

Touching Spirit Bear



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BEN MIKAELSEN

Mikaelsen was born in Bolivia to Christian missionary parents. As a child in Bolivia, Mikaelsen grew up speaking Spanish as his first language and experienced prejudice and discrimination for being one of the only white people in his village. He didn't start school until age nine, when he was old enough to attend the boarding school where his siblings went. Having had no education until his first day of school, Mikaelsen was punished, often physically, by his teachers for poor performance. His parents moved the family to Minnesota in time for Mikaelsen to start seventh grade. In the United States, Mikaelsen was once again bullied. To cope, he wrote stories, worked to earn money so that he could take flying lessons, and taught himself to cliff dive. It wasn't until college that a professor, intrigued by a writing assignment Mikaelsen turned in, connected Mikaelsen with a tutor so that he could learn basic spelling, grammar, and conventions. After moving to Montana and becoming involved with his local Fish and Game office, Mikaelsen adopted a declawed black bear cub that was going to be euthanized otherwise. Buffy the bear lived with Mikaelsen until his death in 2012; Buffy inspired *Touching Spirit Bear*. Though *Touching Spirit Bear* is Mikaelsen's most famous work, he's written a number of other novels for young readers. Mikaelsen also runs an anti-bullying project and speaks about bullying to schools. He lives with his wife in Anacortes, Washington.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Restorative justice is, as the novel explains, a method of helping offenders and victims heal through communication. By giving victims an active role, it gives them a sense of power; it also seeks to help offenders understand how they harmed the victim (and sometimes, the whole community) and how they can take responsibility for their actions. It can be seen as the opposite of traditional criminal justice, which looks only at where an offender went wrong legally and how to administer punishment. Studies have shown that restorative justice is extremely effective: it dramatically reduces the likelihood that an offender will reoffend or return to jail. Though restorative justice has roots in Native cultures in New Zealand and in North America (notably in the Tlingit Nation, of which Edwin and Garvey in the novel are members), it began to rise in popularity in the 1990s. Today, its basic tenets are applied far beyond criminal justice to theories of classroom management, social work, and even family therapy practices.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a follow up to *Touching Spirit Bear*, Mikaelsen wrote *Ghost of Spirit Bear* in 2008. It continues Cole and Peter's journey after their return to Minneapolis as they attempt to help their entire community heal, as they themselves did in Alaska. Like *Touching Spirit Bear*, Mikaelsen's novel *Saving Josh McGuire* was inspired by Mikaelsen's experience with raising black bears. Novels like Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* and Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins* share many similarities with *Touching Spirit Bear*; as in *Spirit Bear*, the natural world is positioned as a powerful teacher and the work of surviving in nature takes center stage. In terms of the novel's treatment of restorative justice practices, Howard Zehr's 1990 book *Changing Lenses—A New Focus for Crime and Justice* is credited with being one of the first and most influential works that introduced concepts of restorative justice to a wider audience.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Touching Spirit Bear
- **When Written:** 2000
- **Where Written:** Montana
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** Minneapolis, Minnesota; a remote Alaskan island
- **Climax:** Cole and Peter see the Spirit Bear.
- **Antagonist:** Cole's Dad; Anger
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Black(ish) Bears. Despite what their name might imply, American black bears only sport black coats about 70 percent of the time. Spirit Bears are American black bears with a rare recessive gene that gives them white or buff coats. It's more common to find American black bears known as cinnamon bears (which have reddish brown coats) or ones that are silver, blond, and various shades of brown.

Don't Poke the Bear. Black bears are, on the whole, much less likely to attack humans than either brown or grizzly bears; they evolved to be cautious and generally avoid humans. Despite this, Cole's choice to approach the bear in the novel is a great example of what *not* to do when confronted with a bear—though black bears are relatively small (most weigh less than 300 pounds), they're still capable of killing a human. There have been fewer than 100 incidences of black bears killing humans in the U.S. in the last century.



PLOT SUMMARY

Fifteen-year-old Cole Matthews sits angrily in the bow of a small boat. He's headed for a remote Alaskan island accompanied by Edwin, a Tlingit elder, and Garvey, Cole's parole officer who's also Tlingit. Cole faces a year of banishment on the island, and he resents everyone in his life for this. As Edwin and Garvey take Cole to shore, show him his crude cabin, and give him advice, Cole thinks back on how he got here.

Cole recently robbed a hardware store. When a kid named Peter Driscall rats Cole out, Cole beats Peter up and slams Peter's head into the sidewalk. Even Nathaniel Blackwood, the expensive lawyer Cole's parents hire, doesn't think he can do anything to prevent Cole from being harshly punished. Garvey suggests that Cole sign up for **Circle Justice**, an organization that practices restorative justice. Through their program, Cole would learn to take responsibility and try to make things right with Peter, with the help of their community. Cole is dismissive until he learns that participating in Circle Justice might lessen his jail time. At the first Healing Circle meeting, Cole seethes as his parents, who recently divorced, sit on either side of him. He hates them and believes it's their fault he's there. Seeing Peter at the meeting is a shock—Peter limps and has a speech impediment as a result of the beating—but Cole tells himself that this is Peter's fault. Chaos breaks out when Cole tells everyone present that his dad beats him. His dad is enraged; Cole's mom refuses to support her son's story. When Peter's lawyer sarcastically notes that they can't just ship Cole away, Garvey brings up that he's Tlingit and that his tribe in Southeast Alaska banishes offenders to remote islands for a year. Cole puts on a brave face, but secretly, he's terrified.

Now, on the island, Cole insists he'll kill any bear he sees—he's not afraid. Edwin tells him about **Spirit Bears**, white black bears that live south of here. He insists that if Cole takes the time to learn, he can learn a lot from the animals here. Garvey, meanwhile, offers Cole an **at.óow**, a Tlingit tribal blanket. He explains that it's a symbol of trust, and Cole grudgingly accepts the object. Edwin and Garvey leave. They'll return in a few days, but Cole has no intention of being here when they do—he's going to swim away. He digs through his supplies and lights them and his shelter on fire, laughing maniacally. Then, he strips to his underwear and wades into the freezing bay. Cole is a strong swimmer, but he realizes the tide is coming in and working against him. His body begins to give out, so he lets the water carry him to shore. He's so cold that he can barely think, but he drags himself to a spot that feels warm. When he comes to, he realizes it's the smoldering remains of the shelter. As Cole plots his next move, he thinks he sees a Spirit Bear. Annoyingly, the animal doesn't seem to be afraid of him.

The next day, it rains. Cole knows he has no choice but to swim today, but the Spirit Bear appears on the beach and Cole wants

to feel powerful. He makes himself a spear, grabs his knife, and approaches the bear. When Cole hurls the spear, the bear flies into action. It chases Cole, and during their scuffle, it breaks Cole's leg, an arm, his pelvis, and his ribs, in addition to shredding his torso. Then, it wanders away, leaving Cole with only a tuft of fur he ripped out. Cole can't fathom how this happened—*everything* is afraid of him. He looks around and feels separate from the world around him. He wonders if he's going to die.

Over the next two days, Cole exists in a pain-addled stupor. Though he initially resents a nest of baby birds in a nearby tree, he feels awful when a thunderstorm takes down the tree and kills all the babies. Cole realizes he's powerless and wonders if his life has any meaning. After a dream in which he's a baby bird in need of help, Cole vows to live. He eats grass, worms, his own vomit, and even a live mouse. When the Spirit Bear returns, Cole spits at it, intent on having the last word. The bear licks his spit up. When Cole wakes up later, he discovers the bear standing over him. He resists the instinct to spit—instead, Cole reaches out and touches the animal. Then, it leaves. After this encounter, Cole grows weaker. When he's close to death, Garvey and Edwin return. They take him to Drake, where Cole spends the night in the care of Rosey, the nurse on the island. Cole is comforted by Garvey's presence and is relieved that Garvey rescued the *at.óow*. Though Cole tells Garvey and Edwin everything, they're skeptical that he saw a real Spirit Bear. As Cole prepares for his flight to the nearest hospital, he finds the white fur from the bear in his pocket. He vows that from now on, he won't need proof, because he'll always tell the truth. He throws the fur in the water.

Cole spends the next six months in the hospital. His mom visits him regularly. During her visits, Cole learns that his dad's parents beat his dad when he was little; he has no idea how to be a parent without being violent. Cole's mom agrees to accuse her ex-husband of child abuse; she also quits drinking and asks Cole for forgiveness. When Cole gets out of the hospital, he still limps and he'll never have full use of his right arm. The one Circle meeting he attends is a disaster—everyone wants to send him to jail, even though Edwin flies in to make the case that Cole is changing. Cole resigns himself to jail, but Edwin and Garvey convince the Circle to give him another chance.

This time, Cole has to pay his own way to Alaska. He sells all his sports equipment to buy supplies and building materials for another cabin. Garvey and Edwin take Cole out to the island and insist that Cole do all the work of making camp and building his cabin. Cole resents this and struggles to keep his attitude in check. On the first night, Garvey tries to impress upon Cole that life is like a hot dog: it can do the simple work of feeding a person, or, if a person cooks it with care and shares it with friends, it can be a celebration. The next morning, Edwin wakes Cole up before dawn and takes him to a pond. They soak in the freezing cold water. Edwin shares that when he was banished

to the island as a young person, he found that if he focused on the cold, he could learn to be happy. He also makes it clear that Cole's anger will never disappear, but Cole can learn to manage it better. Though Cole thinks this makes more sense than anything his counselors told him, he still thinks soaking in an ice-cold pond is nonsense. After a hard day of work, Cole prepares supper. Since Garvey saw a whale earlier that morning, they dance a whale dance and each share what they learned from their dance. Cole thinks he looks stupid, but he learns that whales don't have homes. Edwin says that when he's ready, Cole will dance the dance of anger.

Edwin makes Cole accompany him to the pond again in the morning. Then, Edwin hands Cole a heavy rock, representing Cole's ancestors, and makes him carry it up a hill. At the top, Edwin says it becomes Cole's anger and he should roll it down the hill. Cole is sullen all day, and at supper, his attitude makes Edwin and Garvey threaten to take Cole home. Edwin insists that Cole needs to show his dedication by getting up to go to the pond and to carry the ancestor rock by himself in the morning. Terrified they'll follow through, Cole does as he's told. He tries to imitate Edwin's breathing style and finds that the water doesn't feel so cold this time around. When he carries the rock up the hill, he thinks of how far he's come and sees a disappearing white shape. Back at camp, Cole apologizes. He explains that he knows he has to stop blaming everyone else for his mistakes—he doesn't even blame his dad, since his dad is scared and doesn't know better. Cole gets to work on his cabin and makes a delicious supper to commemorate Edwin and Garvey's last night on the island. He even uses the *at.óow* as a tablecloth. He dances the Spirit Bear dance that night. Garvey and Edwin both accompany Cole to the pond and on his hike the next morning, and as they prepare to leave, Edwin says that Cole needs to learn one thing before he can heal—but he won't say what that is.

Cole dutifully spends mornings soaking in the pond and hiking. One day, he remembers the totem poles he saw in Drake, and Garvey's suggestion to carve. Cole finds a perfect log but knows it'd also make a good canoe. Cole drags it back to the cabin, barely sleeps that night, and skips the pond in the morning. He angrily starts to carve the front into a point, but then he chooses to turn the log into a totem pole and resumes his mornings in the pond. When Edwin returns, Cole tells him the truth. Cole also starts trying to become "invisible" so that he can see the Spirit Bear, but smearing his body in ash and cedar doesn't work. Finally, Cole realizes that being invisible means becoming part of the landscape. The next morning, he sits at the point and lets himself get drenched. Sure enough, the Spirit Bear appears. That night, Cole dances the dance of anger. He dances his story of his first trip to the island. When he's done, he shouts, "I'm sorry," and, "I forgive you." During Edwin's next visit, Cole shares what he learned: that if he's angry, someone else is controlling him. Forgiving gives Cole control.

He wants to carve something on his totem to represent this, but he doesn't know what. Cole also says that he learned he must help Peter before he can truly heal.

During Edwin's next few visits, he seems short with Cole. Winter passes. One day in early spring, Edwin arrives with news that Peter tried to commit suicide. Cole is shocked, but not enough to please Edwin. Edwin leaves without hearing Cole's idea for how to help Peter. A day later, Edwin returns—Peter tried to kill himself again, and no one knows how to help him. Cole suggests that if Peter could come to the island and engage in the island rituals, he'd see that healing is possible. Several weeks later, Peter, Mr. and Mrs. Driscal, and Garvey arrive. Garvey will stay on the island and supervise the boys. Peter is terrified of Cole, which Cole finds disturbing. On their first day alone, Cole attempts to give Peter a candy bar. Garvey shares that Cole's dad is suing for custody of Cole, but he insists that Cole's dad won't win. Over the next few weeks, Cole sleeps in a tent far away from the cabin, and Peter is cold and rude to him. Though he accompanies Cole and Garvey on their morning ritual, he refuses to truly participate. Finally, Peter allows Cole to sleep in the cabin, but he's inconsiderate every chance he gets. He even destroys one of Cole's totem pole carvings. Cole and Garvey drag a log up so that Peter can carve his own totem, and one day, Cole discovers Peter fixing the carving he destroyed on Cole's. The new carving is amazing, and Peter haughtily says that he might be willing to teach Cole to carve.

Four weeks after Peter's arrival, Peter insists that he and Cole go alone to the pond. Peter tries to engage Cole in a fistfight, but Cole refuses to take the bait. He reiterates that he's sorry and wants to help Peter heal and forgive. Peter collapses and admits that he's terrified. Cole comforts Peter until he notices the Spirit Bear watching. The boys go on with their morning ritual and find another rock for Peter to carry. Cole passes the *at.óow* on to Peter as a symbol of their budding friendship, and then, Peter helps Cole carve a perfect circle on his totem pole to represent anger and forgiveness.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Cole Matthews – Cole is the 15-year-old protagonist of the novel. Cole is unspeakably angry, and to deal with his anger, he takes it out on everyone around him. This is why he commits crimes—he's been getting in trouble with the law for half of his life—and specifically, it's why he beats Peter Driscal for ratting him out to adults for his latest crime. Though Cole's goal is to make everyone afraid of him, he only feels this way because he himself is so terrified. As far as he's concerned, the only way he can trust a person is if they're afraid of him. Though Cole unfairly tries to blame his anger, fear, and bad choices on

others, he does have a good reason to be angry: his dad violently beats him, and Cole believes that neither his dad nor his mom care about him. When he becomes involved with the **Circle Justice** program and is sent to Alaska for punishment in lieu of going to jail, he views this banishment as just another way for his parents to get rid of him. Cole's anger hinders his ability to make good decisions: in the Alaskan wilderness, he burns his shelter, attempts to escape the island, and tries to approach and kill a **Spirit Bear**. The Spirit Bear attacks, however, and in the days that follow, Cole is forced to admit that he's not powerful—and that he needs help. The experience of being mauled begins to change Cole, as he learns that he cannot continue in such a violent manner. His second foray to the island is far more successful: with the help of Tlingit elder Edwin's daily rituals, Cole begins to find purpose and peace, as they help him to channel his anger into more useful pursuits. Ultimately, once Cole dances "the dance of anger," he realizes that the final step to his healing must be to help Peter heal. Given Cole's new outlook on life, it's shocking to learn that Peter tried to commit suicide after the assault. However, Peter's parents agree to send him to the island, and Cole tries to be as welcoming and nonthreatening as possible. Cole even refuses to fight back when Peter tries to hurt him—and following their sighting of the Spirit Bear, Cole and Peter begin a tentative friendship. Cole's progression thus embodies the novel's message that overcoming the cycle of violence and making amends for one's actions is possible through trusting others and accepting personal responsibility.

Peter Driscall – Peter is a skinny, redheaded ninth grader whom Cole violently beats up when Peter tattles to adults that Cole robbed and trashed a hardware store. Following the beating, Peter suffers a permanent limp, has memory and attention problems, lisps, and speaks in a slow, drawn-out manner as a result of his injuries. He's also terrified and angry about what happened to him. For much of the novel, this doesn't worry Cole, but Peter reenters Cole's life in a major way when Cole discovers that the key to his own healing is helping Peter to heal and forgive. Around the same time that Cole makes this leap, Peter attempts to commit suicide as a result of his depression and anger. Horrified, Cole insists that the only way for Peter to heal is to come to the Alaskan island where Cole has been banished as punishment for the assault. Ultimately, since Peter's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Driscall, don't know what else to do, they agree. On the island, Peter keeps to himself as much as possible and is terrified of Cole. In his brave moments, he argues with Cole about the existence of the **Spirit Bear**. As he begins to see that Cole has changed, Peter allows Cole to sleep in the cabin with him and Cole's parole officer, Garvey—but he also grows confident and cruel. He gets Cole's things dirty, pushes Cole, and even destroys one of Cole's totem pole carvings. But once Cole gets Peter set up with his own totem pole, Peter reveals that he's an excellent carver and begins making overtures to Cole, even fixing the animal he

destroyed. Things come to a head when one morning, the boys go alone to soak in the pond and Peter rages at Cole, punching him and kicking him. Peter ultimately collapses, crying about how afraid he is—and as he accepts Cole's comfort, the Spirit Bear appears. Peter helps Cole to carve a **circle** on his totem pole, and though they're not entirely comfortable with each other yet, it's implied that the boys' friendship is just beginning.

Edwin – Edwin is the Tlingit elder who facilitates Cole's banishment on a remote Alaskan island after Cole assaults Peter. He's a potbellied, quiet man with a look that seems consistently calm and knowing. Edwin gets on Cole's bad side immediately by forcing Cole to put his clothes on inside out to show shame, acting unafraid of Cole, and refusing to rise to any of Cole's bait. Even more irritatingly, Edwin insists that **Spirit Bears** are more dignified than some people, something that Cole finds offensive. Edwin also makes Cole feel insignificant by insisting that he's part of a much greater circle of life and needs to respect nature and animals. Despite their bad start, Cole is thrilled to see Edwin when Edwin and Cole's parole officer, Garvey, return to the island to discover that the Spirit Bear mauled Cole. Months later, when Cole is recovered and attends his first **Circle Justice** meeting, Edwin flies in from Alaska to attend and makes the case to the disbelieving Circle members that Cole has changed and should be allowed to continue to change. Once he and Garvey convince the Circle to return Cole to the island, Cole's thoughts on Edwin begin to change. Though Edwin remains quiet—at times, maddeningly so—he also introduces Cole to several rituals he can perform to gain control over his anger. He shares that he was also banished on the island as a young person, and that these rituals helped him. However, Edwin wasn't able to help the person he hurt, which is why he now helps Cole. By withholding information, and instead simply giving Cole the space and the tools he needs, Edwin is able to force Cole into making a number of intellectual leaps on his own. Though Edwin believes that Cole has changed and turned himself around, he becomes increasingly distant and angry as Peter's mental health deteriorates as a result of Cole's violence. He does, however, arrange for Peter to come to the island so he can attempt to heal.

Garvey – Garvey is Cole's parole officer after Cole is arrested for assaulting Peter. Garvey is built like a bulldog and annoys Cole, since he's unwaveringly friendly, visits all the time, and seems to see right through Cole's tough façade. He's the one to suggest that Cole participate in **Circle Justice**, though he also insists that he's not going to help Cole unless Cole truly buys into the program. He also brings up the possibility of banishment for Cole—Garvey is Tlingit and knows that his community in Alaska still facilitates banishment for young people. Upon leaving Cole on the island, Garvey gifts Cole an **at.óow** (tribal blanket) as a symbol of trust and friendship, though he can tell that Cole doesn't understand the significance of the gift. Cole hates Garvey for his role in getting

him onto the island, but when Garvey rescues Cole after the Spirit Bear mauls him, Cole clings to Garvey more than anyone else. Garvey remains dedicated and loyal to Cole through Cole's time in the hospital and, with Edwin's help, facilitates Cole's return to the island. During the few days that Garvey and Edwin are there with Cole—even though Cole and Garvey have a much better relationship by this point—Garvey refuses to give Cole any leeway to be selfish and rude. During their time together, Cole does begin to wonder how he ever could've hated Garvey when Garvey is so kind, caring, and funny. Garvey eventually shares that he went to jail for five years as a young person because Circle Justice wasn't an option for him—and he helps Cole for this reason. When Circle Justice agrees to send Peter to the island to try to recover, Garvey takes his accrued vacation time to supervise the boys. He acts mostly as a quiet, friendly buffer as the boys cautiously begin to trust each other.

Cole's Dad – Cole's dad is a wealthy, imposing man who regularly dresses in three-piece suits, no matter where he's going. He's a heavy drinker and believes that he can deal with every problem by throwing money or a lawsuit at it—which means that Cole poses a problem for him, as buying Cole expensive gifts and sports equipment doesn't buy Cole's compliance. Rather, Cole's dad began beating Cole when Cole was small, often to the point that Cole went physically numb and couldn't hide the bruises after the fact. Cole's mom and dad divorced in the year before the novel begins, and they refuse to speak to each other in the novel's present—which makes their split even more difficult for Cole to accept. Though the novel never says whether Cole's dad was physically abusive to his wife during their marriage, their relationship did include intimidation and controlling tactics—Cole's mom is clearly afraid of her ex-husband. Obsessed with appearances, Cole's dad is enraged when Cole tells the **Circle Justice** program about the abuse, and following this, he effectively stops trying with Cole. This is in part because he's charged with child abuse, though Cole also doesn't want to talk to his dad, as Cole blames his dad for his own problems. It's not until the **Spirit Bear** mauls Cole and Cole begins to heal that he can finally understand that blaming his dad is just another way to evade responsibility. During Cole's time in the hospital, his mom also shares that Cole's dad's parents beat him when he was a kid—he doesn't know anything *but* violence. As Cole heals, comes to terms with his anger, and learns to forgive, he does forgive his dad and comes to the realization that his dad must be terrified. Cole's dad, however, changes little over the course of the novel. He ultimately sues Cole's mom for custody of Cole, something that Garvey (Cole's parole officer) suggests that he does to intimidate others, exert control, and win. The custody battle is still ongoing at the end of the novel, but Garvey insists that Cole's dad will never win custody of his son.

Cole's Mom – Cole's mom is a timid woman who, in the year before the novel begins, divorced Cole's dad. At first, Cole

resents his mother. He thinks of her as a timid, mouse-like woman who's afraid of everything, including her own shadow—and thus, he sees her as ineffective and as just another person who abandoned him. This is mostly due to the fact that Cole's mom is an alcoholic and never stood up to her then-husband when he beat Cole, though she knew full well the abuse was happening. Some of Cole's mom's behavior suggests that she didn't stand up to her husband out of fear—he at least threatened to hurt her like he hurt Cole, and it's never confirmed whether or not he was violent with her. Cole's mom only begins to change when Cole's parole officer, Garvey, impresses upon her that she shares the blame for what happened to Cole in Alaska because of her refusal to protect Cole by pressing charges against her ex-husband. Following her choice to accuse Cole's dad of child abuse, Cole's mom quits drinking, begins dressing more casually (before, she dressed up in an attempt to protect herself and hide her true feelings), and visits Cole regularly in the hospital and then in the detention center. She becomes more open with Cole as well, and she owns up to the mistakes she made as a parent and in her marriage. Her apology for not protecting Cole causes Cole to cry. During Cole's final stint on the island, his mom writes often and calls Garvey regularly to check up on Cole—though the terms of Cole's banishment mean he won't get to read her letters or speak to his mom until he returns to the mainland.

Nathaniel Blackwood – Nathaniel Blackwood is the lawyer whom Cole's dad hires to defend Cole after he assaults Peter. Blackwood is a stiff man who, in Cole's opinion, must starch his underwear, judging by just how stiffly he conducts himself. He regularly wears three-piece suits, even in situations that don't call for that degree of formality. Cole never really views Blackwood as a full person to Cole—initially, Cole hates him because he insists he can't do much to help, given the severity of Cole's crime. Cole eventually discovers that his dad hired Blackwood—and thus, when Cole begins to speak out about his dad's abuse, his dad refuses to pay for Blackwood's services.

Rosey – Rosey is the nurse who cares for Cole after he's mauled by the **Spirit Bear**. She's the only—and according to Garvey, the best—nurse in the small Alaskan village of Drake. She's short, has a round face, and is warm and jokey as she tends to Cole's wounds. Rosey makes an impression on Cole, as he's never seen anyone so happily and willingly make sacrifices for another person as she does to care for him. She does everything in her power as a medical professional to help him with his physical pain, but she makes it clear that it's up to Cole to find ways to deal with the emotional pain of what happened.

Peter's Lawyer – Peter's lawyer is a middle-aged woman. Though Cole never describes what she looks like except to note that she's about his parents age, he hates her. This is understandable—Peter's lawyer is dismissive and wholly unwilling to give Cole the benefit of the doubt, even when he tries to show how much he's changed after his first time on the

island. During the meetings between Cole's trips to Alaska, Peter's lawyer seems to barely respect the rules of **Circle Justice** and often speaks out of turn.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Judge Tanner – Judge Tanner is the judge assigned to Cole's case. He attends **Circle Justice** meetings.

The Keeper – The Keeper is the woman who facilitates the **Circle Justice** meetings in Minneapolis.

Mr. Driscal – Mr. Driscal is Peter's father. He's very protective of his son.

Mrs. Driscal – Mrs. Driscal is Peter's mother.

TERMS

Tlingit – The Tlingit Nation is a tribe of Native Americans who live on the coast of the Pacific Northwest, especially in Southeast Alaska. **Garvey** and **Edwin**, both of whom are Tlingit, introduce **Cole** to several aspects of Tlingit culture over the course of the novel. The Tlingit have been using restorative justice practices (alternatives to traditional jail sentences) for centuries, and the titular **Spirit Bear** is an important animal within Tlingit legends and spiritual practices. The Tlingit are known for their carved totem poles and woven blankets, like the **at.óow** blanket that Garvey gives Cole.



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.



FEAR, POWER, AND CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

Touching Spirit Bear introduces readers to 15-year-old Cole Matthews. To say that Cole is troubled is an understatement. When readers meet him, he's being sentenced for beating up a classmate, Peter Driscal, so violently that Peter will suffer permanent physical, mental, and emotional damage—and this is only the most recent (though the most violent) crime that Cole has committed in the last several years. At first, it seems as though Cole is angry and lashing out for no reason, but the novel slowly reveals that Cole acts out because his dad consistently abuses him—and Cole feels he has no choice but to do the same to others. The novel traces Cole and his dad's violent tendencies back to their desire for power, which, in turn, stems from their fears of being alone, unloved, and helpless. *Touching Spirit Bear* demonstrates that

the only way to break this cycle of violence is by acknowledging one's powerlessness and by learning to trust others.

Early in the novel, Cole describes how he thinks of fear and trust: he doesn't trust people who aren't afraid of him. Making people afraid, often by hurting them, is how Cole is able to make himself feel powerful and as though he has control over something in his life. He beats up Peter in the first place because Peter told an adult about Cole's most recent crime of breaking into, robbing, and trashing a hardware store. As Cole sees it, he can't let Peter go unpunished for this transgression or allow his classmates to think that they can get away with tattling on him. Thus, to show his dominance, increase his classmates' fear of him, and make sure that nobody tells on him again, Cole beats Peter at school, where all his peers can see. This is something Cole has done before—he regularly intimidates others in violent ways and then escapes consequences by pretending to be sorry. Cole, however, is never sorry; his act is carefully constructed to fool people into thinking he's changed when, in reality, he plans to go out and commit more crimes. He has no interest in breaking the cycle of violence and has no idea how or why he should.

Following Peter's beating, however, Cole has to confront the possibility that he might not be as powerful as he thinks he is, especially since the expensive lawyer his parents hire doesn't think he can do anything to prevent Cole from being harshly punished. Indeed, Cole *isn't* especially powerful—this is why he lashes out in the first place. The reader gradually learns that Cole's dad has been beating Cole since he was little, often to the point where he couldn't hide his bruises. To make things worse, Cole's mom was well aware of this and seldom, if ever, stood up to her husband while they were married. Given Cole's difficult upbringing, it becomes apparent that he's violent to others because his parents make him feel as though he has no control over his life. Through this, the novel makes the point that people often become violent and seek to make others afraid of them to cover up their own insecurities.

Given his generally high rate of success with intimidating classmates and adults, Cole thinks he's all-powerful. But when Cole is punished by being sent to a remote island in Alaska rather than going to jail, Cole cannot ignore his vulnerabilities—nor can he let go of his anger long enough to survive. He finds it galling that he shares the island with a **Spirit Bear**, a rare white American black bear. As far as Cole is concerned, the bear, like everything and everyone else, should be afraid of him. When it becomes clear that the bear isn't afraid, Cole attempts to kill it—and in response, the bear mauls Cole, leaving him severely injured. Cole spends two days in a pain-addled stupor, during which time he's forced to confront his own powerlessness. He could die, and if he does, he'll die having seriously hurt others and with no one to care about him. It is at this point that he realizes that if he maintains his violent tendencies, he'll always be alone.

During these two days, Cole begins to learn that the antidote to fear and the violence it generates is powerlessness and trust. He wakes up at one point to discover that the Spirit Bear is standing over him. The animal isn't menacing, and it seems to have no interest in eating him—it's just curious. Cole reaches out to touch the bear, which allows him to do so. This begins to teach Cole the power and the beauty of trust: if an animal (or a person) trusts him, he can do amazing things, like touch a powerful wild animal. Having made this connection, Cole uses his time in the hospital recovering from his injuries to build up trust with his mom, which helps him come to terms with the abuse he suffered as a child. His mom shares that Cole's grandfather beat Cole's dad when Cole's dad was a child—as a result, when Cole was born, his dad had no understanding of how to be a parent without being violent. Cole begins to see that by beating Peter, he did the same thing as his dad by perpetuating the toxic cycle of violence—but unlike his dad, who changes little over the course of the novel (he ultimately attempts to sue Cole's mom for custody of Cole, seemingly just to assert power over his family members), Cole comes away with an understanding of how and why one should attempt to earn and build up the trust of others.

Importantly, as Cole and his parole officer, Garvey, discuss Cole's dad's attempt to get custody, Garvey insists he won't let it happen—and Cole simply trusts that Garvey is telling the truth and will keep him safe. This illustrates the novel's final, most important point: that while violence and fear isolate people and make them feel more fearful and violent, breaking the cycle and trusting others gives a person access to a level of support that's stronger than one person can ever be on their own.



RITUAL

Cole is thrilled when his parole officer, Garvey, and Edwin, the Tlingit man who facilitates Cole's banishment on a remote Alaskan island, pull strings

to allow Cole to serve his sentence on the island rather than go to jail for assaulting a classmate named Peter. At the beginning of Cole's second attempt at banishment, Edwin goes to great lengths to try to introduce rituals and a form of spirituality that, in Edwin's opinion, will help Cole let go of his anger and make his time on the island more meaningful. Rituals, Edwin suggests, provide a person a way to channel their energy and process their emotions in a way that's healthy and therefore fulfilling. As Cole comes to see the benefits of creating rituals for himself, *Touching Spirit Bear* proposes that introducing rituals into one's life can help a person better manage their emotions and create meaning in the midst of hardship and confusion.

At first, Cole engages in a negative ritual of his own. He lives in a cycle of committing a crime, going to a detention center, and getting out again—but this comes to a sudden end when Cole's parents get divorced about a year before the events of the

novel. Unwilling to work together and faced with the shocking violence of Cole's most recent crime, Cole's parents refuse to spend the money to get Cole out of trouble, forcing him to take responsibility for his actions for the first time ever. The beginning of the novel as a whole, then, reflects a process of breaking down all the violent habits and toxic rituals that Cole engaged in. As his family breaks up and as his life seemingly implodes, Cole must begin the difficult process of looking to different places and different people as he attempts to find his place in the world. Cole's journey to Alaska begins in his hometown of Minneapolis, where he participates in a number of "circles" in which a Keeper facilitates conversations with the community about how they should deal with Cole's crime. The circles inherent to the Circle Justice program are a ritual all their own—but because Cole is still too caught up in trying to return to his life of crime, he's unwilling to take the circles seriously.

When Cole returns to the Alaskan island six months after his botched first attempt—this time, with the intention of taking it seriously—Edwin, who went through the Circle Justice program as a young person himself, begins to introduce Cole to the idea of developing new rituals for himself so that he can better control his anger. Edwin believes that it's impossible for a person to entirely get rid of their anger, but through employing the right rituals, it's possible to train oneself to make better choices. Thus, for the three days that Edwin is with Cole on the island, he makes Cole soak in a freezing cold pond with him, carry a rock representing his ancestors up a hill, roll the rock down the hill to represent rolling away his anger, and finally, dance around a fire every night to reflect on what he learned during the day. He also suggests that Cole take up carving, something that he suggests is a meditative process. In doing so, Edwin hopes to instill a kind of ritualistic discipline in Cole that will help the young man learn to channel his pent-up aggression in a more productive way.

Cole initially finds Edwin's ritual silly and uncomfortable—but he quickly begins to see that these practices can help him feel ready for his day in the morning and sleep better at night, things he struggled with in the detention center. He even finds that the soak makes his scars (which he acquires from being mauled by the titular **Spirit Bear**) from hurt less. Having something—*anything*—to do every morning during his banishment is a good thing in and of itself. Cole continues to experiment with these rituals even after Edwin and Garvey leave him to his own devices. He begins to see the true power of ritual when, on the first morning he *doesn't* go for his soak and hike, he feels inexplicably angry and begins to carve a canoe to escape. Because Cole has already begun to change his thinking, however, he recognizes the danger in this—and so he begins carving a totem pole instead. In other words, the new rituals that Edwin helped Cole create offer Cole the tools he needs to manage his emotions and continue the process of

breaking his old habits—and ultimately, to live a healthier, more fulfilled life. With this, *Touching Spirit Bear* makes the case that while rituals can be positive or negative, if people want to be able to manage their negative emotions and get the most out of their lives, it's important to create rituals that help a person find comfort and stability in lives that otherwise seem confusing and difficult. Creating rituals, whatever those particular rituals might be, is one way in which people can take control of their lives and change for the better.



MAN VS. NATURE

In an attempt to escape going to jail for assaulting a classmate named Peter, 15-year-old offender Cole Matthews agrees to undergo a yearlong

banishment on a remote Alaskan island through the program **Circle Justice**. Cole undergoes two stints on the island. The first is a disaster: he angrily burns his provided shelter and tries to swim away, and a white American black bear known as a **Spirit Bear** mauls him when he attempts to kill it. Cole's actions put him in the hospital for months. When he returns to the island six months later to try again, he's a changed person. Rather than seeing the natural world either as something he can dominate or something that will dominate him, Cole begins to see the world around him as a teacher that he can learn from. Through Cole's changing relationship to nature, the novel suggests that the natural world can be humanity's greatest teacher, if only a person learns to approach it with respect and curiosity.

When Cole first arrives on the remote Alaskan island, he makes his worldview plain. To him, the natural world is little different from the city he left behind: it's something to dominate. For instance, as he and Edwin discuss that Cole's crude cabin is so far away from his water source because he shares the stream with an assortment of wildlife (including bears), Cole says plainly that he'd kill a bear if he saw one. Cole's early actions on the island reflect this worldview. He burns the cabin and all his supplies, as he doesn't plan to be on the island long and doesn't think that the weather (which, at this point, is beautiful) is going to pose a problem for him. Then, he attempts to swim away from his island with the eventual plan of hitching a ride on a fishing boat and disappearing. When this fails, and the Spirit Bear appears and seems unafraid of him, Cole feels as though this is his last chance to prove his dominance over the natural world by trying to kill the Spirit Bear. It's telling that all three of these attempts fail spectacularly; a cold, injured, and starving Cole is finally rescued days after the bear mauls him. Cole's choice to disrespect nature puts him in a situation where he's unable to learn anything from the natural world—except that it's more powerful than he is.

However, during the two days that Cole spends on the island waiting for help after the mauling, he begins to notice the rhythms and cycles of plants and animals around him—and

through this, he begins to experience new emotions and a sense of humbleness. As he takes note of a bird's nest one day and then watches a lightning storm take down the tree, killing all the baby birds, Cole discovers that he feels compassion for those baby birds. This is a new emotion for Cole, who seldom thinks of anyone but himself. Cole realizes that while the natural world has the power to take lives without a care, it also has the ability to provide him with tools for survival, like food. He turns to grass, easily accessible worms, and even a live mouse that crawls over his hand to keep himself from starving. Even though Cole has no choice but to acknowledge the destructive power of the natural world, his own powerlessness and his dire need for help also force him to look for the ways that nature, the only thing he has, can help him.

Upon his return to the island, Cole continues this process. Especially as he engages in Edwin's rituals that get him out in nature every morning, Cole finds that animals, including the Spirit Bear, begin to show themselves—and if Cole pays attention, they all have something to teach him. Through his almost nightly dances around the fire wherein he acts like an animal he saw that day, Cole has an opportunity to practice a lesson he learned from an animal. By embodying whales, he learns that it takes a group to get through hard times; by embodying other animals, he learns about tenacity, caution, and power. Cole's time on the island ultimately teaches him exactly what it was supposed to do: that every being, no matter how big or small, is worthy of consideration—and every animal has something to share. One can only learn these lessons, however, if they humble themselves before nature and approach the natural world and the animals that inhabit it with respect and curiosity.



JUSTICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Fifteen-year-old Cole wants nothing more than to avoid going to jail—which is why, after brutally beating up his classmate Peter Driscall, he initially acts penitent and agrees to sign up for an alternative correctional program called **Circle Justice**. As Cole sees it, Circle Justice may make him do “stupid” things like pretend to be sorry in front of his community, but Cole is a skilled actor and knows he can play the part. Things get out of hand, however, when Circle Justice connects Cole to a Native American community in Alaska that offers yearlong periods of banishment on remote islands for offenders participating in Circle Justice. It takes far longer—more than a year and a half—and getting mauled by a bear, but Cole ultimately does feel truly sorry for his violent behavior. However, Cole discovers that undergoing this change in himself isn't enough to make amends for his past mistakes. Through Cole's progression, the book suggests that in order to make things right, a criminal offender must take full responsibility for their actions and help others in their community forgive and

heal—and specifically, an offender should help their victim heal from the pain that they caused.

The organization Circle Justice facilitates restorative justice, which proposes that it's not enough to punish a person who committed a crime by sending them to jail or charging them a fine. Rather, restorative justice holds that in order to make things right, an offender must work with their community to learn about the many consequences of their actions, and ultimately, to help their entire community heal—including the victim of the crime. The most important element of this is that Circle Justice is community-oriented—something that doesn't appeal at all to Cole's fundamentally selfish nature. When first presented with the opportunity to participate in Circle Justice, Cole is dismissive of everything other than the program's potential to shorten or eliminate a possible jail sentence. In other words, Cole enters into Circle Justice for purely selfish reasons. For that matter, Cole doesn't feel as though he has anything to atone for: in his mind, it was Peter who made the mistake of crossing Cole and that's why Peter got beat up. Additionally, Cole believes that his actions are further justified since his mom and dad are divorced and don't seem to care about him. Thus, when Cole first arrives on the remote Alaskan island where he's supposed to serve his banishment, he has no real understanding of why he's there and believes he has no reason to change his thoughts or his behavior.

Through Cole's experiences on the island, the novel makes the case that it's impossible to change and take responsibility for one's actions if one doesn't experience empathy or compassion. Though the purpose of Circle Justice isn't to put its participants in danger, Cole only begins to take responsibility for his actions when he makes the questionable choice to approach and attack a **Spirit Bear**. The bear quickly puts Cole in his place: it breaks Cole's ribs, his pelvis, his legs, and an arm, in addition to shredding Cole's torso. While Cole never outright makes this connection, he only begins to take responsibility for his actions and feel genuinely bad for Peter after being forced to experience pain similar to the pain he inflicted on Peter. Because Cole underwent this change of heart, his parole officer, Garvey, and Garvey's connection in Alaska, Edwin, do everything in their power to get Cole back on the island to serve his period of banishment as originally planned. The second time around, the time alone gives Cole the space to dive into his thought processes and to feel truly sorry for what he did. He begins to understand that all lives have meaning, including the lives of the Spirit Bear and of Peter himself—important lessons for a person going through restorative justice, and ones that Cole likely wouldn't have been able to learn in jail.

Though Cole is thrilled with his change in his outlook and expects praise for it, it's not until he learns that Peter attempted to commit suicide after the assault that he realizes his process of healing and getting justice isn't over. Rather, if

Cole is going to truly take what he learned through Circle Justice and complete his journey, he must help Peter to heal and forgive as well. To do this, Cole proposes a wild plan: to invite Peter to stay on the island with him (supervised by Garvey), so that Peter can see that Cole has changed but also so that Peter can take advantage of some of the healing and thought-provoking aspects of living such an isolated life. That Cole would suggest such a thing in the first place speaks to how much he's changed during his period on the island. By the end of the novel, he's come to understand that justice isn't justice if *only* he himself has changed for the better—all parties need to be served justice and in a best-case scenario, which include Cole and Peter's community, not just the boys themselves. Only then, the novel suggests, is it possible to truly heal from pain, trauma, and violence.



SYMBOLS

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



SPIRIT BEAR

The Spirit Bear that lives on the Alaskan island where Cole is sent symbolizes the power, beauty, and danger of the natural world—as well as Cole's changing relationship to the natural world. At first, Cole sees the bear as a threat to his sense of power and control. This is why, when the opportunity presents itself, Cole attempts to attack and kill the Spirit Bear: in order to maintain his image of himself as the most powerful force in his world, Cole must destroy the one thing that seems unafraid of him. The Spirit Bear, however, has no trouble impressing upon Cole the power of nature when it turns the tables and nearly kills him. Following the attack, Cole must reckon with the fact that next to the natural world—which, he begins to see, includes the weather and the ocean, not just the bear that almost killed him—he's powerless. Ultimately, this culminates in Cole's shift to see the natural world as something to learn from and respect. Thus, when Cole empties his mind and takes the time to immerse himself fully in the world around him during his second stint on the island, the Spirit Bear often appears. As such, the animal comes to signify Cole's oneness with nature.



AT.ÓOW

The blanket (*at.óow* in the Tlingit language) that Garvey gives to Cole represents trust and friendship. As Garvey explains, according to Alaskan culture, no one truly owns an *at.óow*; it's tribal property, and whoever possesses it is merely a caretaker of the object. Giving his *at.óow* to Cole is a major demonstration of trust on Garvey's

part, especially since there's little evidence at this early stage that Cole is worthy of that trust. At this point, Cole sees the *at.óow* as a symbol of his overbearing caregivers. However, during Cole's long recovery after he's attacked by the **Spirit Bear**, the *at.óow* begins to take on new meaning for him. While Garvey seemed overbearing at first, now, Cole welcomes Garvey's care and concern. Especially during Cole's second stint on the island, the *at.óow* serves as a reminder that Cole has people in his life who love him, care about him, and want him to succeed. Paying their care forward by giving the *at.óow* to Peter at the end of the novel represents the boys' shift to becoming friends who care about each other.



CIRCLES

The various circles that Cole notices and encounters throughout the novel symbolize connectedness, community, and healing. The organization Circle Justice is the most overt iteration of this: the organization facilitates communication and, hopefully, healing for Cole's entire community by seeking to rehabilitate Cole rather than throw him in jail for assaulting Peter. On the island, Cole begins to notice circles and cycles after the **Spirit Bear** mauls him, when he becomes aware of his own helplessness—that is, he becomes aware of his own vulnerable position in the circle of life. As Cole learns his own place in this metaphorical circle, he also begins to see the importance of helping others learn about the importance of connectedness. At the end of the novel, when Cole and Peter carve a circle on Cole's totem pole, it symbolizes their newfound understanding that they're a part of each other's community—and finally, more than a year and a half after Cole beat Peter, that they've both healed from the emotional trauma of that incident.

Explanation and Analysis

As Cole angrily makes his way to the island for his first attempt at banishment, the narrator introduces Garvey, Cole's parole officer, and begins to describe how Cole thinks about trust. Importantly, Cole approaches the world from a very fearful place. He's afraid of anyone who is bigger or more powerful than he is, or who doesn't make sense to him—and so he projects a façade of fearlessness and acts intimidating to compensate. By acting in ways that make others fearful, Cole is able to gain something of what he thinks of as power. People who are afraid of Cole are more willing to give Cole his way. As a fundamentally selfish person, Cole understandably wants people to be afraid so that he never has to deal with anything he doesn't want or doesn't like.

Interestingly, the way this sentence is framed suggests that trust and fear are connected—and although Cole believes that at this point, he can only trust people who are fearful, his experiences on the island will teach him that trust is something entirely different. Trust can only happen when people aren't afraid of each other—and getting to that point extends an important lesson about not fearing other things in life.

“Justice should heal, not punish. If you kill my cat, you need to become more sensitive to animals. You and I need to be friends, and I need to forgive you to get over my anger. That's Circle Justice. Everybody is a part of the healing, including people from the community—anybody who cares. But healing is much harder than standard punishment. Healing requires taking responsibility for your actions.”

Related Characters: Garvey (speaker), Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

When Garvey first brings up the possibility of Circle Justice with Cole, he uses a theoretical example of a crime—Cole killing Garvey's cat—to explain how Circle Justice differs from a conventional punishment like Cole would face through the court system. Importantly, Circle Justice, focuses on finding ways to encourage perpetrators of crimes to take responsibility, own up what they did, and understand that they don't just harm their victim when they



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Touching Spirit Bear* published in 2002.

Chapter 1 Quotes

“Cole didn't trust Garvey. He didn't trust anyone who wasn't afraid of him.”

Related Characters: Garvey, Cole Matthews

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3-4

do something—rather, they harm their entire community. Through Circle Justice and this way of thinking about crime, the novel introduces its proposal that every thing and every person are somehow related to one another—and that justice is only justice if it provides a holistic solution that helps everyone involved (the victim, the perpetrator, and the wider community) to overcome their pain and anger.

It's also interesting that Garvey uses the theoretical crime of killing a cat to illustrate his point. This points to the novel's broader assertion that the natural world—which could include domestic animals—has many things it can teach people, if only people are willing to look for those lessons. In Garvey's example, Cole learns empathy and kindness through a cat—and during Cole's experience on the island, he ultimately learns these things by humbling himself before the natural world. He takes the time to notice all the wild animals on the island and identifies some lesson that he can learn from them, emphasizing the importance of respecting one's surroundings and being open to learning from one's experiences.

Chapter 2 Quotes

“Other animals come here for water, too,” Edwin said. “How would you feel if a bear made its den beside the stream?”

Cole shrugged. “I'd kill it.”

The potbellied elder nodded with a knowing smile. “Animals feel the same way. Don't forget that.” [...] “You aren't the only creature here. You're part of a much bigger circle. Learn your place or you'll have a rough time.”

Related Characters: Cole Matthews, Edwin (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Before leaving Cole alone on the island, Edwin attempts to impress upon him why he should respect the animals who live here—they can, and will, kill Cole if threatened. What Edwin really tries to get at here is that Cole isn't as powerful as he likes to think he is. Cole's nonchalance about the prospect of sharing the island with bears, coupled with his unwillingness to respect their size, power, and capability, puts him in a very vulnerable position, even if he's not willing to admit it. While this kind of intimidation and nonchalance

may have worked when Cole tried to intimidate people, it doesn't work on wild animals—and especially not on large predators like bears. In this sense, Edwin is trying to set Cole up for success as much as possible by encouraging him to understand his lack of power on the island. He has to share the territory and recognize that he's just one of many creatures on the island, all of which need fresh water to drink. Thus, Edwin hopes to instill the lesson that Cole shouldn't approach every relationship or interaction as a power struggle. Rather, he needs to respect the other creatures around him—both animal and human.

Chapter 3 Quotes

“Will Peter be there?”

Garvey shrugged. “It's up to him. He may not be ready to forgive you.”

“I don't care if he forgives me.”

Garvey rubbed the back of his neck, then glanced up toward the ceiling. “How come everything is always about you? This forgiveness isn't for you. Unless Peter forgives you, he won't heal.”

Related Characters: Garvey, Cole Matthews (speaker), Peter Driscal

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

As Garvey and Cole discuss the possibility that Peter and his family might choose to participate in Circle Justice, Cole consistently makes the conversation about him. This reflects how powerful Cole feels (or wants to feel) at this point—but it only reveals his own insecurities. In ensuring that Circle Justice revolves around himself, Cole is effectively trying to manipulate what happens in order to prevent others from challenging him. However, if (as Garvey insists) Circle Justice is as much about Peter as it is about Cole, Cole doesn't have nearly as much power to dictate how things play out. Allowing Peter a say in things—including whether or not to forgive Cole—would mean that Peter has power, something that Cole cannot acknowledge due to how insecure and afraid he is.

Further, Garvey continues to draw out and elaborate on what restorative justice means here. It's not just about punishing Cole—in order for the program to be effective

and worthwhile, Peter has to get something out of it too. Cole's inability to see this speaks to his selfish nature, as well as to the fact that he's simply not ready to accept what Circle Justice offers him. He's not taking this seriously and is thus setting himself up for failure on the island.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ "If the Driscals realize that the Circle allows them to have a voice in decisions, and that forgiveness can help Peter to heal, they may also join the Circle."

"You mean they might help decide my sentence?"

Garvey nodded. "Maybe."

"They'll hang me," Cole said. "I'm dead."

"I think you've already hung yourself," Garvey answered.

Related Characters: Cole Matthews, Garvey (speaker), Mrs. Driscal, Mr. Driscal, Peter Driscal

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

During another conversation between Cole and Garvey about Peter's possible involvement in Circle Justice, Cole is horrified to learn that Peter and his family may get the opportunity to weigh in on Cole's sentence. His insistence that they'll hang him speaks to Cole's unwillingness to take responsibility for his actions. As Garvey points out, Cole has gotten himself into this situation by making the choice to beat Peter up in the first place—given what Cole did, it's only understandable that Peter's family would want to see Cole suffer consequences. In Cole's worldview, however, he's not the one to blame here. Cole believes it's Peter's fault that he got beat up, so naturally, Cole sees himself as the victim in all of this. This mental gymnastics keeps Cole focused on himself and makes him even less willing to take Circle Justice seriously. And until Cole begins to commit to the program and take responsibility for his part in everything that happens, neither he nor Peter will be able to move on from the trauma that Cole inflicted upon Peter's when he beat him.

☝☝ Cole studied Peter. Peter hadn't sounded like this before. Cole wiped his sweaty hands on his pants. It wasn't like he had meant to hurt anyone. Besides, this wouldn't have happened if Peter had kept his mouth shut.

Related Characters: Peter Driscal, Cole Matthews

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

During the first Circle Justice meeting, Cole sees Peter for the first time since he beat him months before. He's shocked by Peter's condition: Peter now limps and suffers a speech impediment as a result of the beating. In many ways, seeing Peter now is the first time Cole is truly confronted with the consequences of his actions. His violence has changed Peter's life forever, whether or not Cole actually meant to do any harm. Cole's sweating hands, a sign of stress, speak to how uncomfortable he is with this.

However, taking responsibility for his actions isn't something Cole has any practice doing, so he doesn't even really understand how to shoulder the blame for what he did to Peter. This is why Cole pivots so quickly to blaming Peter: if Cole can continue shifting the blame to other people as the opportunities arise, he'll never have to do the difficult work of feeling sorry for what he did and trying to make things better. Until Cole can make these connections and begin to take responsibility for his own actions, he'll never fully understand how restorative justice works or why he should care about the process.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ Cole felt no regret for having burned the supplies and the shelter. Nor did he regret hurting Peter. This was all somebody else's fault. If it weren't for his parents, Peter, and the stupid Healing Circle, he wouldn't even be here. Somebody would pay for what was happening. He would get revenge, especially against those who had wanted him in jail. People like Peter's lady lawyer. He hated her.

Related Characters: Peter's Lawyer, Cole's Dad, Cole's Mom, Peter Driscal, Cole Matthews

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

After burning the shelter on the island, Cole reiterates to himself that none of this is his fault and vows to get revenge on everyone he believes is at fault. In doing this, Cole makes clear his intention to continue the cycle of violence. On some level, Cole does understand that he's a part of this cycle—he blames his dad in a roundabout way when he mentions his parents. And though Cole isn't wrong that he's violent because of the trauma from his dad's abuse, he also doesn't see any reason to try to put a stop to the cycle—hence why he insists he must take revenge on “Peter's lady lawyer.”

Cole's refusal to take responsibility for his actions and stop the cycle of violence stems from the fact that he doesn't yet understand why he should. As far as he's concerned, there's nothing really wrong with how things have been, even though nearly everything about Cole's actions and thought process reveals just how wrongminded and disconnected from reality Cole is. Until Cole begins to see why he should change—something that the natural world impresses upon him—he won't.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ Cole tried to gather his wits. The mauling didn't make sense. In the past, everything had always been afraid of him. Why wasn't the bear scared? A bear with half a brain would have turned tail and run. Instead, this dumb animal had attacked. Now it wandered out in the woods somewhere, the mauling little more than an inconvenience to its morning.

Related Characters: Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

After the Spirit Bear mauls Cole, Cole is shocked: everyone has always been afraid of him, so it doesn't make sense to him that the bear wasn't scared. Cole's shock speaks to the success he's had in the past at scaring everyone else into doing his bidding. He's learned over the years that if he can make people afraid of him, he'll inevitably get his way in some way or another. The bear, however, turns this idea on its head by attacking. With the attack, Cole is forced to reckon with the possibility that he's not as strong or as scary as he thought he was—and specifically, that he's not better, stronger, or more menacing just because he's a human.

As Cole recovers from these injuries, this is the first leap he makes in his understanding: he may be human, but he's nevertheless a part of the natural world. To this end, Cole even recognizes that mauling him was just a small, insignificant part of the bear's morning. It seems no more important to the bear than a person putting a spider or a mouse outside—and being made to grapple with his own insignificance is understandably terrifying and hard for Cole, given that he moves through the world doing everything in his power to make himself the center of it.

☞ Cole's gaze wandered in a big circle around him. All of the landscape, the air, the trees, the animals, the water, the rain, all seemed to be part of something bigger. They moved in harmony, bending and flowing, twisting and breathing, as if connected. But Cole felt alone and apart. His soaked clothes chilled his bones. The hard ground pushed at his wounded body like a big hand shoving him away.

Related Characters: Edwin, Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

While Cole lies injured, he notices that all the animals, plants, and natural elements seem to be part of the same system—a system that doesn't include him. In this moment, Cole becomes aware of something Edwin tried to impress upon Cole before leaving him on the island: that the world doesn't necessarily revolve around humans, especially on a remote Alaskan island that houses only a single human. At this point, though, Cole isn't a part of the cycle of the natural world because he sees it as something fundamentally different from himself—and as something to dominate and overcome.

Following the bear's mauling, however, Cole has no way to dominate over the natural world. Since he's not in his normal position in the world (in charge), Cole doesn't know how to interpret anything he sees around him and cannot figure out where he fits in if he's not in charge. However, the fact that Cole can identify the connectedness of the natural world around him offers hope that he may one day be able to find his own place in it, and through doing so, recognize that he's not the most powerful person or being in his world.

Wincing, he wiped at his mouth with his left hand, then stared at the glistening red on his knuckles. It reminded him of the bear's blood on the knife blade beside him. It also looked like the blood he had seen on the sidewalk after beating up Peter. The blood looked identical. This thought drifted about in his head but failed to gain meaning. Blood might look the same, but Peter was a loser and a jerk.

Related Characters: Peter Driscall, Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

After being mauled by the Spirit Bear, Cole takes stock of his injuries—but he doesn't have the energy or the wherewithal to fully process that his blood looks no different from Peter's or the bear's. It's important to Cole's development, however, that he can even touch on this observation. This offers hope that as Cole moves forward, he'll be able to actually engage with the idea that on the inside, people—and animals—all have blood that looks much the same. Thus, everyone and everything deserves the same kind of care and kindness that Cole craves for himself deep down. If Cole takes the time to think about this more, he may also realize that both Peter and the bear probably experienced pain similar to what he's experiencing now when they were hurt. As Cole moves forward with his healing, engaging with these ideas will help him develop a sense of empathy for others—and ultimately, this will help him figure out how to make things right for Peter.

Chapter 9 Quotes

The storm raged on as Cole lay trembling, his eyes frantic. The explosion had shocked his mind awake. Never in his life had he felt so exposed, so vulnerable, so helpless. He had no control. To this storm, he was as insignificant as a leaf. Cole blinked in stunned realization. He had always been this weak. How could he have ever thought he truly controlled anything?

Related Characters: Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

After a bolt of lightning hits and downs a tree mere feet from where Cole is, he's forced to confront the fact that he's weak, insignificant, and not in control of anything. It's telling that Cole comes to this realization in the natural world. This forces him to see that Edwin and Garvey were right: humans may be powerful in urban places like Minneapolis, but it's impossible—and a death wish—for a person to go out in the wilderness and expect the weather to bow down to that power. Rather, Cole realizes here that in the face of the natural world, humans aren't powerful at all—and this helps him to understand that even back home, where he felt as though he was in control, that was just a lie that Cole told himself. Now that Cole recognizes his own powerlessness, he can tackle his poor attitude and begin the work of accepting his lot in life—and ultimately, he can start to heal emotionally from this ordeal.

Chapter 10 Quotes

As Cole stared at the tiny bodies, sadness flooded through him. The sparrows were so frail, helpless, and innocent. They hadn't deserved to die. Then again, what right did they have to live? This haunted Cole. Did the birds' insignificant little existences have any meaning at all? Or did his?

Related Characters: Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after the storm, Cole is uncharacteristically distraught when he discovers that all the baby sparrows in a nest he'd previously noticed died when the tree fell. This moment is significant primarily because this is the first time in the novel that Cole feels compassion or sadness for any living being other than himself. His sadness stands in stark contrast to what he told Edwin when Edwin left him on the island—Cole shrugged that if he saw a bear, he'd kill it. But now that he actually has dead animals in front of him, Cole understands that it's significant when something dies. This is true even if, as Cole wonders here, a being's life might not have much meaning.

Making this shift to wondering about whether anyone's life has meaning reflects Cole's newfound recognition that he's not as powerful or as important as he once thought he was. He, like the baby birds, could die in an instant if the lightning

happens to strike close enough—or if the Spirit Bear or another wild animal decides he'd make a good meal. Recognizing his own vulnerability relative to the power of the natural world means that Cole can begin to learn from it.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ Frantic, Cole struggled to fly, but he couldn't escape the nest. All he could do was open his beak wide and raise it upward toward the sky, the action a simple admission that he was powerless. There were no conditions, no vices, no lies, no deceit, no manipulation. Only submission and a simple desire to live. He wanted to live, but for that he needed help; otherwise his life would end in the nest.

Related Characters: Edwin, Garvey, Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

During the time in which Cole lies injured after the Spirit Bear mauls him, he dreams that he's a baby bird trying to survive. After this dream, Cole vows to live and begins to turn to the natural world to give him the tools he needs to survive, such as food and water. This dream represents Cole's newfound understanding that he's not the most powerful thing in the world. Though he once thought of himself as being powerful like a bear, the Spirit Bear's mauling forced him to confront the possibility that he's perhaps only as powerful as a flightless, helpless baby bird that relies upon its parents to feed and care for it. It's especially important that in this dream, Cole recognizes that he needs help—and that if he lies and manipulates people, no one will help him. This helps Cole start to figure out how to build and respect the community of people who want to help him, like Garvey and Edwin—and even, possibly, Cole's parents. He can't survive, let alone heal, on his own.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ "I did care about you. But helping others is how I help myself."

"You need help?" Cole asked, surprised.

Garvey nodded. "I see a lot of myself in you. When I was your age, I spent five long years in prison for things I'll go to my grave regretting. I lived my early years here in Drake, but no one cared enough to take me through Circle Justice." He shook his head with a sad smile. "Take my word for it, jail scars the soul. And I was never able to help those I hurt."

Related Characters: Cole Matthews, Garvey (speaker), Peter Driscall, Cole's Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

When Cole wakes in the middle of the night from a nightmare, he and Garvey discuss why Garvey helps Cole at all—given Cole's selfishness, he believes that people only help him for similarly selfish reasons. Garvey's answer, however, begins to put a new spin on helping others that gives Cole a lot to think about. It's shocking, first of all, for Cole to hear that Garvey needs help. This suggests that Cole believes adults have everything figured out and don't need to improve themselves. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the way that Cole sees some adults—like his dad—behave. His dad, who is physically abusive, needs to reform his behavior if he ever expects to have a relationship with his son.

Garvey is also able to draw out some of why he believes so strongly in Circle Justice: given his own experience in jail, he knows that Circle Justice is Cole's only hope. Going to jail will only put Cole behind bars for a few years; it won't ever force him to think about his bad behavior and come up with ways to change it. Then, Garvey also gets at one of the most important ideas promoted by restorative justice: that helping the perpetrator of a crime reform isn't the only step in the process. Rather, it's important for the perpetrator to use what they learned and pay it forward to help others—ideally, the person they hurt with their crime. This sends the message to Cole that if he's going to reform and follow Garvey's example, he needs to start thinking of ways to help Peter.

Chapter 14 Quotes

“Ever wonder why your dad beats you?”

Cole looked up, surprised. “I’ve never done anything to him.”

“I didn’t say you did.”

“He just whips me ‘cause he’s mad.”

Garvey smiled. “Remind you of anybody we know?”

Related Characters: Cole Matthews, Garvey (speaker), Cole’s Dad

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

During one of Cole and Garvey’s conversations after Cole returns to the detention center, they discuss why Cole’s dad hits him. In this conversation, Garvey very purposefully tries to impress upon Cole that his dad’s violence—and for that matter, Cole’s violence—doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Rather, Cole is the product of a *cycle* of violence. It’s not reasonable or rational, either: Cole’s dad is violent because he’s angry and afraid, and his anger and fear make Cole feel as though he has to act the same way in order to protect himself.

Cole, however, shows that he believes people should only be the victims of violence because they somehow deserve it, even though he’s well aware that in practice, things don’t work this way. This begins to show where Cole is in his development: he’s beginning to shed his more idealistic, youthful ideas of how violence works and is starting to recognize that this cycle of violence is far more complicated than he’d like to think it is. By beginning to dig into how the cycle begins and how it’s perpetuated, Cole will obtain the information he needs to choose to stop the cycle.

“Your father isn’t a bad person, but when he was younger, he had parents who beat him for everything he did. That’s all he ever knew. When I saw him start doing it to you, I kept telling myself things would get better. Drinking helped me ignore reality.” She shook her head. “It took a divorce and you ending up in the hospital to wake me up. I realized I couldn’t change your father, but I could change me. I’m sorry you’ve gone through all you have. Can you ever forgive me?”

Related Characters: Cole’s Mom (speaker), Cole’s Dad, Cole Matthews

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation between Cole and his mom, Cole’s mom shares that her husband beat Cole because he was beaten as a child and knows no other way to parent. Having this piece of his dad’s story helps Cole begin to trace the violence back and understand that behaving violently doesn’t solve anything—it only brings about more violent situations. This, in turn, begins to impress upon Cole that if he ever wants this to stop, he has to do the same thing his mom has decided to do and start on the hard work of changing himself. Neither of them can change Cole’s dad, but they can both try to improve themselves and abandon their violent ways, thereby stopping the cycle of violence.

Cole’s mom’s apologies for the ways in which she failed to protect Cole also helps Cole learn to trust his mom. This is seemingly the only time thus far that one of this parents has admitted they made a mistake, and it gives Cole an example of what it looks like to accept responsibility for one’s errors. As more people begin to do this and show Cole that it’s possible, Cole begins to see that he, too, can accept responsibility for his actions and move forward to create a much better relationship with people he’s hurt.

Chapter 15 Quotes

“I just know that my dad’s not going to ever come back to say he’s sorry. Even if he did, he couldn’t change what he did. He couldn’t take away all the memories.”

“So you think this is all his fault, huh?” asked Edwin.

“No,” said Cole, his voice trembling. “Mom said his parents beat him up, too. I don’t know where the anger all started. All I know is I don’t ever want to have a kid and beat him up.”

Related Characters: Edwin, Cole Matthews (speaker), Cole’s Dad, Cole’s Mom, Garvey

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

When Edwin and Garvey approach Cole to talk about how he’s changed and what he’s learned (with the final big reveal that he’s going back to the island), Cole shows that he now recognizes the importance of stopping the cycle of violence. Cole also recognizes that, to some degree, his dad is a lost cause—and Cole will only grow increasingly unhappy and bitter if he focuses on wanting his dad to come back and

apologize for the years of abuse he inflicted upon Cole.

These leaps all reflect Cole's growing sense of his own self-worth. While he used to think that his dad beat him because he was worthless and meaningless, he now knows that he's just a victim of a long, tragic cycle of abuse and violence. And given that Cole now sees that it was the violence that made him feel worthless, he understands full well the importance of not making anyone else feel so worthless. This, he understands, will make that person—in this case, his theoretical future child—just as violent and angry as Cole was before his time on the island.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ So, unless I go somewhere and freeze every morning, I'll keep getting mad, huh?"

Edwin smiled but shook his head. "You only look at the left end of the stick and at the cloudy sky now because your experiences in life have made that a habit. Happiness, like anger, is also a habit. You learn to be happy one day at a time. But habits change hard. This pond will help you."

Related Characters: Edwin, Cole Matthews (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Edwin introduces Cole to the habit of soaking in a freezing cold pond every morning and, using a stick, makes the point that it's impossible to get rid of one's anger (represented by the left end of the stick he mentions; a stick will always have two ends, no matter how small of a stick it is). Though Edwin doesn't fully explain why soaking in the pond helps, he nevertheless makes the case that people can form helpful rituals or hurtful ones. Both take practice, and it's hard to shift from one way of thinking to another—but it can be done. Importantly, Edwin also positions rituals as a way that a person can begin to manage their negative emotions and change their outlook on life. This is something that Cole will need to learn if he wants to figure out how to become a better person and ultimately, make the most of his time on the island. It's also telling that what Edwin proposes puts Cole in the natural world—this speaks to Edwin's belief that if a person is willing and able to listen and pay attention, nature has many lessons to teach people.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ "I just realized that I'm not a bad person. Nobody is," he said. "People are just scared and do bad things. Sometimes people hurt each other trying to figure things out." Cole gazed into the flames. "I hate what Dad does to me, but he must be just as scared as I am. He doesn't want to be mean; he just doesn't know any better."

Related Characters: Cole Matthews (speaker), Peter Driscall, Cole's Dad, Garvey, Edwin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After Cole performs Edwin's morning ritual by himself for the first time (after copping an attitude that made Garvey and Edwin threaten to take him back to Minneapolis), Cole shares what he learns. This boils down to his discovery that he needs to approach others—human and animal alike—with compassion. He understands that while his dad may be his abuser, his dad is also a victim since his parents beat him too. Cole understands now that when people are victims of violence, they unsurprisingly become scared and start lashing out—which is exactly what Cole's dad did to him, and is what Cole did to Peter.

Cole also learns that anger and lashing out like this is a habit that one can break if one puts in the work. By making this connection, Cole begins to take more responsibility for his actions. This recognition that both violence and compassion are changeable habits is what fuels Cole's insistence that nobody is a truly bad person. If everyone has the potential to change for the better, it does others a disservice to think of them as wholly, unalterably bad.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝☝ That was the only time the beaver ever came near. Cole regretted betraying the beaver's trust. He couldn't help but think how many thousands of times he had done the same to people.

Related Characters: Cole Matthews

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

In the pond one morning, a beaver swims very close to Cole

but disappears as soon as Cole reaches out to touch it. This experience helps Cole to make sense of some of his past behavior. Because he now pays attention to the natural world around him and is in a better mental state, he's able to learn from his surroundings and make the connection that the way he treats animals reflects the way he treats people. Luring people (or beavers) in, starting to earn their trust, and then doing something awful to them has been a lifelong habit of Cole's. Now, however, Cole understands that this is a mean and horrible thing to do. He recognizes that trust is something precious that he should treasure once he has it, which means that he must stop betraying people for sport.

The fact that Cole learns this from betraying a beaver's trust drives home Edwin's earlier assertion that nature has the ability to teach people all sorts of things, if only they pay attention and are willing to internalize the lessons they learn. Furthermore, this leap in understanding happens while Cole is soaking in the pond as part of his morning ritual. Rituals, this suggests, have the potential to help people make these connections, especially when those rituals put people in the natural world.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☹️ “There’s still something missing. It isn’t enough to be sorry and forgive. Somehow I have to figure out a way to help Peter. Until then, I’ll never be able to carve anything in the blank space. That’s what I had to discover before I could heal, wasn’t it?”

Edwin smiled slightly and nodded. “How to help Peter heal is something that will haunt you and stay in your thoughts like a sliver under your skin. The harm you did to him will fester and pain you all your life unless you’re able to make up for it.”

Related Characters: Edwin, Cole Matthews (speaker), Peter Driscall

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

When Cole sees Edwin for the first time after dancing his dance of anger, Cole shares what he learned from the ritual—and most importantly, he makes it clear that he now understands that he won’t heal until he can help Peter. This brings one of the most important pillars of restorative justice to life for Cole. Restorative justice holds that a major part of Cole’s rehabilitation needs to be helping the person

he hurt to heal from the pain and trauma he caused. In other words, it’s not enough for Cole to change his thinking and be a better person—he must pay that forward and use what he learned to help others. Edwin’s insistence that this will haunt Cole forever speaks to the fact that what restorative justice really teaches is compassion and remorse. Cole is now able to think about Peter with compassion and empathy—and now that he feels bad about what he did, it’s impossible for him to move on without making it right.

☹️ “How is Garvey?” Cole asked excitedly.

“He said that last week Peter tried to commit suicide.”

“Suicide!” Cole caught his breath. “Why?”

“If someone is treated as if his life is worthless, he begins to believe it.”

“But his life isn’t worthless,” Cole protested.

Edwin stood, and with one motion opened the door and flung the last of his hot chocolate outside.

“I never told him he was worthless,” Cole argued.

“Smashing his head on a sidewalk is a funny way of telling Peter he’s valuable.”

Related Characters: Edwin, Cole Matthews (speaker), Peter Driscall

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

When Edwin drops off supplies and shares that Peter attempted to commit suicide, Cole is both shocked and unwilling to accept his own role in pushing Peter to this point. Edwin’s anger and snappiness is in response to the fact that being on the island is supposed to teach Cole to take responsibility for his actions, but when Cole insists that he never told Peter he’s worthless, he’s not doing that. Even though Cole has come a long way, he’s not entirely reformed yet—when confronted with difficult information like this, Cole cannot truly accept that his choice to beat up Peter set Peter down a path toward attempting to take his own life. Cole must learn to take responsibility for the pain he caused—and is still causing. It’s also possible to read Peter’s attempt at suicide as a continuation of the cycle of violence, which Cole is now trying hard to break. While Peter might not be lashing out at others, in harming himself, he’s nevertheless enacting a different version of the violence that Cole inflicted upon him.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☞ The next morning Cole hiked alone to the pond. He soaked as long as he could, his calmness shaken by how terrified Peter was of him. How could he have once wanted someone to feel that way? No matter how deeply he breathed, soaking failed to take away his troubled thoughts.

Related Characters: Peter Driscal, Cole Matthews

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

On Peter's first morning on the island, Cole is shaken by how scared Peter is. The fact that this is so disturbing for Cole highlights how far he's come since the beginning of the novel. While he once believed that he couldn't trust anyone who wasn't terrified of him, he now sees that the terror he caused has lasting, long-term consequences. Wanting people to be afraid was a selfish desire on Cole's part, and now that he recognizes the humanity and the worth of all living beings, it's shocking to him that he could've wished (and perpetrated) such violence upon them.

When Cole turns to the pond to try to clear his head, it speaks to the fact that Edwin's rituals have now become Cole's rituals. Cole is fully sold on their ability to keep his emotions in check and keep him focused on his happiness, not on his anger. The rituals do have their limits, however. This is the first time that Cole has really had to face the consequences of his actions and take responsibility for how he made Peter feel. This is an understandably difficult prospect, and it's commendable that Cole is turning to coping mechanisms that he knows will help him get through this, rather than running away.

☞ "I think it's a matter of pride. He thinks he can always get his way and doesn't want anyone or anything to win out over him."

Cole traced the eraser of his pencil across the table. "I used to be like that."

"I know you did."

"Do you think he'll win?" asked Cole.

Garvey shook his head. "Over my dead body."

Related Characters: Cole Matthews, Garvey (speaker), Cole's Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

As Cole and Garvey chat in the cabin, Garvey mentions that Cole's dad sued for custody of Cole—but purely as a way to assert his dominance, not because he actually wants to care for his son. Cole's ability to recognize his old self in his dad's actions illustrates how far Cole has come since the novel began. While he once did stuff like this all the time in his wild grabs for power, he now sees that those power grabs are pointless—and they hurt people. Cole doesn't want to hurt people anymore, so it's somewhat sobering to realize that he used to want to.

Meanwhile, Cole's calm manner as he digests this news is significant: he doesn't leap up in anger and fear. Instead, he simply trusts Garvey's assessment of the situation—and he trusts that Garvey cares enough about Cole to do everything in his power to keep Cole's dad away from Cole. Because Cole was able to break the cycle of violence within himself and learn to trust others, he's now able to trust that his community will be there for him and help him in situations like this, where he's powerless simply because he's a minor.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☞ Cole fought back his own tears. "I'm part of some big circle that I don't understand. And so are you. Life, death, good and bad, everything is part of that circle. When I hurt you, I hurt myself, too. I don't think I'll ever heal from what I did to you, but I'm sorry, Peter. I really am sorry."

Related Characters: Cole Matthews (speaker), Peter Driscal

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

When Peter and Cole go to the pond unsupervised for the first time, Peter loses his temper and attempts to engage Cole in a fight—but Cole refuses and instead, apologizes again for what he did. Through the way that Cole frames his apology, he demonstrates that he's learned the true meaning of justice as espoused by Circle Justice and

restorative justice practices: that Cole didn't just hurt Peter when he beat Peter up. Rather, he hurt himself and everyone else in their community because everyone and everything is connected. His actions don't exist in a vacuum, and not everything is about him.

By saying these things to Peter, Cole acknowledges that he may spend the rest of his life trying to take responsibility and make things right again. It might not even be possible to make things right, given that restorative justice practices hold that Peter must heal in order for Cole to heal. In this

sense, Cole has very little power here. Though he can try to convey this all to Peter, the power now lies with Peter, who is faced with the choice of whether to forgive Cole and begin his own healing process. This makes it clear that justice and healing are in no way straightforward processes. They can take years and require facing difficult emotions—and even if one person changes for the better, this doesn't mean that everything is suddenly okay again. It takes helping the victim of the crime, as well as the wider community, to make things okay.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

Cole kneels in the boat. He strains at his handcuffs, even though he agreed to wear them until he reaches the island where he'll begin his yearlong banishment in Southeast Alaska—the only way to avoid jail in Minneapolis. Garvey, a Tlingit Indian and Cole's parole officer, sits in the middle of the boat. Cole doesn't trust Garvey; he doesn't trust *anyone* who doesn't fear him. Edwin, a quiet Tlingit elder, sits in the back. When Cole met Edwin at their last stop, Edwin made Cole put his clothes on inside out to show humility and shame. Everyone thinks Cole is sorry for what he did, but he isn't. To Cole, this is a game.

Feeling a sudden wave of anger at Edwin, Cole spits so that the wind carries it back and it lands squarely on Edwin's chest. Edwin wipes it off; Cole feigns horror. He wonders what Edwin is afraid of. Cole thinks back to everyone who tried to help him in Minneapolis. Nobody really cares about him; they sent him to drug counseling and therapy, but everyone "referred" him on. Cole soon learned that adults "referred" him when they were tired of dealing with him. He's already been arrested many times and every time, they warned him it was his last chance. Cole now knows that he can always count on having one more last chance. It doesn't really matter now, though. He doesn't plan to honor his contract with **Circle Justice**; he's not staying on the island.

Last year, Cole robbed and trashed a hardware store. A week later, when he bragged about it at school, a kid named Peter Driscall turned Cole in. Cole beat him bloody in the parking lot and smashed Peter's head against the sidewalk. This landed Cole in a detention center. At the detention center, Cole refuses to do his schoolwork and thinks that he's only here because Peter wouldn't fight back. What angers Cole most, however, is his mom and dad's behavior. They used to always come to his rescue with a lawyer and money, but that changed when they got divorced. This time, the police refuse to let Cole go. Prosecutors attempt to get his case transferred to adult court, and even Nathaniel Blackwood, the expensive lawyer Cole's dad hired, doesn't know if he can help. Cole resents his parents for this.

The idea that Cole doesn't trust anyone who isn't afraid of him suggests that Cole believes his power comes from making people afraid. By linking this idea to trust, it suggests that Cole doesn't have many trustworthy people around him. Given this outlook, it's not surprising that he greets Edwin and Garvey with such disdain—as far as he's concerned, they're peddling nonsense, and he's not going to play along.



By detailing Cole's past dealings with the criminal justice system, it becomes clear that the system isn't set up to actually help people change for the better—and for a person like Cole, the minor punishments he's already received aren't enough to point him in the right direction. Given that he believes he'll never face consequences for his actions, it's nothing to him to break his contract with Circle Justice (an organization that tries to help Cole reform rather than just sending him to jail).



Cole doesn't believe any of this is his fault—he believes that Peter's at fault for getting beaten up, while Cole's parents are to blame for not being able to override how the criminal justice system deals with violent offenders like Cole. Cole believes he's above the law, and he also thinks that at times when he might not be, it's his parents' responsibility to buy him out of trouble. His parents' divorce also makes a neat scapegoat, as it's easy to blame them for uprooting his life than it is to accept that there are limits to how much money can buy.



Cole thinks that his mom never stands up to anyone, while his dad drinks and blames everything on Cole. He tortures them when they visit by ignoring them. It irks Cole's dad the most—with guards watching, he can't hurt Cole. His parents finally stop visiting, but Garvey visits daily. Cole doesn't understand what Garvey wants. One day, Garvey asks if Cole would consider applying for **Circle Justice**, a healing form of justice used by native cultures. He explains that normally, if Cole were to kill Garvey's cat, for instance, Cole would pay a fine and they would still hate each other. But in Circle Justice, Cole would sign a "healing contract." It might require him to help Garvey pick out a new kitten, watch a vet operate, or help care for a cat.

Cole is dismissive and doesn't know why he'd do this, but Garvey points out that Cole is also a victim—something happened to make him kill a small animal. When Garvey reaches out to clap Cole on the back, Cole shrinks. Nobody touches him except to hurt him. Garvey continues that justice should heal, not punish. Healing, however, is much harder than punishment, as it means an offender needs to take responsibility for their actions. As soon as Garvey mentions that participating in **Circle Justice** might reduce Cole's jail sentence, Cole puts on an innocent voice and says he's interested. He thinks that Garvey is a sucker.

CHAPTER 2

Cole looks at the boxes filled with supplies—food, rain gear, and even schoolwork. A few weeks ago, Edwin built a one-room shelter on the island for Cole. He described it as a healing place, but Cole resents it and the supplies. His dad paid for it all, and this is just another buyout. Cole twists his handcuffs again, thinking that he's not afraid of pain or anything else. He's going to play along just until he can escape.

Back in Minneapolis, **Circle Justice** had seemed like a joke. Garvey told Cole to plead guilty and assured him that he can withdraw it at any time. Cole doesn't trust Garvey, so he told Garvey that he'll be sorry if he's lying. Garvey acted shocked that Cole thinks that he can only trust Garvey if Garvey is afraid of him. Back in the present, Edwin guides the boat to a bay. Cole spots the shelter and thinks that Garvey and Edwin are crazy to think he's going to live here. Once they reach the shore, Garvey and Edwin unload all the supplies, and Edwin motions for Cole to follow him. Cole follows slowly. When Edwin stops, he tells Cole that he's on his own here—the land can help him or kill him. When Cole boasts that he's not afraid of dying, Edwin just smiles.

This passage reveals several important things here: first, it's implied that Cole's dad is physically abusive, as it's only in front of the guards that his dad can't hurt him. This suggests that Cole may be lashing out because violence is all he knows—essentially, he may be part of a cycle of violence. Then, although Cole blames his mom for never standing up for herself, it's possible that given his own self-centeredness, he doesn't understand that she might also be in danger of Cole's dad and may also be a victim.



Given how hard Cole tries to deflect blame, it's unlikely that he's going to take Circle Justice seriously without some sort of major change in his life. It's telling that Garvey delineates between punishment and healing. This suggests that if Cole chooses, he could make the most out of this situation and learn something from it—or he can just accept punishment. That Cole only agrees to try when he learns this might lessen his jail time makes it clear that Cole doesn't have any interest in taking this seriously.



The very fact that Cole has to remind himself that he's not afraid of anything suggests that he is very much afraid—his anger is a way to keep him from wavering and admitting that he's nervous about staying on the island alone. Insisting that this is a buyout from his dad shows that Cole feels forgotten and unloved by the very person who's supposed to care for him.



It's unclear what Cole expects to do to Garvey to get back at him, which makes his front even easier to see through. He's merely trying to be intimidating to cover up his own insecurities. On the island, Cole purposefully walks slowly as he follows Edwin so that he can continue to feel powerful—he wants to make Edwin do things on Cole's timeline. What Edwin proposes is that Cole figure out how to live with the land and see it as the helper it can be—but Cole's insistence that he's not afraid of dying suggests that he sees the natural world as something to dominate.



Edwin points out Devil's Club, a spiny, dangerous plant that will cause infection if touched. He points to the stream where Cole can get water and says it's so far away because other animals use it for water. He asks how Cole would feel if a bear made a den there, but Cole just shrugs and says he'd kill the bear. Edwin says that animals feel the same way. He reminds Cole that he's part of a much bigger **circle**; he's not the only creature on the island. Edwin says that animals can teach people all sorts of things and mentions that off the coast of British Columbia, there are white black bears called **Spirit Bears**. These animals have more honor, dignity, and pride than most people. Cole declares he'd kill a Spirit Bear, but Edwin gives the cryptic warning that any action one commits against animals is also committed against oneself.

Cole insists that Edwin is crazy, but Edwin continues unperturbed. He says that there's a book on edible plants in the supplies. Edwin be back to visit in a few days, and then he'll come every few weeks with supplies. Cole smirks, but Edwin says that he was out here as a young person and that it's a good place to find oneself. Cole says it sucks as Edwin takes off his handcuffs. Edwin snaps that anger will keep Cole lost; he can only find himself if he searches. They head back to the shelter. Garvey offers Cole a small bundle. He says it's called **at.óow**: it's a blanket that's been handed down in Garvey's family for generations. Nobody owns it—the person who possesses it is just a caretaker. If Cole accepts, he has to promise to take care of it and pass it on to someone he trusts someday.

Cole asks if this means that Garvey trusts him. Garvey says that if Cole promises, he'll believe Cole. Cole accepts the blanket. Garvey tells Cole to not waste his chance, and Cole angrily snaps for Garvey and Edwin to leave. They promptly get back in their boat and head out to sea. Cole waves, but they can't see his raised middle finger. Then, he hurls rocks into the bay, thinking about the last three months he spent in detention and dealing with **Circle Justice**. The committee members kept asking why they should believe that Cole wants to change. This annoyed Cole, but he pretended to be penitent and complained to Garvey about it. Garvey explained that they want Cole to show them he's trustworthy and wants change. People have already paid for Cole's mistakes.

Through his pep talk, Edwin tries to enlighten Cole to the fact that lots of animals—bears in particular—aren't going to be frightened of a 15-year-old kid, so he should treat these animals with caution and respect if he encounters them. Having to admit that anything in the world is more powerful than he is isn't something Cole can accept while still believing in his own superiority, hence his declaration that he'd kill bears. Saying he'd kill a Spirit Bear, though, is also intended as a personal insult to Edwin—knowing that this animal is sacred to Edwin, it's an attempt to make him afraid and hurt his feelings.



It's telling that Edwin keys in on Cole's anger as the one thing that will keep him lost. With this, Edwin proposes that if a person is angry all the time, they miss out on opportunities to appreciate the world around them—and, for that matter, to appreciate themselves and what they can do. Garvey's offering of the at.óow blanket is an attempt to demonstrate for Cole what trust and friendship look like. He's banking on the possibility that Cole will recognize the significance of this moment and honor his promise, which seems risky given Cole's behavior.



In dealing with Circle Justice, Cole comes up against the fact that going through the court system is relatively easy. He makes his case—or his dad pays Nathaniel Blackwood to do so—and the judge hands down a sentence. At Circle Justice meetings, however, Cole has to try to show people that he's actually willing to take responsibility for his actions. Unsurprisingly, this is difficult given that Cole has no genuine interest in taking responsibility. He doesn't seem to have positive relationships that would make him see the error of others pay for his mistakes.



In Minneapolis, Garvey told Cole that he had bigger issues than getting out of detention—like finding a sponsor for **Circle Justice**. Cole thought that Garvey was going to help him, but Garvey announced he doesn't waste time on losers. Back on the island, Cole begins to cry. He thinks this is no different than being in jail: everyone just wants to get rid of him. Cole's rage grows. The last time he felt angry like this, he trashed his cell at the detention center and punched the walls until they were bloody. He'd wanted to find someone to pay for his anger. When Garvey arrived a bit later, he turned right around to leave and insisted that Cole blames the world for his problems. Garvey teased Cole about his bloody fists and then left. Presently, Cole's rage grows. He finds a match and sets his shelter and all his supplies on fire.

Garvey can clearly see through Cole's façade and knows full well that Cole isn't taking this seriously. Given that Cole ends up on the island thanks to Circle Justice anyway, it's likely that Garvey figured that even if he couldn't get Cole to see the error of his ways, being confronted with the raw power of the natural world would make Cole confront his own weaknesses. Cole's anger, however, blinds him to the power of nature—burning his shelter is a way of telling the world that no matter what it throws at Cole, he doesn't need help weathering it.



CHAPTER 3

Cole stares at the fire; it doesn't make him happy. He notices eagles and a mother seal and her pups, and then he announces aloud that the island sucks. Nobody cares—nobody understands what it's like to live with parents who don't want him to live. Garvey is one of the worst offenders—Cole remembers when Garvey showed up at the detention center one day and asked what Cole didn't like about his life. Cole spat that his parents hate him; they drink and never came to his sporting events. When Garvey expressed sympathy, Cole cracked and shouted that his dad hits him until he's numb while his mom does nothing. Garvey then pulled out baking ingredients and asked Cole to taste them. Cole did. Then, Garvey offered Cole a cake made from the same ingredients. Cole refused to see the point and threw the cake after Garvey left.

The observation that lighting the fire doesn't make Cole happy is an early indicator that acts of violence—including beating Peter—don't make a person feel better. However, Cole provides more background on why he acts the way he does when he shares with Garvey that he feels abandoned by his parents, and that his dad hits him. The very people who should love and protect Cole have made his world a terrifying place, and so Cole tries to gain power wherever he can. This is also why he refuses to see the point of Garvey's cake demonstration, which is to show Cole that he can choose to make something positive out of his life (like the cake), even if certain parts of it (like eating raw flour on its own) aren't particularly pleasant.



Cole laughs hysterically as everything burns. His laughter seems to mock everyone who has ever bullied him and hurt him. He thinks that all the ingredients in his cake are awful; banishment feels even worse than his dad's abuse or his mom ignoring him. Cole only looks away and stops laughing when the fire starts to slow down. He notices the **at.óow** is unharmed and flings it toward the fire before heading for the shore. No one except Cole's dad knows how good of a swimmer he is. Cole strips to his underwear and plots his path to the next island: his plan is to catch a ride on a boat and then disappear on the mainland. He wades into the water and swims hard.

What makes Cole the angriest is his feeling that his parents want him. Nobody wants him—and this sense of loneliness and distrust makes it seem acceptable to beat people up, steal, and destroy his shelter and supplies on the island. However, since Cole's dad is the one responsible for Cole's swimming abilities, it suggests that Cole's swimming might not get him very far, given how unhelpful Cole's dad has been in every other way.



As Cole swims, he thinks about Garvey’s “stupid cake demonstration” and his application to **Circle Justice**. When Cole’s application was accepted, Garvey explained that Keepers needed to prepare the Hearing Circle, which allows everyone to discuss solutions. Anyone could come—there could be classmates, lawyers, and Cole’s parents. Cole scoffed that his parents don’t care and then asked if Peter would be there. Garvey shrugged and noted that Peter might not be ready to forgive. Cole insisted he didn’t care if Peter forgave him, which made Garvey ask why everything is about Cole. Forgiveness, Garvey suggested, isn’t for Cole—it’s for Peter’s healing.

Cole still thinks about the cake demonstration because it likely made an impression on him—even if he writes it off as “stupid” at this point. This offers hope that in the future, Cole will be able to bring together everything he’s learned and reevaluate his poor behavior. Cole doesn’t understand that healing is about Peter because in his mind, everything is about himself. He doesn’t yet take other people’s experiences seriously, which means that he’s unable to take Circle Justice seriously.



CHAPTER 4

Cole pauses his swimming to catch his breath. He’s outside the bay now and angles for the island, still thinking about **Circle Justice**. Back in Minneapolis, Garvey explained that all the meetings Circle Justice holds are circles because life is a circle. Cole doesn’t have to go to the meetings, and he can’t go to the ones between the Keepers and Peter’s family. Peter’s family might help decide Cole’s sentence, which makes Cole insist that they’ll hang him—but Garvey points out that Cole already hung himself. On the night of the Hearing Circle, Cole nervously enters the basement of the local library. He’s allowed to enter without handcuffs, and the Keeper shakes Cole’s hand. Lots of people arrive. Cole nervously greets them, but he’s afraid of seeing Peter for the first time since the beating.

Cole’s insistence that Peter’s family will hang him is yet another way for him to blame others for what’s happening and to avoid taking responsibility. If they do send him to jail, it’ll be their fault for sending him, not Cole’s fault for committing a crime that warranted a jail sentence. When Cole is able to enter the Circle without cuffs, it does suggest that in theory, the Circle is trying to give Cole freedom. The program’s leaders aren’t to control him—rather, they want him to genuinely change and show that he can handle life without handcuffs.



Judge Tanner arrives, along with Nathaniel Blackwood and Cole’s dad. They’re both dressed in suits and look out of place. Cole’s dad sits on Cole’s left; when Cole’s mom arrived a minute later, wearing a party dress, she sits on Cole’s right. Cole feels as though his parents are treating this like a social event. His mom looks afraid, and Cole thinks this feels like public humiliation. Peter, Mr. and Mrs. Driscal, and Peter’s lawyer arrive. Then, the Keeper asks everyone to join hands for a prayer. Cole catches Peter staring at him and glares threateningly. When the Circle sits down, the Keeper explains that they’re not here to win or lose—**Circle Justice** is intended to heal, though healing isn’t easy. She holds up a feather and says that people may only speak when they hold it. People must be honest and respectful.

Because Cole thinks only of himself, it’s impossible for him to see how difficult this meeting probably is for his parents. His parents’ choice of dress suggests that, like Cole, they’re trying to stay strong and look put-together and reasonable, not like awful people who might be somehow responsible for their son’s behavior. It’s worth noting, though, that Cole’s mom looks afraid. Cole shows no interest in why this might be, but it’s worth considering that his mom might also have suffered her husband’s abuse and may therefore have good reason to be afraid in his presence.



The Keeper looks at Cole and points out that he has a history of anger and violence. Peter is still in therapy for his injuries. Addressing the group, she says that they must make both Peter and Cole well. As the feather moves around the **circle**, people introduce themselves. Cole's mom nearly cries as she introduces herself. When Cole gets the feather, he squirms. He says he screwed up, apologizes to Peter, and says he wants help getting over his anger. People seem to like what he said. Cole's dad introduces himself and says that he wants to make sure Cole doesn't cause problems again. Nathaniel Blackwood insists that Cole should be released to his parents, not put in jail.

When Peter introduces himself, he speaks slowly and haltingly. He didn't sound like this before. Cole's hands sweat. He didn't mean to hurt Peter, but this wouldn't have happened if Peter had stayed quiet.

CHAPTER 5

Cole swims as hard as he can and pauses to look back. He can't believe it—he hasn't gone anywhere. Cole realizes his mistake: the tide is coming in. His legs begin to cramp, and Cole panics as the tide brings him to shore slowly. He flails and hits his frozen feet on rocks until he gives up and lets the water carry him to land. Cole drags himself up the beach, where he lies still and can barely think. He knows he needs to get warm and remembers flames, but he can't find them. His legs refuse to hold him, so Cole drags himself along. The cold makes it hard to think, but Cole can remember flames. He finally collapses someplace that feels oddly warm and realizes that he's totally alone. This scares him.

Cole wakes before dawn. Everything hurts. He can almost remember burning everything and swimming away. He wakes again after dawn and realizes that he's lying in the ashes of the burnt shelter. He can stand, but his aching body is scraped and bleeding. About a quarter mile away, Cole notices a white bear—a **Spirit Bear**. They're not supposed to live here. It stares at him. Cole thinks it has no right to stare—it's not dignified or honorable. He hurls a stone at it, but the bear seems unafraid. Angry, Cole looks for a weapon. He finds the hunting knife, but when he turns back around, the bear is gone.

When the Keeper insists that the purpose of Circle Justice is to improve both Peter and Cole's lives, it speaks to the mission of restorative justice: to treat crime like a symptom of things gone wrong in the community and to treat everyone who was hurt, not just the victim of the crime. However, because Cole sees himself as the only real victim here, he can't fully appreciate the intent and doesn't see the point of doing anything for Peter. Until he can acknowledge the humanity of those around him, he can't heal or change his behavior.



Even when confronted with proof that he did something awful, Cole cannot accept responsibility—so he blames Peter for what happened. It's much easier to do this than to change.



Cole's experience trying to swim away is an early indicator that he can't actually control the natural world. The tides come in and out whether he pays attention or not—and the tides can either help him or they can make his swim difficult and dangerous. Now that Cole is back on shore, he has to deal with the consequences of having burnt his shelter down. He doesn't have anywhere warm to recover from his swim, and he thus has to accept that he's not match for the natural world.



The appearance of the Spirit Bear—which is supposed to live much farther south—reinforces that the natural world doesn't make logical sense, especially to a person who thinks of himself as all-powerful. Because the bear turns everything Cole thinks he knows about the natural world upside down, he greets it with anger and with a desire to dominate it. This shows how much Cole's anger blinds him to reality, given that bears are obviously dangerous and can easily overpower people.



Cole catches sight of the **at.óow** when he turns back around. It's still not burnt. Cole throws it around his shoulders and finds his clothes. He doesn't regret burning everything or hurting Peter. All of this is someone else's fault, and Cole knows he'll get revenge someday. He especially wants to get revenge against Peter's lawyer, who insisted at the Healing **Circle** that Cole was dangerous and untrustworthy. Other people echoed her, and then Cole's dad said that he and Cole's mom have always wanted what's best to him. Cole interrupted to say his dad was lying—his dad only drinks and whips him.

The fact the at.óow somehow survived the blaze symbolically suggests that even if Cole spurns everyone's attempts to help him, those attempts can still make a difference. Indeed, the at.óow may be the only thing that keeps Cole alive, now that he's burnt the shelter and all his supplies. His anger keeps him from recognizing this, though. Turning to thinking about revenge is much easier, especially when he has an easy scapegoat in Peter's lawyer.



CHAPTER 6

Cole puts on his damp clothes and laughs about people's reactions when he called his dad a liar at the **Circle** Justice meeting. Cole's dad sputters, turns red, and tries to deny that he hits Cole. Though the Keeper tries to step in, Cole shouts that his dad is lying. Nathaniel Blackwood pulls Cole's dad down, and the Keeper confiscates the feather. She hands it to Cole, who shakily says that his parents don't care about him—he doesn't think his dad even knows when his birthday is. Cole then asks his mom to talk about how Cole's dad beats him, but his mom just glances at Cole's dad and passes the feather without speaking.

Though Cole's mom's choice to pass on the feather may look like a betrayal to Cole, it's an indicator that she's probably terrified of her ex-husband—and like Cole, she may be a victim of his abuse. But because Cole is so caught up in playing the victim, he's not open to feeling compassion for his mom. This makes the family situation even more complicated, as even if Cole's mom is afraid, she still failed to protect her child—and Cole clearly holds this against her.



Garvey takes the feather and asks the group what caused Cole's anger—and what they might have done had they grown up in Cole's situation. Garvey admits that he doesn't know how to heal deep emotional and physical damage, and he says that Cole isn't the only problem. Rather, Cole is a symptom of a community and a family that are broken—they're *all* guilty. He stares at Cole's dad as he says this. Peter's lawyer is the next to speak: she insists that Cole must go to jail for the safety of the community. Mrs. Driscal speaks next and says that Peter has speech problems, coordination problems, and nightmares as a result of the beating. Because of this, Cole deserves to go to jail. Cole slouches in his chair—this is getting old.

By asking others in the Circle to imagine themselves in Cole's shoes, Garvey tries to spark empathy in everyone in attendance. Suffering abuse, he suggests, is uniquely traumatizing, and they can't just write Cole off as a coldhearted criminal because he, too, is a victim. For Mrs. Driscal, however, it's easier to look at Cole just as the person who took away the son she knew and to ignore the fact that Cole is hurting too.



Peter gets the feather and holds it for a long time. When prompted, he slurs that someone should hit Cole's head against the sidewalk so that he can learn what it feels like. The Keeper takes the feather after this and ends the Healing **Circle** with a prayer. Cole refuses to hold either of his parents' hands. The guard comes in to put handcuffs on Cole, but before he leaves, Garvey stops and notes that Cole isn't buying any of the Circle Justice stuff. When Cole asks whose side Garvey is on, Cole's dad says that this isn't about sides. Garvey agrees with him, but then he asks when Cole's birthday is. Cole's dad gulps, flushes, and leaves.

Peter is understandably angry about what Cole did to him. He's also clearly suffering in a variety of ways—including from anger, which causes him to suggest that Cole needs to suffer pain. This anger is surprisingly similar to the anger Cole feels, which suggests that it's not helpful for Peter to feel this way. In other words, anger might be understandable, but it's still inappropriate and unproductive to wish violence on others. Now, Peter is caught up in the cycle of violence, just like Cole is.



Back in the present, on the island, Cole gets angry just thinking about **Circle** Justice meetings. He hikes to the stream for a drink and wonders how the **Spirit Bear** can move so quietly through the tangled forest. Then, he returns to the ashes and coaxes a fire to life. The weather is beautiful, but Cole remembers Garvey saying that this spot gets a lot of rain. Cole thinks this is silly. He studies the tide and jumps when he hears a noise, thinking it's the Spirit Bear. But it's just birds, and Cole reminds himself that the bear should be afraid of him, not the other way around. Cole watches the tides and decides it'd be best to leave tomorrow—he doesn't want to swim at night. He wishes he could see Edwin and Garvey's faces when they find him gone.

Cole also wishes he could see his dad's reaction, as he knows that his dad hates that he can't fix Cole with a lawsuit or a drink. In his dad's opinion, the only thing to do is hit Cole harder. Cole remembers that once, his dad hit him with his belt until Cole's skin was raw and then turned the belt around to use the buckle end. Cole screamed and screamed. That night, for the first time, his mom said something, but she ran away when Cole's dad threatened to hit her too.

It's all Garvey's fault that Cole is on the island in the first place. After the fifth **Circle** meeting, Cole asked why nobody believed he'd changed. Peter's lawyer points out that Cole is a liar and sarcastically says that they can't ship him to the Arctic Circle where he can't hurt anyone—but Garvey suggests they look into banishing Cole in Southeast Alaska. He explains that Cole would be alone to think for about a year, and then the Circle could reevaluate and decide whether to sentence Cole. Cole insists that he's fine living outside, but he's privately worried. After the meeting, Garvey tells Cole that banishment is harder than jail. He says he supports banishment because Cole won't change if he goes to jail. He also tells Cole that island life is hard—it's impossible to manipulate the natural world or to ignore one's hunger.

Simply being curious about how the Spirit Bear moves through the woods again suggests that Cole has the potential to change—and on some level, he recognizes that the natural world has all sorts of things to teach him. Note that Cole's behavior and what he tells himself are at odds; he's clearly afraid, but he knows that showing vulnerability will break his act of being all-powerful. Having to keep up this act, however, means that Cole feels compelled to behave recklessly—like swimming in the freezing cold ocean.



This memory confirms that the horrible abuse that Cole suffers at home—it's no wonder he feels the way he does, given how heartless his dad seems. This also confirms that Cole's mom is likely a victim as well, and that Cole acts out so he can get a sense of control. At home, he feels utterly out of control, alone, and neglected.



Even though Peter's lawyer participating in the Circle, it seems as though she isn't taking the program seriously. This suggests that everyone has something to learn when it comes to managing anger and getting justice. This passage is also significant because it marks the beginning of Cole's desire to dominate the natural world—he needed to act tough about living in the wild in order to get out of going to jail. This suggests that Cole is naïve about what's in store for him in Alaska; in jail, he'd at least be warm and fed.



CHAPTER 7

Cole breaks branches off trees to feed his fire. He notices an orca and her calf in the bay, but he ignores them and angrily tends the flames. Cole closes his eyes to gather his thoughts, and when he opens them, the **Spirit Bear** stares back from 100 yards away. Enraged, Cole threatens to kill the bear and carefully cuts a sapling to fashion into a spear. Now, he's ready to kill the bear if it returns. He spends the afternoon next to his fire, since the smoke keeps the mosquitos away. Though Cole is hungry, he ignores it and curls up to sleep, reminding himself that this is easy. Cole struggles to fall asleep and wakes up several times in the night. Once when he awakes, everything is silent. He shouts in case the Spirit Bear is lurking, but he can't fall back to sleep.

At dawn, it starts to drizzle. Cole knows he needs food and energy to swim, so he stokes his fire and heads down to the beach with his spear. There, he finds seagulls picking at a fish. He chases the seagulls away and sees that the fish is mangled, but still good. Cole cooks it over the fire, drinks from the stream, and has more fish. It begins to rain in earnest, and Cole wishes he could wait for better weather. He needs to leave today, or Edwin and Garvey will return to check on him. Cole settles in under the **at.óow** to watch the tide, though it's hard to see given the weather.

When Cole looks up, the **Spirit Bear** is standing at the bay, staring straight at Cole. Cole grabs his spear and his knife and hurries for it. But rather than running away, the bear faces Cole. Cole figures it's just bluffing and starts to shout at it. He raises his spear and thinks that no one is watching—he can back away and no one will ever know. However, his anger controls him, and he creeps forward. The bear waits calmly. Cole figures it's afraid, and this just makes him angry. He starts forward.

CHAPTER 8

Ten feet from the **Spirit Bear**, Cole flings the spear. The bear swats it away and then leaps, knocking Cole down and shoving his face in the dirt. Cole scrambles to his feet and races for the trees, but the bear chases him and drags him down again. Cole grabs for something, but he only gets Devil's Club. He ignores the tiny spines as the bear lifts him by the thigh. Cole feels his pelvis crack as the bear drops him and claws at his torso. When Cole lifts a hand, the bear bites it and swings Cole back and forth. Cole reaches out and comes away with a handful of fur. The bear drops Cole, but then comes forward again. It stands on Cole's chest and shoves, cracking Cole's ribs. A few minutes later, it saunters away.

Cole is entirely unable to acknowledge or enjoy the beauty of the natural world. This is because he's too caught up in his own human problems—and in his anger. While a curious bear like this Spirit Bear would certainly be a concern for many campers, Cole takes everything a step further when he prepares to kill it rather than just scaring it away (black bears are timid, and people can often successfully chase them off). Insisting on killing the bear instead of chasing it suggests that Cole feels he needs to prove himself and come out a winner.



Even though Cole remains focused on leaving today, it's telling that he wishes he didn't have to. On some level, he does understand that what he plans to do is even more dangerous because visibility is poor, he's cold, and he hasn't had a meal to fuel his swim. In other words, Cole knows he might not be powerful enough to make this work—but his desire to win is strong enough to override his instincts.



It's somewhat humorous that Cole seemingly believes that the bear is afraid of him, given that he's a poorly armed teenager staring down an enormous animal. However, the very fact that Cole persists in this endeavor shows just how much his anger and his desire for power blind him to reality. He thinks he can win this fight, because in his mind, there's no other option—to back down would be to admit weakness.



The bear's attack to be expected given Cole's behavior. In many ways, this is the first time that Cole has to face consequences for his bad choices and his need to exert his power over everyone and everything. It's telling, then, that the trauma is so intense—Cole probably Peter (and others) a similar amount of pain throughout the course of his various criminal escapades. When the bear leaves him so casually, it reinforces that as a human, Cole is powerless in the face of the natural world.



Cole can't move anything except his head and his left arm, and everything hurts. Blood drips from his mouth and down his throat, which chokes him—but when he coughs, the pain is unbearable. Ten feet away, seagulls pick at something: Cole realizes that they're eating bits of his torso that the bear tore up. There's nothing he can do to make the seagulls go away, and he's enraged that the gulls are treating him like any other animal. Cole wishes he had a gun. He tries to think about the mauling. It doesn't make sense—*everything* is afraid of him, but for some reason, this bear wasn't. Cole is thrilled to see that his nearby knife is bloody and that he still has the bear's fur in his hand. He puts the fur in his pocket so he can prove his story later.

Cole tries to move, but he can't. His arm is useless, and his hand points the wrong direction. His legs don't work either. He looks around in a **circle** and sees that everything else seems to be part of something bigger. Cole feels alone and knows that he's not a part of this place. Feeling haunted, Cole knows that night will eventually arrive. He's not sure what will happen when he dies, and he wonders if the **Spirit Bear** or the seagulls will return to eat him before he passes away. Cole has had nightmares of being helpless all his life, but this is his worst nightmare. As his stomach cramps, he crushes a caterpillar to teach it a lesson. When Cole wipes blood off his mouth, he notes that it looks just like the bear's blood and just like Peter's blood—but Peter is a loser, and the bear is stupid.

Cole's stomach cramps, causing him to vomit. He's in excruciating pain, and he blacks out. Hours later, when he wakes up, he looks around at his vomit, the bay, and the ocean. He damns everything he can see and wishes he'd gone to jail, where at least he'd have some control—unlike on the island. Feeling small and lonely, he begins to cry.

CHAPTER 9

The rain and gray sky make it difficult to mark time, but Cole knows that he's going to die. He tries not to think about it as he gets weaker and cries. Cole doesn't think anyone cares about him, so it doesn't matter anyway. He watches a sparrow feed babies in its nest and finds the whole thing irritating. If he weren't hurt, he'd knock the nest down. He also thinks that if he were the mother bird, he'd leave the babies to die—she owes them nothing. He feels like he doesn't owe anyone anything either; if it weren't for other people, he wouldn't be here. Thinking these bitter thoughts helps Cole focus, but it does nothing for the pain. Exhausted, he finally falls asleep and dreams of the **at.óow**.

Though it's impossible to tell if these are the same seagulls from Chapter 7, it's also quite the coincidence that seagulls literally feast on Cole's body after he stole their meal earlier. This recalls Garvey's earlier advice that the natural world can either help Cole live, or it can kill him. When Cole wishes he had a gun, it reflects his desire to feel superior and empowered. His belief that the bear's mauling doesn't make sense indicates that Cole has never had someone (or something) call his bluff before.



Now that Cole is stuck here, he begins to think more about how Garvey and Edwin insisted that he is part of a much larger circle of life, whether he likes it or not. Even though Cole doesn't feel as though he's part of the circle with the other animals, this thought does force him to acknowledge that the circle of life includes death—and he could die as a result of what happened. His unwillingness to recognize that the bear did to him exactly what he did to Peter shows that even now, Cole isn't willing to take responsibility for his actions.



Alone and with no one to help him, there's no telling whether Cole will live or die. By spurning everyone's attempts to help him, he's now at the mercy of the natural world—and it doesn't care whether he lives or not.



When the narrator notes that thinking bitter thoughts helps Cole focus, it suggests that his entire thought process and worldview revolves around being angry and bitter. It's a habit, in other words; he doesn't know any other way to look at the world around him. His thoughts on the bird's nest reiterate how entrenched he is in the cycle of violence. He wants the birds to suffer the same emotional and physical pain that he has, for no other reason than because he thinks that hurting others might make him feel better.



Cole wakes in the middle of the night to thunder and lightning. When lightning flashes, Cole sees the **Spirit Bear** about 50 feet away. He's terrified, but when lightning flashes again, the animal is gone. Cole thinks the bear is a coward—it's just waiting to kill him until Cole is too weak to fight back. The storm picks up, and Cole curls into a ball to try to protect himself—but it hurts too much. He cries for help, but no one comes. Suddenly, he feels a prickling sensation and then hears an explosion next to him. Cole can smell something burning and feels as though he's never been so exposed and vulnerable. He realizes that he's *always* been this weak. Eventually, the storm blows itself out, and Cole falls back asleep.

When Cole wakes up, he confusedly looks around and sees that lightning hit a nearby spruce tree. The tree is now on its side mere feet from him. Cole focuses on the full moon and wonders whether he wants to live or die. He remembers that Garvey and Edwin had both said something about a **circle**, but he can't remember what. Cole looks around for the **Spirit Bear** and then remembers the baby birds—their nest was in the fallen tree. He weakly calls out to ask if they're okay.

CHAPTER 10

Cole thinks about the sparrows as he struggles to stay alive. By dawn, he's hanging on by a thread. His pain gets worse, and unable to put it off any longer, he ashamedly allows himself to defecate. The stench is awful, but he's too weak to move away. Mosquitos swarm around him. He wants to be angry and blame other things for his predicament, but that takes energy, and Cole is weak. As the sun rises, horseflies begin to swarm too. There's nothing Cole can do.

Cole watches birds flit around the downed tree and remembers the nest. He spots it and then notices four dead baby birds scattered in the grass. Cole envies them—they died clearly trying to get back to their nest, and Cole doesn't feel like he ever had a home worth trying to return to. He feels sad and like the birds didn't deserve to die, but he also can't figure out why they had the right to live. Haunted, Cole wonders if life—including his—has any meaning. He watches a bird, wonders if it's the mother, and he thinks that he doesn't have anyone to search for him.

Amid the thunderstorm, Cole finally has to confront the inarguable fact that he can't control anything right now. He survives this storm thanks to sheer luck; he's too injured to even do anything to protect himself. However, Cole continues to think mean, angry thoughts at the Spirit Bear because he still doesn't understand how any being could not be afraid of him. It doesn't make sense to Cole, and therefore, he can't describe it in neutral terms.



Because Cole is so afraid right now, he naturally looks for other beings who might also be afraid and struggling. This is why he thinks of the baby birds. He recognizes that these tiny creatures aren't all that different from him right now—they just happen to have a mother who cares about them. Recognizing this is a first step to developing empathy.



As Cole gets weaker, the novel makes the point that it takes a lot of effort to stay angry—and in dire situations like this, a person like Cole has to choose whether they want to be angry or want to live. This more broadly suggests that a life fueled by anger isn't really living.



Again, Cole sees himself in the baby birds—or maybe more accurately, he sees an idealized version of himself in them. Those birds had a mother and a home, things that Cole doesn't feel like he has. All of this continues to drive home that if a person is willing to humble themselves and pay attention, the natural world has many lessons to teach and can help a person figure out how they want to live their life.



Tears well in Cole's eyes. He wonders if the baby birds suffered as they died, and though he thinks it's awful that maggots will eat the bodies, he also thinks that this is the **cycle** Edwin talked about. Cole knows that dying is part of living and knows that he'll die someday, but he angrily thinks that right now, he's no better than a plant. The world hasn't benefited from his life. With this thought, Cole vows to live—he knows that he'll have no control in death, but he'll be able to make choices if he's alive. Cole also suddenly understands that the power to make others scared is "fake." He realizes he's squandered his choices feeling sorry for himself. Now, everyone he hates is safe and warm; Cole's choices have only hurt him.

It's telling that Cole vows to live right after thinking that the world hasn't gotten anything out of him. This is essentially a veiled recognition that life isn't worth living unless a person gives back and makes the world a better place. With this thought, Cole finds purpose and is able to plot a path forward. However, in order to do this, Cole must also look back and make sense of his past choices. He's able to see now that anger and intimidating others hurts him most of all, as he's the one unable to move on from his mistakes and offer anything worthwhile to the world.



The image of a baby sparrow in a nest flits into Cole's mind. The bird isn't angry; it's just helpless and wants food and life. Cole realizes he needs food if he's going to live. He picks a few blades of grass until he has a wad of grass in his mouth. When he tries to swallow, he chokes. He then chews slowly until he can swallow. He grabs several worms and then opens his mouth to the rain for water. When he's tired, he realizes he can't feel any mosquitos on his right arm. His arm, however, is covered in mosquitos. Cole wishes he had the **at.óow** for protection, but he doesn't know where it is. Cole sleeps, and when he wakes up, there's a mouse on his arm. When it steps onto his hand, he grabs it.

By thinking of himself as a helpless, innocent baby bird, Cole has to reckon with his own powerlessness. As he accepts that he's relatively powerless right now, he's able to let go of some of his anger—and in doing this, he's better able to plan how he'll get through this. This is why, suddenly, Cole is able to muster up his strength and gather food. Meanwhile, wanting the at.óow blanket shows that once Cole begins to leave his anger behind, he begins to crave the safety and warmth (both literal and figurative) that the blanket represents. Companionship and community, as symbolized by the at.óow, can help Cole—whereas his anger cannot.



CHAPTER 11

The mouse struggles in Cole's clamped hand. Cole feels awful for the animal, but he forces it into his mouth. He struggles to bite down on it but finally crushes its head. Cole imagines the baby sparrow as he chews on the mouse and swallows. Exhausted after this, Cole doesn't fight the mosquitos. He's not sure how to live at this point. Sensing movement, he opens his eyes and sees that gulls have come to eat his vomit. Cole realizes that the fish chunks he threw up are still energy, so he shoos off the gulls and eats what he can. It begins to rain. Fortunately, the rain cools Cole's skin. He smears mud on himself and realizes he feels satisfied after feeding himself. Digging up mud made a hole and Cole finds water in it. He lifts water to his mouth.

The simple fact that Cole feels bad for the mouse suggests that he's developed a lot of empathy just in the last 24 hours. Killing the mouse isn't just a way to exert his dominance over another living creature. Now, it's the only way for Cole to stay alive, and thus, the mouse's death seems like more of a sacrifice than a senseless killing. Eating his own vomit is also a very humbling experience—and as Cole continues to humble himself, he becomes more at peace.



Cole looks out to the bay and sees the mother sea with her pups. He snags two more worms and then hears a twig break. The **Spirit Bear** is about 20 feet away. It stands stock-still, and Cole stares at it, too afraid to do anything. He wonders if the bear is back to kill him—he knows it could finish the job in an instant, and he decides to go out with the last word. Cole gathers as much saliva as he can and spits at the Spirit Bear, knowing that he's spitting at the whole world and at his entire life. The spit lands far short of its target, but the bear curiously steps forward.

Now that Cole has begun to humble himself and acknowledge his own powerlessness, he understands that the Spirit Bear could kill him in an instant. However, this doesn't mean that Cole isn't still angry at everything and is willing to submit to death, hence why he spits. He's not yet ready to totally give up on thinking he's powerful, as dangerous as spitting at a bear might be.



CHAPTER 12

As the **Spirit Bear** approaches Cole's saliva, Cole wonders if he's strong enough to put up any defense. The bear, however, merely licks up the spit and ambles away. Cole begins to cry. If he's going to die, he wants to die quickly and violently while putting up a fight. It's insulting that even the Spirit Bear seems to think he's insignificant. Cole begins to sob and then falls asleep as a storm moves in and soaks him with rain and hail. He dreams he's a baby bird and can do nothing but submit to the storm and hope to live. In his dream, Cole knows that he needs help to survive.

When the storm loses its power, Cole wakes up. He can smell a harsh animal smell and opens his eyes to find the **Spirit Bear** standing over him, staring into his face. Cole is surprised to realize he's not terrified—he knows he'll fight if the bear tries to kill him, but he also knows that if he dies, he's ready. The bear, however, only looks curious. Cole instinctively gathers spit in his mouth but then swallows; he's not sure why. Then, he lifts a hand and cautiously reaches out to touch the bear. It seems aware, but it allows Cole to touch it. Cole notices the bear's warmth and heartbeat, but he also feels trust. He's not sure why the Spirit Bear allows this after Cole's attempt to kill it, but Cole takes his hand away. The bear backs away and heads for the bay.

The **Spirit Bear** wades right into the water and swims away. Cole takes a breath and notices that the world around him seems to have come alive. He notices the color of the water and the seals playing in the bay. Cole can smell his own vomit, but he can also smell seaweed and salt. He thinks that the world is beautiful and wonders why he's never noticed this before. Cole also realizes that he can't redo his past; this moment is all he has. He senses that he's starting to slip away, and though he's sad to die, he feels content to pass away having trusted the Spirit Bear and having the bear trust him. Cole puts his head down and feels like he's floating.

Cole begins to hear a buzzing noise and seagulls. This is annoying—he wants to die in peace. The gulls pick at his arms, trying to lift him. Cole begins to feel warm, soft sensations, and then he feels warm liquid in his mouth. He wonders if it's blood and spits it out. When more liquid enters his mouth, Cole gives in—he doesn't think it matters how he dies. He then hears a voice telling him to hang in there. The buzzing noise starts again, and Cole's pain magnifies as he bounces. Cole tries to die but opens his eyes: the island is gone. There's a blanket over him, but it's not the **at.óow**. He realizes he's in the bottom of Edwin's boat and that Garvey is leaning over him. The bouncing motion of the boat makes the pain worse.

To Cole, simply starving to death or bleeding out where he is doesn't make sense. Death, for him, needs to be flashy and violent, as that's all he knows. However, the fact that the Spirit Bear seems to think so little of him drives home yet again that the natural world isn't going to play by Cole's rules and make him feel powerful.



The bear is probably just curious to figure out what Cole even is—it's possible that it's never seen a person before. However, it's still meaningful that the bear allows Cole to touch it. When Cole identifies this as trust, he begins to understand that if others trust him, amazing things will happen. Before, when he approached the bear with anger, he had no chance of touching a wild animal. Now, he has proof that if he treats things kindly and doesn't lash out, they'll repay him in kind.



Now that Cole understands how important and beautiful trust is, the world around him suddenly looks more beautiful. This implies that if a person approaches life with kindness, compassion, and optimism, it's far easier to acknowledge how beautiful the world is. Because Cole has lived his life in such an angry haze, he's never been able to understand this before.



Now that Cole has totally given up (like the bird in the nest that he dreamed about), help finally arrives. In essence, this implies that Cole realizes he can't be helped until he totally gives into his own vulnerability. That his pain increases as he's being helped, however, foreshadows how difficult Cole's journey will be going forward. He's made many important leaps during his time on the island, but this doesn't mean he has the tools to put these lessons into practice in real life.



Finally, the boat slows and bumps against something. Cole opens his eyes to see lots of people. He cries out in pain as the group lifts him. One person slips, but Cole finds himself on a stretcher and then in a van. Hands carefully lift Cole into a warm bed, and he hears a woman's voice as more hands clean him up and tuck him in. When Cole opens his eyes, looking for the **at.óow**, Garvey and Edwin step forward. Garvey says plainly that the fallen tree must've gotten Cole, but a Tlingit woman steps up, pulls down the blanket, and says that a bear attacked Cole. Garvey looks scared, so Cole weakly says that he's okay. Garvey lists all of Cole's injuries and says that Cole definitely isn't okay, but Cole argues he is.

Again, giving into his own vulnerability and powerlessness puts Cole in the position of finally being able to accept help from others. This woman is able to clean and dress Cole because he doesn't try to resist. When Cole insists he's okay, it suggests that he's far more interested in his emotional development over the last few days than any lasting damage he might suffer as a result of his injuries. In this sense, he's becoming less selfish and more accepting of what comes his way.



CHAPTER 13

A strange man announces that they can't get a plane out to take Cole to Ketchikan until morning due to the weather. Edwin introduces the Tlingit nurse as Rosey, the best and only nurse in Drake. When Cole shivers, Garvey passes Rosey the **at.óow**. Rosey rejects it because it's wet, but Cole grabs at it. He then grabs Garvey's arm. Garvey assures Cole that he's not leaving and says they can talk later. Rosey gives Cole medication and an IV while Garvey spoons broth into Cole's mouth. Cole watches Rosey work on him as though there's nothing else she'd rather do.

Though Edwin is around, Garvey is the person Cole knows best out of this crew of helpers. Thus, Cole clings to Garvey—and to the at.óow, their symbol of trust and friendship—as he's the one person who has been there for Cole from the beginning. Garvey's willingness to help Cole speaks to his own selflessness: he understands that it's his responsibility to do everything he can to help Cole, even if Cole has been a jerk to him in the past.



Garvey remarks that the bear did a lot of damage and apologizes to Cole, but Cole whispers that it was his fault. Garvey and Edwin exchange a glance, and then Cole closes his eyes. Rosey returns with bandages to clean up Cole's open wounds, marveling that Cole is able to talk given the severity of his injuries. She suggests that he's tough, but Garvey whispers that Cole isn't as tough as he thinks he is. Edwin murmurs that Cole will be okay if he can find a reason to live. Cole falls asleep and dreams that everyone in his life steps forward to help him in some way. Cole likes using people in this way—but suddenly, lightning strikes and everyone turns into a monster. They shout at Cole and tell him that he's nothing.

It's shocking for Garvey and Edwin to hear that Cole thinks what happened is his fault—he's likely never uttered those words before in his life. Even if Circle Justice doesn't aim to put its participants in danger, this suggests that major traumatic events like what Cole experienced can help jolt a person into understanding the value of life and the importance of taking responsibility for their actions. If Cole had remained focused on blaming the bear, he would've been too angry to focus on surviving.



Cole wakes and reaches out, calling hoarsely for Garvey. Garvey turns on the light, and Rosey rushes in. Cole tells them about his dream, and both Rosey and Garvey assure Cole that they're not monsters. Cole asks why they're helping him, and Rosey shrugs that it's not worth living if she can't help. Garvey insists that they're friends, but Cole frustratedly says that this isn't true. Garvey admits he helped Cole for his own reasons. When Cole starts to accuse Garvey of not caring about him, Garvey interrupts and points out that he helped Cole to help himself. He explains that he spent five years in prison since there was no one to take him through **Circle Justice**. Rosey tells Cole that his body will heal, but he can only heal his spirit by helping others.

Both Rosey and Garvey make the point that it's unfulfilling to live a selfish life. Rather, the only way to be happy in life is to help others. This is a foreign concept to Cole, as he's never had reason to trust anyone tasked with helping him—he's never had role models like Garvey before. When Garvey shares his own story of not getting to go through Circle Justice, he reiterates that jail isn't a great way to heal—all it does is punish, and those scars last forever.



When Cole insists that people want to hurt him, Rosey assures Cole that those people need his help. She gives Cole another shot for the pain, but says she can't give him anything to "take away the monsters"—only Cole can make them go away. When Cole wakes up in the morning, Rosey gives him another painkiller and brings a bag of Cole's clothes with the **at.6ow** on the top. Edwin arrives with two boys Cole's age to help carry Cole to a van, which takes him to the marina. When Rosey leaves to fetch something, Edwin asks Cole what happened. Cole hesitantly tells Edwin and Garvey everything. Garvey points out that Cole might never use his arm again, but Cole insists that it isn't important—a parole officer once told him that if he likes the cake, the ingredients in it might be okay.

Rosey makes the case that Cole isn't shut out of helping people just because they don't want his help. The people in Cole's life aren't "monsters," and it's his responsibility to show those people (presumably, Peter and his family) how much he's changed and do what he can to help them heal. Meanwhile, it's significant that Cole tells Edwin and Garvey the truth about what happened to him on the island. That he no longer feels the need to lie speaks to his newfound recognition that he can't expect people to help him if he keeps betraying their trust.



Garvey incredulously says that he also let a bear maul Cole, and now, Cole still has to deal with his parents and jail time. Cole says that whatever happens, he's done being angry, but Edwin insists that anger doesn't disappear—it just lessens. He asks about the **Spirit Bear**. Cole says that the last time it came, it stood over him and let him touch it. Edwin insists that his family has been here for generations and has never seen a Spirit Bear—the animal might only exist in Cole's mind.

Though Cole's insistence that he's done being angry is commendable, Edwin insists that it's impossible to entirely get rid of one's feelings. It's important to feel a full range of emotions in order to live a fulfilling, healthy life. Edwin has no reason to trust that Cole is telling the truth, given how much Cole has lied—now, Cole has to deal with the consequences of his dishonesty.



Cole starts to argue and reaches for his pants to pull out the hair, but then realizes that he's never been strong enough to just tell the truth. He insists he's telling the truth. Edwin and Garvey step away and once he's alone, Cole pulls the white fur out of his pants pocket. Cole vows to himself that starting today, he'll tell the truth. He tosses the fur in the water but knows he'll never forget the **Spirit Bear**.

Cole has no way of knowing whether or not Garvey and Edwin will ever believe him. He's lied so much that it's possible they never will—but if Cole starts telling the truth now, especially in situations where it's easy to verify, he may start to earn their trust.



CHAPTER 14

Six months later, Cole limps slowly out of the hospital. Garvey is next to him; Cole's mom and a guard are behind. Cole's dad didn't visit Cole in the hospital because a month after Cole was hospitalized, his dad was arrested and charged with child abuse. This is all thanks to Garvey—he told Cole's mom that her silence is the reason why Cole is hurt so bad and if she remains silent, it'll be partly her fault. The next day, she agreed to press charges against Cole's dad.

Garvey made it clear to Cole's mom that just like Cole has to accept responsibility for his actions, she must do the same. If she does this, she'll also be in a better place to earn Cole's trust and build a better relationship with him. By owning up to their past mistakes, both Cole and his mom can move forward and break the cycle of violence.



Lots of people from the **Circle** visited Cole during his hospitalization. His mom came often and assured Cole that she loves and cares about him, but Cole didn't know why he should believe this now. For one, she's not around at night, when Cole is alone to think through his mauling, his fear, and his anger—which, as Edwin predicted, isn't gone. Cole also remembers the baby sparrows and touching the **Spirit Bear** at night; thinking about the bear makes Cole feel calm.

Just as Edwin and Garvey have no real reason to believe Cole actually saw a Spirit Bear, Cole has little reason to believe his mom when she says she cares—her actions throughout his life suggest otherwise. However, if Cole can begin to experiment with trusting her and being honest in turn, they can break the cycle of violence and build a stronger relationship.



Cole glances back at the hospital, glad to leave. He knows he has a lot of therapy ahead of him—the therapist made it clear that he needs to fight to walk and move. Garvey tells Cole that healing his mind will be even harder and that he's not sure what the justice system will do now. He promises to stop by tomorrow. Cole's mom says she'll visit too, and then she suddenly hugs Cole. Rather than push her away, Cole hugs her back and assures her she'll be okay. He gets in the car and wonders if he'll go to jail. Cole also wonders if his dad will go to jail. At the detention center, the guard escorts Cole and his small duffel bag—which contains the **at.óow**—to a room. Cole hangs up the *at.óow* as a reminder and wonders if he can remember the **Spirit Bear's** gentleness.

The next afternoon, Garvey shares that the Justice **Circle** will meet with Cole again—but they'll probably send his case back to the courts. This means jail. Cole says that he wishes he hadn't ruined his chance, and he vows to go back to the island to see the **Spirit Bear** someday. Garvey isn't convinced that Cole saw a Spirit Bear and is incredulous when Cole says it didn't try to hurt him. Cole explains that when his dad beats him, he knows his dad is trying to hurt him. He knows the bear was just trying to protect itself. When Garvey asks if Cole wonders why his dad beats him, Cole insists that he hasn't done anything to his dad—his dad is just mad. With a smile, Garvey asks if that reminds Cole of anyone, and then he leaves.

Cole settles in. His dad never visits, but Garvey and Cole's mom stop by every day. Cole's mom looks happier. One day, she suggests that they start a new life somewhere when this is over and admits that she quit drinking. Cole asks why, and his mom explains that she and Cole's dad were normal newlyweds, excited about their life. She insists that Cole's dad isn't a bad person, but violence is all he knew since his parents beat him as a child. Drinking helped Cole's mom ignore that her then-husband was beating Cole, and she hoped it'd get better. She says she only woke up when she got a divorce and Cole landed in the hospital. Now she knows that she can't change Cole's dad, but she can change herself. Cole's mom asks for forgiveness, since she didn't protect Cole. Cole tells her it's okay and hides his wet eyes.

*When Cole hugs his mom back rather than shoving her away, it speaks to just how far he's come—he certainly wouldn't have accepted that kind of an overture before, when he shied away from Garvey's attempts to touch him. By making sure that the *at.óow* has a prominent spot in his room, Cole is able to create a space where he has to remember what he learned on the island. He can remind himself of the importance of truthfulness and gentleness, hearkening back to the Spirit Bear's treatment of him during their second encounter.*



Cole's ability to differentiate between malice and self-defense in comparing his dad and the Spirit Bear is a major leap. Garvey and Cole's conversation about why Cole's dad might beat him is an attempt to make Cole understand that he and his dad might not be all that different. Cole lashed out at Peter just because he was mad; he's said himself that he didn't mean to actually hurt him. By forcing Cole to make these connections, Garvey asks Cole to understand that he's part of a cycle and isn't just a victim.



Cole's mom is able to provide even more information to help Cole understand his dad and the violence he suffered as a child. When he learns that his grandparents beat his dad, he begins to see that violence is something that can pass down through generations if people don't take active steps to stop the cycle—and both Cole and his mom are starting to take those steps. Cole does this by cultivating a relationship with mom, while his mom does this by giving up alcohol, accusing her husband of child abuse, and asking Cole for forgiveness.



A week later, Garvey announces that the Justice **Circle** meets the next night. Both of Cole's parents know about the meeting, and Garvey has a surprise. The next night, Cole accompanies Garvey to the Circle. Many of the same people from before are there, except for Peter, Peter's parents, and Cole's dad. The Keeper opens the meeting, and Garvey keeps glancing at the door. The Keeper talks about how Cole violated the Circle's trust, and as the feather moves around the room, everyone agrees that the Circle shouldn't handle Cole's case anymore. Cole thinks that the Keeper left out important information when she told his story—she doesn't know about the baby birds, his loneliness, or the **Spirit Bear**. Edwin walks in and joins the circle. Then, the Keeper asks Cole to explain himself.

Even if Cole has changed quite a bit since the last time he was at a Circle meeting, he still thinks that he's the most important person in the room. This shows that he still has a long way to go as he figures out how to deal with his anger and face the consequences of his actions. To be fair, the Keeper and the other members of the circle have few reasons to believe he's changed—they know him only as a violent liar. However, Cole is correct in that without the full story of what happened to him on the island, they'll never see how much he's changed.



CHAPTER 15

Nervously, Cole tells the **Circle** that he was mad and didn't understand that they were trying to help him. He says he knows he was wrong and that he can't go back to the island. He hands the feather to his mom and notices that no one seems to believe him. Cole's mom says that Cole has changed—he's speaking openly now. Other Circle members say it's time to send Cole's case back to the courts, but Garvey insists that Cole has changed and should be allowed to change more. Peter's lawyer, however, insists that everyone has suffered too much. She insists that Peter is doing poorly because of Cole, and nobody believes that a white bear attacked Cole. She concludes that this meeting is a waste of time.

Rather than try to defend himself—or even tell the story that he believes the Circle needs to hear—Cole simply admits that he was wrong and that he messed up. This is a major step for Cole, as it shows that he's learning to take responsibility for his actions, at least verbally. It's still up in the air whether Cole will accept the Circle's desire to send him back to jail with grace, or whether he'll revert to his old ways and blame them for ruining his life again.



Edwin asks Cole to help him with a demonstration. He points out a line in the linoleum floor and says it represents a bad life path. He and Cole walk along it together, pushing against each other. When they get to the other side of the room, Cole is only a few feet away from the line. Cole eyes Edwin as Edwin says that they're going to now do the same exercise differently. Suddenly, Edwin shoves Cole and sends him sprawling. Cole fights his urge to shove Edwin—instead, he accepts Edwin's hand to get up. Edwin addresses the group and says that people change either through persistent pressure or one traumatic experience. He says that Cole experienced something significant on the island—months ago, Cole would've hit him after a shove. Edwin concludes that Cole is facing a new direction.

The simple fact that Cole is willing to help Edwin with this demonstration and trust that Edwin is going to make a reasonable point also speaks to how far Cole has come. He's reasonably comfortable with the physical contact that this exercise entails, and it's especially meaningful that Cole accepts Edwin's help up at the end. Even though the demonstration itself makes Edwin's point just fine, Cole's reaction to it makes it undeniable that Cole isn't the same person he was six months ago. He has a better handle on his anger, and he's more trusting.



The Keeper asks how they can be sure and mentions Cole's claim that he saw a white bear. Edwin asks Cole if he saw a **Spirit Bear**. Cole realizes that if he lies, the **Circle** will believe him. If he tells the truth, they'll think he's a liar. Cole says he saw and touched the bear. Though she doesn't have the feather, Peter's lawyer insists they're done. Edwin notes that a fishing crew recently sighted a white bear near Cole's island, but Peter's lawyer says this is irrelevant; Cole is out of chances. Cole can deal with not being in control right now, but he's still angry. Edwin insists that if Cole goes back, he'll pay his own way. Cole asks for the feather and says he knows he's not over his anger, but he knows now that it takes strength to ask for help and tell the truth.

Over the next few weeks, Cole prepares himself mentally for jail. He starts working out and realizes that he can exercise his anger away. No matter how much he does, though, his right arm remains weak. The **Circle** continues meeting without Cole and Edwin stays in Minneapolis to attend them. Edwin stops by a few times but says little. Nathaniel Blackwood visits to say that Cole's dad won't pay his legal fees anymore. Then, two days later, Garvey and Edwin stop by. Edwin tells Cole to explain how he's changed, and Cole shares how he felt unimportant after he was mauled. He realized that he'd die, that no one would ever trust him, and that he'd never love anyone.

Cole admits he's not sure how this changes anything, but he knows now that his dad is never going to apologize. Edwin asks if Cole thinks this is his dad's fault, but Cole says he knows it's not. He shares what his mom said about his dad's parents beating him too. Cole starts to cry and says that he just doesn't want to beat his own kid. Cole says that he's worse than his dad, since his dad never went to jail. Garvey asks why Cole thinks he can be different, and Cole replies that he's not sure, but that he does know that something changed on the island. He sniffs and irritably asks Garvey and Edwin why they're trying to help when he's a lost cause and is going to jail. Garvey and Edwin reveal that they've convinced the **Circle** to let Cole go back to the island.

Again, Cole now has to deal with the consequences of lying—nobody believes him when he says something that seems unlikely, even if it is true. When Peter's lawyer speaks without holding the feather, it's an indicator that she isn't taking this seriously. This is, importantly, similar to how Cole approached Circle Justice before going to the island—and it makes the case that there are many people in the world who need to learn the lessons that Cole learns in the novel.



Discovering exercise is a way for Cole to start taking control of his emotions. It's a tool he can use to turn his mind to healthier, more productive thoughts—something the novel suggests is important for anyone who wants to make their life more meaningful. Significantly, even though Nathaniel Blackwood ends his relationship with Cole, Cole doesn't hold this against his dad or get angry. This suggests that Cole is emotionally distancing himself from his dad—and he sees that his dad is just trying to gain the upper hand in response to the child abuse accusations.



When Cole insists that he doesn't ever want to beat his own child, he demonstrates that he understands how the cycle of violence works—and how important it is for him to stop it now that he has the chance. It's also telling that Cole nevertheless recognizes that this isn't his dad's fault. He now has the skills to feel compassionate and empathetic toward his dad, who must've had a horrible upbringing. However, this doesn't excuse his abuse—just as it doesn't excuse what Cole did to Peter.



CHAPTER 16

Cole shudders as the island comes into view. He wonders if the **Spirit Bear** is out there. Over the last month, Cole sold all his sports gear to purchase the supplies he'll need. Edwin tells Cole to get out and steady the boat. The water is freezing; Cole thinks he must've been crazy to try to swim away last time. Edwin and Garvey move the boxes of supplies to shore, and all three of them drag the boat out of the water. Edwin warns Cole that the water will kill him, but Cole insists that he's not going anywhere. He asks what they're going to do first, but Garvey says that *they aren't doing anything*: Cole is doing it all himself. He tells Cole to start a fire, set up the tent, and have supper ready in two hours. Then, Garvey and Edwin leave to go walk up the beach.

Annoyed, Cole eyes the boat, but he decides to stay. When Edwin and Garvey return two hours later, Cole is putting up the tent. Edwin wants to know why supper isn't ready, but Cole insists that Edwin should be grateful he didn't escape. Edwin pulls the boat's spark plug out of his pocket, which makes Cole grumble that the men don't trust him. Cole asks what they'd do if he didn't cook, and Garvey says calmly that they'd take him back to Minneapolis. When Cole insists that making hot dogs isn't a big deal, Garvey tells him that the world is a hot dog, and he instructs Cole to eat one. Cole does as he's told: he cooks the hot dog and wolfs it down. When Garvey asks how it was, Cole shrugs and says it was fine.

Garvey says that the hot dog did what Cole asked of it—it fed him. Garvey asks Cole to pass him one, and he and Edwin hum as Garvey patiently cooks the hot dog. He pours three glasses of water, cuts the finished hot dog into three pieces, and passes glasses to Edwin and Cole. They toast to friendship, and Garvey passes Edwin and Cole plates of hot dog. He tells Cole to eat slowly and savor it, and he toasts something different with every bite. Then, Garvey asks Cole how his hot dog was different from the one Garvey just shared, and Cole says that Garvey just acted like it was different. But Garvey says that life, like a hot dog, can be whatever a person makes it, and he tells Cole to celebrate his time on the island.

Again, Cole thinking that he was crazy to try to swim away last time is a marker of how much he's changed. As Cole becomes a healthier, happier person, the angry teenager he was six months ago will continue to seem more and more foreign—and so will other people who are ruled by anger. Cole understandably thinks that his time on the island with Garvey and Edwin will be about community and working together. However, Garvey makes it clear that they're here out of the goodness of their hearts—Cole needs to survive on his own if he's going to make the most out of his second stint on the island.



It's commendable that Cole chooses to stay when he believes he has the opportunity to leave. He's come to the important realization that he has a choice in how he behaves. Garvey makes this clear, too, when he insists that it's up to Cole whether he stays or goes. If he refuses to do as he's told, he forfeits his opportunity; if he accepts that he's here to atone for something, he can try to make the best out of it.



Garvey again makes the case that people have a choice in how they live their lives. They can, like Cole, go through life doing the bare minimum required to survive with no joy—or, they can make every day a celebration of life and friendship. Introducing this idea through a meal also helps Garvey introduce Cole to how rituals can help him find meaning in life. Even eating a simple meal kind be a kind of ritual, and Cole can choose to imbue it with meaning much like he can choose to live a meaningful life.



CHAPTER 17

Edwin shows Cole how to suspend their coolers of food so the bears can't get it and announces that they'll "dance [their] feelings" around a fire tomorrow. Cole lies awake long after Edwin and Garvey fall asleep, thinking of the **Spirit Bear**: he wonders if it's angry or curious. He also thinks about his parents, wondering if his dad cares about anything aside from himself, and he hopes that Peter is okay. Cole becomes angrier as he tosses and turns, thinking about how Garvey and Edwin will watch him work all day tomorrow. He also doesn't think that the chores he'll need to do to stay alive once he's alone are anything to celebrate.

Almost as soon as Cole falls asleep, Edwin shakes him awake. It's still dark, but Cole stumbles into his clothes and out of the tent. Edwin gives Cole a pair of knee-high boots and sets off, insisting that they shouldn't waste their morning. Cole's joints are stiff and achy as he follows Edwin along a stream. Edwin asks about Cole's restless night, and Cole admits that once he starts thinking, his mind won't stop—he's still angry. Edwin stops hiking when the stream turns into a calm, clear pond and announces that they're going swimming. Edwin strips and swims to the center of the pond with a stick, insisting that Cole has to trust him if he wants Edwin to trust him.

Cole strips and wades into the pond. He sits on rocks next to Edwin and notices that Edwin seems impervious to the cold. Cole feels vulnerable and stupid; his teeth chatter as he asks what the stick is for. Edwin announces that the right end of the stick is Cole's anger; the left end is his happiness. He tells Cole to break off his anger by breaking off the left end, and Cole does as he's asked. Edwin shakes his head; there's still a left end on the stick. Cole breaks the stick again and then says this is dumb—there will *always* be a left end on the stick. Edwin says this is the point. People try to get rid of their anger, but they can't.

When Cole then asks why bother trying, Edwin asks Cole if the sky is sunny or stormy. Cole looks around and says it depends on which way he looks. With Edwin's prodding, Cole says that he'd say it's stormy if he *just* looks at the clouds, and he'd say it's sunny if he *just* looked at the sunrise. Edwin says that the sky, sticks, hot dogs, and life are the same—they're what a person makes of them. If someone focuses on anger, they'll be angry. Cole interrupts and says desperately that he has no choice, but Edwin asks if he's been angry since getting in the water. Cole hasn't been.

Even though there are positive elements to Cole's internal monologue, it still inevitably turns to anger. By giving in to these angry thoughts, Cole makes himself less and less able to look on the bright side or find things to celebrate. Especially when he's alone on the island with no one else to distract him, Cole will have to actively look for things that make it seem like life is worth celebrating and enjoying—and now is a great time to practice.



Again, Cole is making progress, as he's honest with Edwin about what he's feeling and he can identify his own negative thought processes. But he nevertheless makes a point to take issue with everything Edwin asks him to do. This surliness doesn't indicate that Cole is willing to take responsibility for his actions or that he respects Edwin, hence Edwin's warning that Cole has to trust Edwin if he ever expects to earn Edwin's trust. In other words, Cole needs to be on his best behavior if he wants others to be on theirs.



It's telling that Cole notes how vulnerable he feels in the freezing water—this is probably a good thing, given how being made aware of his vulnerability is what made him decide that he was ready to give up on his anger. However, Edwin again makes the point that it's impossible for anyone to actually get rid of their anger. It's something Cole will have to deal with the rest of his life; the struggle is just to find healthier methods of coping.



Edwin makes the point that if Cole chooses to put himself in uncomfortable situations that distract him from his anger, it'll gradually become easier to cope with his feelings. In this way, Edwin proposes that rituals that demand attention and concentration are some of the best tools available to people as they attempt to gain control over their emotions.



Smiling, Edwin says that when he himself was banished, he came to the pond to deal with his anger. It gave him a choice of what to focus on. He explains that happiness and anger are habits; with the pond, Cole can learn to make happiness a habit. He admits that the winter will be hard since it'll be too cold to soak. They climb out, and Cole notices that his stiff joints feel better. Cole announces that Edwin made way more sense than the counselors and psychologists he saw, and Edwin says that those people think Cole should be able to get rid of the left end of his stick.

Edwin confirms again that the whole point of the pond is to give Cole something to do every day that takes his mind off of the negative thoughts in his head. It is, in a sense, a form of mindfulness or meditation. In the winter, when it's too dangerous to sit in a cold pond, Cole will have to come up with other rituals that serve the same purpose—and that's something Cole will have to figure out for himself.



CHAPTER 18

When Cole and Edwin get back to camp, Garvey is sipping coffee. He points out whales, and Edwin says that tonight, they'll dance the whale dance. Cole lowers a cooler and makes himself cereal, ignoring Edwin's suggestion to eat something heartier before working all day. Edwin also says that he and Garvey won't help with the cabin; they'll just tell Cole how to do it. He offers Cole gloves to protect his hands, but Cole refuses. Cole spends the morning creating the foundation and floor, ignoring his grumbling stomach. Over lunch, Garvey and Edwin insist that Cole has to do a good job, or his winter will be terrible. When Cole goes back to work, he puts on gloves. He tells Edwin to say, "I told you so," but Edwin insists that there's no room for pride here.

Even if Cole has given up on a lot of his negative, unhelpful, and violent tendencies, he still wants to look cool and powerful—which is why he rejects the gloves. However, it's a mark of how far he's come that he chooses to put the gloves on after lunch, and he even gives Edwin permission to say, "I told you so." Edwin, however, tries to impress upon Cole that it doesn't do anyone any good to be right—Edwin just wants Cole to be safe and as happy as possible in his work.



Cole pulls out hamburger for dinner, irritated that Garvey is smiling. Cole's hands are blistered. Annoyed, he makes three hamburgers but only cooks one. He eats it as Garvey and Edwin watch and then announces that he's going to bed. Edwin insists that Cole cook, and then they'll dance. Garvey asks for a feast, so Cole grudgingly makes two burgers and dresses them with mushrooms, onions, and cheese. His blisters sting as he washes the dishes. Then, Edwin coaxes the flames higher and announces that there are powers all around them. There are animals, seasons, and emotions like anger, and they can dance to all of them and learn what they have to teach. Tonight, they'll dance the whale dance and learn from whales.

Forcing Cole to make a feast is a way for Garvey to impress upon Cole that even if he doesn't feel like celebrating, he can nevertheless choose to celebrate. An if he does choose to celebrate, he'll be able to deepen his relationships with his those around him. When Edwin explains how the dances work, he tries to make the point that if Cole pays attention to his surroundings, they have a lot to teach him. Choosing an animal a day to learn from is another ritual that forces Cole to focus on something other than his anger.



Edwin paces around the fire, pretending to dive and duck like a whale. Ten minutes later, he stops, and Garvey takes over. Garvey jumps, imitating a whale breaching. Aware that he has no choice but to dance, Cole bends at the waist and pretends he's gliding through the water. He thinks he looks stupid but starts to move faster. He imagines migrating and wanders away from the fire. Then, he turns around and heads back, leaping like he's fishing. Once Cole sits down, Edwin says that whales are graceful and gentle, and Garvey adds that they're smart and powerful. Garvey asks what Cole learned, and Cole replies that whales migrate but don't have homes—and he feels like a whale.

Cole thinks he looks stupid because he's not taking the ritual seriously—but once he starts to actively participate in the dance, he lets go of his self-consciousness and is able to really dive into what whales have to teach. And ultimately, Cole is able to see that whales aren't so different from him. As Cole begins to make these connections and learn lessons from the animals around him, he develops empathy for all living things—including himself.



Garvey stands and announces that it's time for bed. He gives Cole ointment for his blisters. Cole asks Edwin what a dance of anger is like and if they'll dance that dance. Edwin says the dance of anger is hard because the dancer faces and releases their anger—but Cole will do that one alone, when he's ready. Cole falls asleep instantly. Edwin wakes him up before dawn and insists that they have to go to the pond. Cole grumbles—everything hurts. Edwin offers Cole a rain jacket, and they hike to the pond. Edwin shows him how to place his clothes under a tree so they stay dry, and then he leads Cole out to the rocks.

Cole asks how long they have to sit, and Edwin says they sit until Cole can choose between happiness and anger. Cole insists he can choose now, so Edwin edgily says that they'll sit until Cole is numb. He says that someday, Cole will want to come. Finally, Edwin stands. Cole is thrilled to go back and start a fire, but Edwin says it's time to “meet [his] ancestors” first. Edwin leads Cole along a rocky slope until he finds a round, bowling ball-size rock. He holds it fondly and says that he's “touching [his] ancestors.” Then, he gives the rock to Cole and tells Cole to follow. As they head up the slope, Edwin says that Cole's ancestors struggled, learned lessons, and passed them onto the next generation.

Cole looks back after several hundred feet, but Edwin tells him to pretend the rock is his ancestors. Every step that Cole takes up this hill, he's carrying his ancestors through his life. Someday, he'll pass on their lessons. Cole continues up the hill until they reach the top. Edwin takes the stone and sets it down gently before Cole can drop it, and he says that he's carried it up the hill hundreds of times. With a smile, Edwin says that now the rock represents Cole's anger—and he should roll it down the hill. Cole gives it a shove and laughs at the thought of his dizzy ancestors, but Edwin patiently ignores this and says that each time Cole does this, he'll find more meaning and learn more respect.

Cole scoffs that he's not doing this every day, but Edwin reminds Cole that it's his choice to stay angry. He also shares that this was good for him when he was Cole's age. Cole asks why Edwin thinks he knows what's best, but Edwin says that *nobody* knows what's best—he says that maybe he and Garvey just want to redeem themselves for what they've done wrong. Cole snaps that it's his life, so Edwin says that they should've swam longer.

Simply asking about the dance of anger again speaks to how far Cole has come. He now trusts that Edwin is telling him the truth and giving him important information that Cole should make sure to internalize. Following Edwin out to the pond again the next morning is another way in which Cole shows Edwin that he trusts him. He may not be entirely sold on this as the way to handle his anger, but at this point, he's strengthening his relationship with Edwin.



Even if Cole has the basics of this ritual down, Edwin makes it clear that Cole doesn't totally get it yet. Once Cole figures out why sitting in the pond is important, it'll become more meaningful—and Cole will be more willing to do it of his own volition. Carrying the rock up the hill is another ritual that gets Cole out in the natural world where he can sit with his thoughts. It's also very physical, so it's likely that this hike will do much the same thing that working out in the detention center did.



By asking Cole to think of the rock as his ancestors, Edwin essentially asks Cole to think about other cycles aside from violence that may be a part of his family. It forces Cole to consider what he may have learned from his mom's choice to finally report Cole's dad, or to consider his dad as an example of what not to do. Even though Cole doesn't see the point of the ritual this time, Edwin nevertheless makes it clear that going forward, if Cole wants to improve, he must make the choice to take it seriously.



Given the fact that Edwin also served a period of banishment on the island when he was young, Cole should pay close attention to what Edwin says—he might not know what's best, but he clearly has some valuable wisdom to share. Cole's unwillingness to play along reflects how out of his depth he is—he's never been asked to think or show respect like this, and it's understandably difficult.



CHAPTER 19

As Cole smears lotion on his blisters, he points across the bay to something. Edwin says it's a wolf and Garvey announces that they'll dance the wolf dance later. Cole builds the roof silently. He's not angry, but he doesn't want to talk. In the afternoon, he rolls tarpaper over the roof and then lifts galvanized roofing sheets. Edwin and Garvey don't help, even when Cole shoots them pointed glances. When Cole calls it for the evening, Edwin says that Cole's last chore on the island will be to tear down his cabin. Cole snaps that he'll burn it and says he's going to bed. He refuses to make dinner. Garvey calls that they'll head back to Minneapolis tomorrow and says, with an edge in his voice, that there's no room for both Cole and his attitude on the island.

Cole is certain that Garvey is bluffing, but it's not worth it to test if he's right. He stumbles back out of the tent to fix supper, but Garvey says it's about more than food—Cole still has a chip on his shoulder and wants to do the bare minimum. Cole apologizes, but Garvey insists that Cole needs to apologize to himself. No one speaks as he prepares chicken and serves it nicely. Cole reminds the men that he said he was sorry and begs them to not take him back, but Edwin stands and says they're done. He insists that Cole's words don't mean anything. Tomorrow, Cole will soak alone, carry his ancestors up the hill, and roll his anger down the hill. Then they'll talk.

Edwin and Garvey head for the tent. When Cole asks about the wolf dance, Garvey tells Cole to do what he usually does and do whatever he wants. Cole trips as he washes dishes and thinks that the men don't understand what it's like to be so alone and afraid. He stares at the fire and thinks about the wolf. He knows that wolves aren't alone—they live in packs, and with a group, they're successful. Cole crouches and pretends to stalk a moose with his pack. Then, he quietly squirms into his sleeping bag, and Garvey asks what Cole learned. Cole says that he needs help, like a wolf needs its pack. Cole sleeps fitfully, afraid of oversleeping. He drags himself up when there's enough light to see.

It's impossible to know whether Edwin and Garvey might have been willing to help Cole had he outright asked for help, but Cole nevertheless learns here that if he doesn't speak up and admit that he needs assistance, he's never going to get it. Cole's expectation that Garvey and Edwin will help him suggests that he still feels entitled to everyone's time and effort, just because. Garvey, however, makes it clear to Cole that if he's not going to accept that he made things harder for himself by botching his first attempt at banishment, he won't get a second chance.



The way that Cole behaves suggests that he thinks saying sorry is enough to make up for his rude behavior—but Garvey and Edwin insist that an apology is meaningless. Instead, Cole needs to demonstrate that he's fully committed to doing what needs to be done to make his second stint on the island successful—and he needs to be grateful that he's even getting this second chance. In other words, if Cole isn't willing to put in the work, he won't have a meaningful experience.



Given that both Edwin and Garvey have firsthand experience as troubled teens who ended up banished and in jail, it's likely that they do understand what it's like to be alone and afraid. Because of this, they also understand that Cole must learn the value of leaning on others, asking for help, and accepting what others offer to him. This is the main reason why Cole gets up to soak in the morning—he knows that he must accept Edwin's help, or Edwin won't try again.



As Cole hikes, he wonders if Garvey and Edwin will really take him back to Minneapolis. He's so lost in his thoughts that he runs into a branch, but he continues on. Cole knows it'd be easy to make up a story, but he knows that Garvey and Edwin won't accept a lie this morning. He strips and gets into the pond. Cole thinks of how Edwin sat calmly and tries to imitate Edwin's way of breathing. Eventually, he realizes that if he sits still, his skin feels warm. He notices movement and sees a fish, but it darts away as soon as he thinks of eating it. Cole notices that his breath gets cold and that his body doesn't hurt. When he gets out, he does so because he's done. He feels like he learned something, but he doesn't know what.

Cole locates the ancestor rock. He's stiff from the cold, but his joints don't ache. Cole breathes deeply and stretches, curious how Edwin figured all this out. He grabs the rock and hikes up the hill, imagining that each step is a day of his life. When he stumbles, he remembers days that he struggled—but when he looks back, he realizes he's come a long way since he beat Peter. Cole wonders if he'll ever escape the consequences and realizes that he doesn't want to go to jail. At the top of the hill, Cole puts the rock down. He feels like a new person. He allows the rock to become his anger, and he knows he needs to stop blaming others. Cole shoves the rock over the edge, and when it reaches the bottom, he feels light. As he starts back to camp, he spots a large white shape that quickly disappears.

CHAPTER 20

Cole wonders if he really just saw the **Spirit Bear**. He wonders if he should tell Garvey and Edwin; they might think he's making it up. Neither of them speaks as Cole joins them by the fire. After a minute, Cole apologizes. He realized this morning that he has to stop blaming others to get over his anger. Garvey asks why this morning is different, and Cole responds that he learned that nobody—him included—is a bad person. People just get scared and sometimes hurt others. He says that he hates what his dad does, but that his dad must be scared and not know how to *not* be mean. Edwin asks why they should believe Cole. Cole says it doesn't matter; he'll be okay even if they go home. He tucks a tarp around the wood and starts work on the cabin.

Now that Cole understands he's truly in charge of what happens here, he sees how important it is to tell the truth and do the right thing, even if that's hard. It's also telling that Cole tries to imitate how Edwin breathes. That he noticed Edwin's breathing in the first place suggests that Cole has been paying attention and watching his mentors closely, even if he still lashes out at them sometimes. Seeing the fish helps show Cole that if he's quiet and respectful, the natural world will trust him and show him amazing things—much like his encounter with the Spirit Bear.



Though there's never any explanation of where Edwin learned about these rituals, it's likely that Edwin learned from an older mentor, just as Cole now learns from Edwin. This makes the case that it's possible for people to engage in cycles of healing and kindness, just as they can also be a part of cycles of violence. Possibly seeing the Spirit Bear drives home for Cole that if he chooses to respect Edwin's rituals, great things can happen. The Spirit Bear also acts as a reminder of the power of the natural world.



It's important that Cole apologizes—and especially that he follows up his apology with actions that demonstrate he's sorry and wants to take his time on the island seriously. It's also telling that Cole links violence to fear. In this moment, then, he essentially admits that he's gone through his entire life terrified—and because he was so afraid, he tried to make others feel the same way. Having figured this out, Cole learns another key to help him break the cycle of violence: if he can conquer his fear and be brave, he won't feel like he has to hurt people.



Cole works hard all day, and by evening, all that's left is to install the stove. Edwin and Garvey inspect the cabin and tell Cole what else he needs to do before winter; Edwin and Garvey will leave tomorrow. Cole is exhausted, but he fixes a special supper to celebrate Edwin and Garvey's last night. He even makes biscuits, spreads the **at.óow** over a plywood table, and lights a candle. When they're done eating, Cole hands out Snickers bars. Edwin asks what dance they should dance, and Cole suggests the **Spirit Bear** dance. He hesitatingly says he saw it today after his soak. Edwin asks Cole if he's afraid to be here with the bear, but Cole replies that what he's afraid of is being alone. He asks Edwin how he felt when he was here.

Edwin says he felt painfully lonely at first, but eventually he felt peaceful. When it's dark, Edwin asks Cole to dance first and offers to keep a rhythm. He finds two chunks of driftwood and hits them together. Cole dances the story of his first time on the island. He gets closer and closer to the fire and then breaks twigs to represent his mauling. He pretends to spit and lick the spit, and then he reaches out like he touched the **Spirit Bear**. Edwin praises Cole's dance and hands him the driftwood. Edwin performs his dance by stalking up behind Cole and Garvey until they stop looking at him. Garvey dances by "foraging" for things. Cole smiles and wonders how he ever could've hated Garvey. Garvey suddenly starts to prowl, puts a finger to his lips, and then shouts, "Boo!" and leaps at Cole and Edwin.

Cole sleeps well, and in the morning, both Edwin and Garvey get up with him. Cole leads the way to the pond, feeling proud, and wades right in. Garvey is shocked by the cold, but he dutifully joins Edwin and Cole on the rocks. Cole ignores his companions, thinking that it's better when he's alone. He briefly opens his eyes to see if Edwin is done, but then reminds himself that he'll leave when he's ready. When Cole is ready, he gets out, and Edwin and Garvey follow him soon after. Cole makes a joke about letting someone else carry the ancestor rock, but the others don't laugh. They carry it up the hill, roll away Cole's anger, and joke as they hike back to camp.

Edwin shows Cole how to install the stove, and then he and Garvey pack up. Garvey gives Cole a hunting knife and says that the knife is like life: it can destroy Cole or help him heal. Garvey suggests that Cole carve to heal. Thoughtfully, Edwin says that there's one more thing Cole must discover before he can heal, but he won't say what it is. Edwin starts the boat and promises to be back in a few days. Cole assures Edwin that he'll be fine. He remembers how angry he felt when Edwin and Garvey left him the first time. Now, he's just terrified.

Cole's insistence that he's more afraid of being on the island alone than sharing territory with the Spirit Bear speaks to how comfortable he's gotten with nature over the course of the few days he's spent on the island. Nature isn't frightening, since Cole accepts that he's wandering through the animals' world and knows that they'll protect themselves. Rather, what frightens Cole is that he's going to have to spend his time on the island with only himself for company—and he knows that he hasn't been the best company in the past.



Asking Edwin about his experience on the island is a way that Cole can demonstrate he trusts Edwin. It's a way to show interest and care, and to thank Edwin for choosing to spend his time helping Cole. Cole's willingness to dance a version of what happened to him on the island also shows that he's learning to trust Garvey and Edwin—he knows he doesn't have to lie to them about what happened because they will take him seriously no matter what he says. Garvey and Edwin's dances, meanwhile, make it clear that there are many things bears can teach people besides power and violence.



After Cole's sense that he figured something out yesterday, he no longer needs Edwin to constantly demonstrate how to soak. This offers hope that as Cole's time on the island unfolds, he'll be able to live with the isolation and make it a learning opportunity. When Edwin doesn't gripe about Cole getting out first, it shows that he trusts Cole to make decisions that are right for him.



By turning the hunting knife into another metaphor about choices and life, Garvey makes the case that if a person pays attention, they can turn nearly anything into a reason to keep going—or a reason to give up. If Cole looks at the knife as life, the natural world as a teacher, and the pond as a way to manage his anger, he'll be okay.



CHAPTER 21

Every morning, Cole soaks in the pond and carries the ancestor rock. In the afternoons, he works on his cabin. He sleeps well at night. By Edwin's first visit, Cole has built a table, a chair, and a bedframe from driftwood. He's also started a woodpile and dug a latrine. Edwin says little, but he looks approvingly at Cole's handiwork. Cole asks Edwin to thank Garvey again for the knife. Edwin leaves, and this time, Cole doesn't feel so desperately lonely. He hikes along the shore and finds a huge driftwood log, worn smooth and straight. It's about two feet in diameter. As Cole examines it, he remembers the totem poles he saw in Drake. He wonders if he could carve a totem pole out of this log, but he also knows what else the log could be. That thought scares him.

Cole uses rope to get the log to the water and then lets it float while he drags it back to camp. He knows this log would make an amazing canoe, but the thought again scares him. Cole makes himself dinner, stares at the log, and goes to bed. He can't sleep, and in the morning, he sleeps in and skips his soak. When he finally gets up, he reasons that carving a canoe could just allow him to fish—but he knows that he's lying to himself. With a hatchet, Cole viciously hacks one end of the log into a point. He feels angry. He watches eagles fish in the ocean and realizes that it's the first day he's felt angry since Edwin and Garvey left. Though he tells himself he's angry because he slept poorly, he knows he's actually angry at himself for making a canoe instead of a totem.

Cole takes a deep breath and hacks a groove around the center of the log. Then, he begins whittling an eagle's head around the groove. After dark, he builds a fire and dances the eagle dance. When he's tired from dancing, he wishes he could remember to stay strong and proud, like an eagle. Cole sleeps well that night, and the next morning, he goes to the pond and carries the ancestor rock up the hill. Though he looks for the **Spirit Bear**, he doesn't see it.

When Edwin visits next, Cole asks why he hasn't seen the **Spirit Bear**. Edwin suggests that the bear was curious last time, but after Cole's mauling, Cole became "invisible." Edwin won't say what he means by this. He does say that Cole has mail, but that he can't have it until his year is up. His mom calls Garvey daily. Cole also asks about his dad. Edwin shrugs and says that his dad never spent time in jail, and he can't say whether Cole will ever have to live with his dad again. Cole asks about Peter, and Edwin replies that his depression is getting worse. Cole muses that he wishes he could help Peter, which makes Edwin say that Cole is close to figuring out the secret to healing.

It's very telling that when Cole continues to carry the ancestor rock and soak in the pond, he can sleep at night. His rituals make it much easier to simply get through the day, and Edwin's approval is just a cherry on top. Finding the log, however, tests Cole's resolve. In this moment, he has a choice: he can make the log into a totem pole (something that would record all the things he's learned and be a meditative process), or he can make something else (likely a boat) that would allow him to run from his problems. The fact that Cole sees this as a choice at all speaks to how far he's come.



On the first day that Cole doesn't make his trip to the pond and to carry his rock, his anger consumes him. Rituals, he learns, only work if he keeps doing them—and at this point in his healing process, missing one day can be disastrous. It's also telling that Cole knows exactly what he's doing as he fights with himself about whether to carve a canoe. He now has the awareness to know what the right choice is—the only question is whether he'll be able to consistently make that choice.



By destroying this log's potential to become a canoe, Cole makes the choice to follow through with his agreement with Circle Justice and honor his friendships with Garvey and Edwin. He also takes responsibility for the fact that he considered making a bad choice. Knowing he could make this tough decision will show Cole that he does have the strength to stick by his commitment to the banishment.



Though Edwin tells Cole everything he knows about Cole's dad, it's clear that he doesn't really think Cole's dad is worth talking about. Focusing on his dad would possibly mean focusing on his anger and the violence that consumed him for so long—so Edwin instead wants Cole to think about his mom's love and the letters he'll get in a year. Edwin also wants Cole to think about Peter and how he might be able to help—something that will complete Cole's healing process.



Edwin turns his attention to the totem. He examines the eagle and then the tapered end, and he says sternly that it looks like the start of a canoe. Cole whispers that he started to carve one, but he cut the groove so he couldn't finish. The totem and dancing the eagle dance helped him sleep. He asks if Edwin is angry, but Edwin says he's proud that Cole was honest. Cole asks what the secret to healing is, but Edwin won't say. Edwin does explain that totems tell ancestry and stories, and assures Cole that even if he's not Indian, his totem will tell his story. Cole says he hasn't come up with a story yet and admits he tried to dance the dance of anger, but it felt weird. Edwin says that Cole will dance it when he's ready.

Choosing to be honest with Edwin and own up to trying to make a canoe is a huge step for Cole. Cole now understands that lying won't get him anywhere. If he wants Edwin to continue to help him, he needs to be honest with Edwin, just as Edwin has been honest with him. Giving Cole permission to carve the totem pole is another way that Edwin can introduce yet another ritual into Cole's life. Like the ancestor rock, carving also forces Cole to reflect on what he's learned—but this time, what he learned from animals.



CHAPTER 22

Cole carves all afternoon after Edwin leaves, even stretching a tarp so that he can escape the rain. After he visits the pond the next morning, he washes his clothes. That afternoon, he tries to become invisible by bathing, putting on clean clothes, and rubbing ashes and cedar on himself. Cole hikes to a point and sits still. He sees other animals on the shore, but no bears. Cole continues to try to become invisible. One morning, as Cole sits in the pond, he sees a beaver swim close. He breathes deeply, and when the animal gets close, he reaches for it—but the beaver disappears. Cole regrets scaring the beaver and betraying its trust, and he thinks he's done the same thing to people. He dances the beaver dance and realizes that beavers have "persistence, patience and ingenuity." He carves a beaver head on his totem pole.

At this point, Cole believes that being invisible means becoming one with the landscape and scrubbing himself of everything that makes him human. Though this may be true to a degree, Cole's experience with the beaver seems to tell a different story. When Cole isn't focused on immediately identifying animals and coming at them in a predatory, human way, they're far more willing to show themselves. It's possible that being invisible has far more to do with Cole's mindset and the manner in which he interacts with the natural world than the way he smells.



The weather gets warmer, but the drizzle continues. Cole busies himself with chores and schoolwork. He looks for the **Spirit Bear** and tries to dance the dance of anger every night, but he can't figure out what to put at the bottom of his totem—a spot he's saving for an anger carving. Once, when Edwin visits, Cole frustratedly tells him that he can't find the Spirit Bear. Edwin suggests that Cole might not be invisible yet and asks if Cole has danced the dance of anger. Cole pushes Edwin's boat back out and helplessly watches him leave. He wonders if Edwin even cares and spends the rest of the day carving, wondering what will help him heal and how to become invisible.

Edwin seems to imply that Cole's upcoming dance of anger and figuring out how to be invisible are related, which suggests that Cole will find new ways to see the world around him once he's able to let go of his anger. The simple fact that Cole feels so abandoned and wonders if Edwin cares makes it clear that Cole isn't yet ready to entirely ditch his self-serving ways—life is still all about him, especially when he's frustrated and things are hard.



Cole still feels angry most days for no reason he can identify. Despite this, he still can't dance the dance of anger. One morning, after his morning ritual, Cole wonders why the **Spirit Bear** came so close when he was hurt and why the beaver got so close in the pond. Cole thinks he wasn't invisible then. That night, he wakes up with a start. He knows how to be invisible.

It's telling that as Cole puzzles through this mystery, he thinks about the Spirit Bear and the beaver. He knows now that he can look to the natural world to set an example and show him how he needs to do things; he accepts it as his teacher now.



CHAPTER 23

Cole realizes that being invisible means clearing his mind. In the pond, he feels like he's in a trance—and animals come close until he thinks about hurting them. When the **Spirit Bear** came to him, Cole had given up all control. Cole is thrilled with his discovery; he wonders how much people miss because they move so fast and aren't calm. In the morning, Cole hikes to the bay instead of the pond. He focuses on the "patterns" formed by the drizzle, the waves, and the rocks as he wanders down the shore. He sits down at the point, lets the drizzle soak his hair, and closes his eyes. He breathes deeply. When he opens his eyes, the Spirit Bear is there. Cole stares at it patiently. He doesn't think of himself as a juvenile delinquent—he's part of the landscape.

Cole blinks, and the **Spirit Bear** disappears. That night, he builds a huge outdoor fire, cooks his spaghetti ceremonially, and uses the **at.óow** as a tablecloth. Cole thinks that tonight is special—tonight, he'll dance the dance of anger. He screams and starts to dance, swinging at a tree and shouting at everything to stay away as he kicks burning wood out of the fire. Cole walks through the ashes and then dances the bear attack. He feels the storm that killed the baby sparrows. Then, he stands, grabs a rock that represents the ancestor rock, and hurls it into the water.

Cole shouts into the ocean that he didn't mean to hurt Peter and that he's sorry for what he did. Cole cries, but he gently kicks the coals back to the fire pit. He continues to cry and dance well into the night. He punches the tree until his fists bleed, and suddenly, Cole feels ashamed. He drops to his knees, apologizes, and then shouts, "I forgive you." His dance is over. Eyes watch from the darkness of the trees.

CHAPTER 24

Cole goes to his totem pole the next morning to carve something to symbolize his anger. He understands that no one chooses to be angry—if Cole is angry, some outside force controls him and he doesn't like that idea. He wants to carve something that shows he's sorry and knows how to forgive, but he can't think of anything. When Edwin visits, Cole announces that he danced the dance of anger. Cole tells Edwin that he forgiving gives him control. When Edwin asks what Cole carved in the totem, Cole murmurs that he knows he needs to help Peter in order to carve something. Edwin says this is what Cole needed to learn before he could heal, and the question of how to help Peter will haunt Cole forever. If Cole can't help Peter, he needs to help someone else—this is why Edwin and Garvey help Cole.

When Cole is able to make himself invisible and see the Spirit Bear from the point, it makes the case that it's not soaking in the pond that's necessarily the important part of the ritual. Rather, what's important is that in order to sit in the pond, Cole has to empty his mind and ignore the cold—a practice that makes him nonthreatening to the animals around him. Essentially, Cole discovers that "invisible" really means "nonthreatening," which suggests that moving forward, Cole needs to let go of everything that makes him seem threatening to others.



Figuring out how to become invisible helps Cole understand how to dance the dance of anger. In order to dance it, Cole needs to see exactly why he should let go of his anger. Becoming invisible showed Cole that if he can let go of his anger and all the things that make him threatening, other beings will trust him—and earning the trust of others is one of the most important things he can do.



Though it's impossible to tell who, exactly, Cole forgives in this moment, it's nevertheless important that forgiving others who hurt him (or even forgiving himself) is a part of his dance. It makes it clear that Cole now understands that it's not enough to simply not be angry anymore. He needs to make things right with the people in his life too.



Cole still wants to be in control, but now, he understands that anger and violence aren't appropriate ways to gain control. Rather, Cole gets that if he wants to be in control, he needs to be able to make choices with a clear head. Now that Cole has gotten over this hurdle, his relationship with Edwin begins to change somewhat. Edwin is still an all-knowing elder, but he and Cole speak more as equals. This suggests that as Cole continues to reevaluate how he carries himself, he'll be able to form more meaningful, trusting, and egalitarian relationships with his friends and mentors.



Throughout the summer, Edwin visits infrequently and never stays long. He acts as though something bothers him. Though he checks Cole's totem pole, Edwin focuses on the blank spot for Cole's anger carving. In September, as the salmon head upstream, Cole watches them during his morning soak. He stops seeing the **Spirit Bear** and figures it's hibernating. Despite the cold, Cole continues to visit the pond, though he only soaks for a few minutes. When he's in his cabin, he stuffs moss and cloth in the cracks. The cold makes it hard to carve, and the rain never stops.

Cole eventually stops performing his morning ritual when it becomes too dangerous to hike with the ancestor rock. Though he stays busy, Cole has more time to think about his loneliness. He thinks about his parents, Garvey, and Peter—who, according to Edwin, is growing more depressed. Cole's anger returns more often, though he tries to quell it by remembering how he touched the **Spirit Bear**. He's still afraid what will happen when he returns to Minneapolis and won't have these rituals. Christmas is uneventful: Cole finds a small, deformed pine tree and decorates it. He spends Christmas wondering if anyone misses him and later tells Edwin that Christmas was lonely. Edwin warns Cole to not wallow in self-pity and shares that Peter now refuses to get out of bed. This thought haunts Cole.

Near the end of March, Edwin arrives and acts like something is wrong. Cole helps carries supplies to the cabin and makes them cocoa. Edwin finally shares that Garvey called: Peter tried to commit suicide. Cole is shocked, but Edwin isn't surprised—he suggests that Peter now believes his life is worthless, since that's how Cole treated him. Cole argues that Peter's life isn't worthless, but Edwin snaps that Cole implied that when he beat Peter. Edwin grabs his coat and heads for the bay. Cole chases after and insists he's sorry, but Edwin says that doesn't help Peter. Edwin ignores Cole's insistence that he knows how to help Peter. Cole watches him go and thinks that if Peter came to the island, he'd start to understand. He's sure Peter is afraid—which means he needs to be here.

Cole returns to his cabin and thinks about Peter's suicide attempt. He understands that Peter's parents would never actually let Peter come to the island, especially with Cole here. Cole remembers how scared he was when he almost died. He wonders how scared Peter must've been to try to die. After a fitful night, Cole wakes before sunrise and notices a warm breeze. He visits the pond for the first time in months, and though he knows it'll be freezing, he needs to calm his mind. Up until he learned about Peter's suicide attempt, Cole's life has been boring. Now, he's confused. The water is so icy that Cole doesn't have time to empty his mind. He carries the ancestor rock and then hears the buzz of Edwin's boat engine.

Now that Cole has been able to set his anger aside, he's able to pay more attention to the natural world around him. He can mark the seasons not just by the weather, but by what the animals do. He can also take their examples to heart—he spends more time in the cabin now, making it warmer, in a similar way that the Spirit Bear sleeps in its den.



Because Cole is more at home in the natural world and is more respectful of it, he pays attention to the signs that things are too dangerous. This stands in stark contrast to how Cole went right into the freezing, stormy ocean to escape last time—something that, if Cole were to look back on it now, would look misguided and dangerous. Cole also recognizes that he'll need to come up with rituals of his own if he's going to be successful in Minneapolis. Even though he might not have an Alaskan island there, he can still do something to clear his mind and find calm.



Despite how far Cole has come since the beginning of the novel, the way he responds to news of Peter's suicide suggests that he's not entirely willing to take responsibility for his actions. As far as he's concerned, he should be praised for having made as much progress as he has—but Edwin insists that Cole isn't done until he's come up with a way to help Peter. Edwin's unwillingness to listen to Cole's plan shows that even adults who have learned to manage their anger still struggle. If Edwin is any example, Cole will have to work on this his entire life.



Now that Cole believes all lives have worth and meaning, it's unthinkable that any person would try to take their own life. However, he also recognizes that Peter is afraid and is therefore in need of help. It's commendable that as Cole works through these questions, he returns to his rituals. He understands that he needs the structure of the pond and his hike in order to process his emotions and deal with the anger that's surely lurking under the surface.



Cole races back to camp as fast as he can, slipping in the stream. He finds Edwin sitting in the cabin. Edwin tells Cole to put dry clothes on and then says that Peter tried again to commit suicide. He wants to hear how Cole can help Peter.

Even adults are capable of messing up—but, like Cole, they can show they're sorry with their actions and behave in ways that convey respect and kindness.



CHAPTER 25

Edwin immediately shoots down Cole's insistence that Peter come to the island. Cole argues that Peter needs to see the **Spirit Bear**, soak, and carry the ancestor rock. He suggests that Edwin stay with them, but Edwin can't. Cole knows Peter is scared of him and thinks Cole will come back to get him, but Peter needs to come here and see that change is possible. Edwin wants to know how much Cole has changed, but Cole is tired of trying to prove himself. He insists that they can either give Peter the chance to come here or watch him kill himself. Cole suggests that Garvey come, but Edwin counters that Cole isn't the most important thing in the world. Cole insists that this is about Peter, not him. Edwin softly says that Cole *has* changed and that he and Garvey are proud of him.

After Cole's own positive experiences with Edwin's rituals, he believes that they can help everyone—even Peter. As far as Cole is concerned, Edwin of all people should understand this, since they're his rituals. However, Edwin's job is still to make sure that Cole is getting as much out of this experience as possible, and that does mean making sure Cole understands that people can't just drop everything to do what he wants them to do. Garvey has a life of his own—hanging out on an island with two boys might not be on his to-do list.



Before Edwin leaves, he asks if Cole would stay on the island longer in order to help Peter. Cole insists he'll stay as long as it takes. In the following days, Cole spends much of his time standing by his totem pole, trying to figure out how to represent his anger, forgiveness, and healing. One day, Cole hears two boat engines getting closer. He sees Edwin's small boat and a fishing trawler. Edwin is in his boat; Garvey, Mr. and Mrs. Driscal, and Peter are on the trawler. Peter stares at his knees, terrified, and refuses to get out of the boat. Cole greets Peter, but he walks farther away at Garvey's prodding.

By insisting upon staying on the island until he can help Peter, Cole commits to paying forward what he's learned. At this point, Cole understands that his own transformation matters little. What matters is doing something—anything—to keep Peter alive and help him heal. The fact that Peter does indeed come speaks to how dire this situation is—Peter and his parents have seemingly run out of options.



Once everyone is ashore, Edwin leads them to the fire pit and starts a fire. Peter pulls a hunk of driftwood away from the group to sit by himself. When the fire is blazing, Edwin explains that Garvey will stay with Cole and Peter. Mr. Driscal tells Cole forcefully that he and Mrs. Driscal are staying long enough to make sure Peter is safe. Cole promises to never hurt anyone again. Edwin makes it clear that they're here because Cole was thoughtless and cruel, and then he asks Cole to tell everyone his story of his time on the island. Peter exhibits no interest, but his parents do.

Peter's behavior is entirely understandable. He's deeply depressed, and now he's on the island with the person who caused him so much pain and who probably scares him more than anything else. Peter feels terrified, powerless, and victimized—in many ways, he feels exactly how Cole did when he ended up on the island the first time. It's telling that Cole doesn't interject when Edwin drives home that all of this is Cole's fault. Now, he knows he must take responsibility for his actions.



Cole tells everyone his entire story, from the **Spirit Bear** mauling him to his return to the island and his discovery of rituals. Cole explains how he dances and shows everyone his totem pole. Though Cole tries to evade Garvey's questions about the empty space at the bottom, Edwin tells Cole to tell the truth. Cole says that his dad beats him, but he knows that his dad didn't mean to hurt him—violence was all he knew. Cole says he learned to forgive, and he knows now that he can't heal until he helps Peter heal. Peter spits that he doesn't want Cole's help.

Garvey forces Cole to talk about the cycle of violence and to make it clear that the only way to break the cycle is to forgive. Though Peter is turning the violence on himself and not someone else (as Cole and his dad did), Peter is still part of the cycle—and like Cole, he'll need to learn forgiveness in order to break it.



CHAPTER 26

Cole prepares his favorite meal for everyone that night and explains how Garvey taught him that life is a hot dog. He spreads the **at.óow** on the table to make it a feast. Everyone but Peter eats. Peter blurts out that he's not sleeping with Cole. Mr. Driscal tries to reassure him, but Cole interrupts that he'll sleep in a tent. Peter sleeps in the trawler with his parents and refuses to eat his supper. Cole hikes to the pond alone the next morning, shaken by how scared Peter is. He can't believe he ever wanted people to feel that way. When Cole returns, he finds Edwin and Peter's parents saying goodbye to Garvey and Peter. Edwin privately explains to Cole that Peter's parents know now that Cole isn't the problem, and they understand that they can't protect Peter from himself.

Even though Cole's transformation may be obvious to Peter's parents, that doesn't mean that Peter is open to forgiving Cole. His fear may blind him to the fact that Cole has changed—and his anger could also be keeping him from seeing what's in front of him. Cole's thoughts in the pond reinforce how much he's changed. Now, he understands that fear traps a person and doesn't create trust. He recognizes that he cannot scare Peter at all if this is going to work—he has to show Peter trust and kindness, and hopefully, Peter will reciprocate.



Cole remarks sadly that Peter is very afraid, so Edwin advises Cole to be patient. Mr. Driscal asks Cole for a private word. Up near the trees, Mr. Driscal warns Cole that he hasn't forgotten what Cole did, even if Cole has changed. He doesn't like the idea of Peter being here, and he warns Cole that if he does anything, Mr. Driscal will make sure Cole goes to jail forever. Cole nods. Back at the cabin, Edwin asks Cole what Mr. Driscal said. Cole insists he just wished Cole a good day and says that he has a right to be angry. Cole stays in the cabin and watches Edwin leave with Peter's parents. Peter stays by the water.

Crucially, Cole now understands that although anger shouldn't consume and drive a person, anger is still a normal and expected response to certain situations. This is why he's so understanding of Mr. Driscal's anger and distrust—he recognizes that Mr. Driscal is at his wit's end, but he also doesn't think he has good reason to trust that Cole is genuine. This understanding is proof that Cole is taking responsibility for his actions and extending empathy and to others.



Garvey returns to the cabin. Cole pulls out a Snickers bar and walks down to Peter. Peter gets up and moves away, terrified, so Cole puts down the candy and returns to the cabin. Cole watches for a while but eventually turns to his math homework. When Cole takes a break, Garvey shares news of Cole's parents. His mom sends her love, while Cole's dad has filed a lawsuit to have the abuse charges dropped—and he filed for Cole's custody. Garvey believes that this is about pride and winning. Cole says quietly that he used to be like that and asks if Garvey thinks his dad will win. Garvey emphatically says no. Cole thanks Garvey for all he's done and asks how he can repay the kindness. Garvey tells Cole to not give up on Peter. When Cole notices the candy is gone, he that says he won't.

When Cole and Garvey talk about Cole's dad here, it's significant that Cole can recognize himself in his dad. He understands that until the mauling changed his life forever, he and his dad were on the same violent path. Even more important is Cole's reaction to Garvey insisting that Cole's dad won't get custody: Cole seem to trust that Garvey will look out for him and make sure that Cole won't have to suffer abuse again. This points to the bond that Cole and Garvey have built up since Cole stopped relying on fear and violence.



Peter refuses to come back to the cabin until Cole is in his tent, 100 yards away. Garvey brings Cole supper later, and when Cole asks when he can come back, Garvey bluntly asks how long a person stays scared after a beating. Cole goes to sleep early, and in the morning, he forces himself up to go to the pond. He knocks on the cabin door and invites Garvey and Peter to join. Garvey forces Peter up, and they follow Cole. Cole wades into the icy water, but Garvey and Peter stay on the shore. Cole then invites them to help him with the ancestor rock. At the top of the hill, he offers to let Peter shove it off, but Peter refuses.

Back at camp, Cole suggests they gather more firewood. Garvey invites Peter to help, but Peter walks away without a word. Cole grouches that they're collecting firewood because of Peter, but Garvey answers that they're here at all because of Cole. Days pass and Peter doesn't change. He does what Garvey asks him, but no more. Two weeks after Peter's arrival, Peter does rush forward to kick the ancestor rock off the hill—but he continues to ignore Cole. Several days later, Peter throws a stone so it lands near Cole and acts like he didn't do it. Cole realizes that his fists are clenched, but doesn't tell Garvey.

Not long after this, Peter bumps Cole while they're walking along the stream and sends Cole flying into the water. Cole announces that he won't soak since he's already wet, but Peter strips, races into the pond, and races back out again. Later, Peter seems relaxed and asks Cole if he's frozen in the pond. Cole says he's used to it now, but Peter says he doesn't want to get used to it. The rain persists, and Peter grows more sullen. Garvey remains happy and joking. One rainy day, about a month after Peter's arrival, Cole sits in his tent and prepares himself for a cold night. Peter hesitantly calls that Cole can come into the cabin.

CHAPTER 27

Cole races into the cabin. Garvey winks at him as Cole heats water for hot chocolate. Though Peter refuses a drink, Cole makes him one anyway. Peter wants to know why they haven't seen the **Spirit Bear** yet and insists that the bear isn't real. Cole admits that he didn't think it was real either, but he pulls up a sleeve to show off his mauling scars. Garvey interrupts the argument by deciding where everyone will sleep. Cole is thrilled to be inside and thanks Peter for letting him in. Peter spits that they're not friends, and in the following days, Peter takes every opportunity to get back at Cole. He walks over Cole's sleeping bag in muddy boots, knocks Cole's jacket down, and leaves the door open at night so that Cole (who sleeps closest to the door) will be cold.

Even if Cole and Garvey have a much more egalitarian and understanding relationship now, Garvey is still the mentor—and it's still important to remind Cole that he's the one to blame for all of this. His work isn't over until Cole and Peter come to some sort of understanding. Cole's overtures to Peter suggest that he's willing to shower Peter with kindness until Peter is able to let go of his fear—regardless of how Peter treats him in return.



Now that Peter sees Cole isn't a threat anymore, he's seemingly realized that he has the opportunity to get revenge. This is a normal reaction—Peter suffered major trauma at Cole's hands, and it's understandable that he'd want to see Cole suffer some for the pain he caused. However, Cole's experiences indicate that Peter won't feel any better if he tries to hurt others; he won't heal until he learns to forgive.



Rushing into the pond is likely just a way for Peter to try to one-up Cole and look tougher. However, Peter's relaxed demeanor later in the day suggests that the pond still had a calming, healing effect on him. His insistence that he doesn't want to get used to it, meanwhile, sounds a lot like something Cole would've said a year ago. This suggests that Peter is going through much the same process Cole did, and that Cole could help Peter if Peter was open to it.



Even if Cole and Peter aren't friends, Peter can still show Cole some degree of kindness by letting him into the cabin. Peter's anger continues to shine through, however, and he uses Cole's proximity to make Cole's life even more miserable. It's interesting that Garvey doesn't do anything about Peter's behavior, even though he certainly sees what's going on. Garvey likely wants the boys to figure this out and take responsibility for their actions on their own; his job is just to make sure that no violence occurs.



One day, Cole discovers that someone destroyed the bear carving on his totem pole. He feels enraged, but he calmly asks Peter why he did it. Peter shrugs, insists the **Spirit Bear** isn't real, and taunts that Cole can't beat him up again. Cole suggests that they go find another log so that Peter can carve his own totem, but Peter is derisive. After lunch, however, he accompanies Cole and Garvey to the shore and helps them drag the log up next to Cole's. Peter doesn't know what to carve. Cole suggests he carve the last animal he saw, and when Peter says he saw a mouse earlier, Cole announces that they'll dance the mouse dance tonight. He insists that every animal can teach them something, but Peter sarcastically mocks Cole.

Peter refuses to come out of the cabin until supper is ready. After they eat, Cole adds more wood to the fire and dances first. When he's done, he says that mice are persistent and bold, and that they're survivors. Garvey's dance seems to interest Peter. Garvey says that mice often go unnoticed. Peter's dance is jerky and unsure, and afterward he says that he only learned that he looks stupid. After Peter retreats to the cabin, Cole laments that Peter will never forgive him. Garvey shrugs and reminds Cole that spiritual wounds heal slowly. The next morning, Cole carves a mouse into his totem instead of soaking. Peter eventually joins Cole.

Cole is amazed at how real Peter's mouse carving looks. Peter smirks that his mouse is better and ignores Cole's reminder that they shouldn't compare whose feelings are better. Peter asks again about the **Spirit Bear**, so Cole tells him about the white fur. He says that he always had to prove things back then because he knew he was a liar, and that he threw the fur away because he decided to stop lying. That afternoon, Peter asks for some time alone. Garvey and Cole go on a hike, and as they head back, Cole sees Peter carving on Cole's log. Cole races back, angry, but stops when he sees that Peter is carving a lifelike bear where he destroyed Cole's. Cole asks Peter if he'd teach him to carve. Peter shrugs and says it depends on whether Cole wants to learn.

CHAPTER 28

Cole, Garvey, and Peter go to the pond together through the summer until one morning, Peter suggests that just he and Cole go. Cole is a bit nervous, but he agrees, and Garvey lets them go. Cole slips the **at.óow** into his backpack and leads Peter along. Peter follows angrily. At the pond, Cole holds a hand out and says he's ready to be friends, but Peter rejects Cole's offer. Cole tries to explain that he never meant to hurt Peter as Peter shoves Cole and shakes his fists in Cole's face. Peter tearfully says that everything will be okay when he can sleep at night without bad dreams. He accuses Cole of just wanting to get off the island, but Cole insists that's not true.

Peter's snappiness and rudeness is likely a fear reaction. Even if he no longer thinks that Cole is going to jump him and beat him up again, this doesn't mean that he's done being afraid. And given Garvey's constant presence, Peter must turn to being rude and sullen—he can't do anything more than that. It's commendable that Cole so virtuously puts up with Peter's behavior: it speaks to his commitment to helping Peter, as well as his newfound ability to handle his own feelings of anger.



Though it's understandable that Cole is sad about how Peter seems uninterested in forgiving him, Cole also seemingly forgets how long his own transformation took. It wasn't until he'd been on the island for almost a year that he was able to dance the dance of anger—and that happened about 18 months after he first beat Peter up. Though Cole can and should make himself as nonthreatening as possible, this doesn't mean that making amends with Peter won't take time.



Questioning the truth of Cole's story is another way for Peter to try to anger Cole and make him feel unimportant. In the face of this, Cole has to embody Garvey and Edwin as he speaks slowly and calmly to Peter at all times. Complimenting Peter's carving is a major turning point, as suddenly, Cole begins to see what Peter has to share with the world. Now that he knows what Peter can do, Cole can help make Peter feel important and worthwhile simply by complimenting his carvings. Peter's choice to fix the bear, meanwhile, suggests that he's also coming around.



For Peter, it's terrifying to accept that Cole has changed—and it's even scarier to consider possibly forgiving Cole. His angry and violent behavior here shows how difficult the healing process can be. This show of violence may be a final gesture before Peter realizes that it's not doing him any good. In keeping his cool and calmly explaining himself, Cole can prevent the situation from escalating even as Peter comes at him with fists.



Peter shouts that Cole *hasn't* changed. Cole slowly insists that he's not going to beat Peter up again and says it doesn't do any good to stay angry. Peter rushes at Cole, screaming and shouting, and pushes him down. He taunts Cole to beat him up again as he punches Cole in the face and kicks gravel at him. Cole doesn't try to fight back, which just makes Peter angrier. Cole feels angry, but he tries hard to not let his anger consume him. He curls into a ball and begs Peter to stop. Finally, Peter stops and sinks to the ground, sobbing. Peter admits that he's terrified and doesn't trust Cole. Cole insists that he's not a bad person and that his time on the island carving and carrying the ancestor rock showed him who he is.

Fighting back his own tears, Cole insists that they're both part of a big **circle** of life and death. Cole understands now that he hurt himself when he hurt Peter and he apologizes again. Peter collapses, sobbing, and Cole puts his arms around Peter. They sit for a while until the **Spirit Bear** appears about 20 feet away. Cole quietly draws Peter's attention to it, and Peter stares, openmouthed and afraid. The bear stares for a moment and then lumbers away. Peter asks if they really saw it. Cole smiles and says that "they" say there are no Spirit Bears here. Peter asks if anyone will believe them, but Cole assures Peter that what *he* believes is the important part.

Cole and Peter soak in silence and then find a second ancestor rock. They both roll their anger down the hill. Cole's face is swollen, and he's in pain as they head back to camp. He and Peter stare at their totems, and Cole tells Peter about being invisible. He says that this morning, they forgave each other and themselves, which allowed them to become invisible and see the **Spirit Bear**. Cole pulls the **at.óow** out of his backpack and explains its significance. He says he trusts Peter and hopes that Peter can trust him someday. Peter asks if he can help Cole carve his anger dance on the totem pole. Several hours later, Cole yells for Garvey to come look at their perfect **circle**. Smiling, Garvey asks if they carved a circle because circles are beginnings and ends, but Peter and Cole joke that Cole is just a slow learner.

It's extremely important that Cole doesn't fight back. If he does, even just in self-defense, it'll only confirm Peter's fears that Cole is still a violent maniac intent on hurting him. When Peter finally collapses, he confirms Cole's suspicions that Peter is motivated by fear. After being beaten up, Peter felt as though he couldn't trust anything or anyone, Cole least of all. It's understandably terrifying, then, to be on an island with the very person who changed his life forever—but like Cole, Peter cannot let his anger take over his life.



Cole makes the case against allowing anger to consume one's life when he brings up the circle of life and death. Anger, he suggests, will lead to violence and hurt everyone—including the perpetrator. This is the very reason why Cole wants to help Peter now: helping Peter helps everyone else. When the Spirit Bear appears, it suggests that the boys have finally let go of their anger and their fear.



Though it's unfortunate that Cole and Peter rely on mean jokes when they answer Garvey's final question, carving the circle together nevertheless suggests that the boys are well on the way to starting a friendship based on trust. Giving Peter the at.óow at this point in their relationship reinforces this—just as Cole didn't really trust Garvey when he first accepted the at.óow, Peter doesn't fully trust Cole either. Carving the circle, meanwhile, reinforces the idea that all people are connected to each other and to the natural world—and therefore, they must be kind and compassionate to everyone and everything.





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