only their memories, she too lessens her grip on trying to control or influence them and instead delights in the small ways she can communicate with them.



Ray and Ruth have been isolated from much of the rest of the world by the earth-shattering experience they shared, but have found connection and community in one another. Ruth is attempting to fulfill the destiny thrust upon her when Susie first passed her by on the way up to heaven all those years ago, knowing now that justice for the dead can be secured in many different ways.



One afternoon, scanning the earth alongside her grandfather, Susie's view ends up at a diner her grandfather remembers from his days as a traveling businessman. Just as Susie is about to turn away from looking down on the diner, she sees Mr. Harvey coming out of the doors of a Greyhound bus in the parking lot. Mr. Harvey goes in and orders a coffee. A teenage girl walks into the diner—Mr. Harvey recognizes her from the bus. The girl goes into the bathroom, and when she comes out a few minutes later, Mr. Harvey follows her out of the diner. It is snowing, and there is a drop-off to a ravine below directly on the side of the diner. Susie watches as Mr. Harvey, following the girl, "calculate[s] his business in his mind."

Mr. Harvey attempts to engage the girl in a conversation, but she rebuffs him. He persists, but she calls him a creep and walks away. As she does, an icicle hanging off the edge of the diner falls and hits Mr. Harvey—he is thrown off-balance, and stumbles forward into the ravine. Susie explains that it will be weeks before the snow at the bottom of the ravine melts enough to expose his corpse.

Susie describes watching Lindsey build a garden outside her and Samuel's new home. She works in the garden every day, decompressing and thinking about her patients. Susie follows her sister's thoughts as Lindsey thinks fondly of gardening with Susie in their childhood, and of Holiday, their dog, and of how in a few years it will be time to get her own child a dog to play with. Samuel joins Lindsey in the garden—he has their daughter, named Abigail Suzanne, in his arms. As Samuel sets up a picnic blanket for the baby to play on, Lindsey leaves Susie behind in her own memories, where she is "meant to be."

In a small house, five miles away, a man holds out Susie's mud-covered charm bracelet to his wife. He explains that he found it at an old industrial park—it is being bulldozed, for fear of more sinkholes opening up. The man touches each of the charms on the bracelet, and his wife remarks aloud that the little girl who once owned it must be "grown up by now." Susie interjects: "Almost," she says. "Not quite." She wishes her readers a long and happy life.

Susie no longer watches Mr. Harvey out of a morbid desire to see what he is up to, and in that way deepen her own sense of injustice, sadness, pain, and anger. She stumbles upon him by accident, however, in this passage, and is concerned to find that he is still up to his old patterns—pursuing his dark desires and calculating and constructing scenarios in which he can claim victims. Susie knows at this point that she cannot influence events on Earth the way she once thought she could, and experiences anxiety and curiosity combined as she looks down on Harvey and the latest woman on whom he has set his sights.



In this passage, Harvey is the recipient, at long last, of a kind of cosmic justice. Due to Susie's earlier admission that during games of "How To Commit The Perfect Murder" she always chose an icicle, there is the implication that she did, in fact, cause Harvey's death, at last influencing physical events on Earth in a culmination of her desire to participate in the world she left behind, but Sebald intentionally leaves the truth unclear and thus up to the reader.



Susie struggled for so long to keep her family from forgetting her, and worried so deeply that she would be forgotten. She now understands that she will never be left behind by those who loved her on Earth—but that neither does she need to be the sole focus of their worlds. Life goes on, and in this passage, Susie actually rejoices in the unstoppable forward march of time, grateful for how it has helped her family to heal and grow in new ways around the void of her loss.



In one final scene, Susie observes a man and a woman finding one of her most treasured objects in life and reflecting on what the fate of its onetime owner could be. As they speculate that she must be all grown up, Susie speaks up to reflect on the unique conundrum of her afterlife: she will never be grown up, as she is in a way frozen in time; nonetheless, she is still learning, growing, and changing.





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