We the Animals

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JUSTIN TORRES

Justin Torres was born in New York City but grew up in upstate New York in a town called Baldwinsville. The youngest of three brothers, he is of Puerto Rican descent and came out as gay when he was a teenager, an experience he writes about in his debut novel, *We The Animals*, which is semi-autobiographical. He attended New York University as a young man, though he soon dropped out and traveled around the United States. During this period, he worked odd jobs before sitting in on a writing class at The New School back in New York City. After this experience, he decided to concentrate on his writing. He subsequently attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, receiving his Masters in Fine Arts in 2010, at which point he became a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. It was during this time that he published *We The Animals*, which won an Indies Choice Book Award and was a finalist for a Publishing Triangle Award and an NAACP Image Award. He now teaches in the English department at the University of California, Los Angeles.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Given its episodic and highly poetic nature, *We The Animals* feels rather dislocated from any major historical events. After all, the book primarily deals with the relationships between the narrator and his family, which are more or less uninfluenced by the time period. However, it's worth noting that the book is semi-autobiographical, meaning that it most likely takes place in the 1980s, which is when Torres grew up. This means that it takes place during the AIDS epidemic, which unfortunately fueled bigotry against the gay community. This is largely because doctors first identified the virus in gay men in 1981, leading the general public to associate the illness with the gay community. Although AIDS doesn't come up in *We The Animals*, it's useful to remember that the narrator's process of coming out as gay is most likely impacted by the knowledge that the people around him have unfair biases against the gay community—biases most likely exacerbated by the misinformation surrounding the AIDS epidemic.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Justin Torres has said that he was profoundly impacted by *City of God*, a collection stories and poems published by the Latino author Gil Cuadros. *City of God* was published in 1994, and because it deals with coming of age as a young gay man, it resonated strongly with Torres. To that end, *We The Animals* is similar to *City of God* in that it is comprised of stories and vignettes that can exist in and of themselves, even if they also fit together to assemble a greater narrative. Torres's novel is also reminiscent of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, since both books feature gay protagonists living in the closet and struggling against society's narrow conception of masculinity.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** We The Animals
- **When Published:** September 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realism, Contemporary Fiction
- **Setting:** Upstate New York
- **Climax:** Just after the narrator has sex for the first time with a man, he goes home to discover that his family has read his journal, in which he has detailed his sexual fantasies about other men. Reacting fiercely, he screams and lunges at them, prompting them to take him to a psych ward.
- **Antagonist:** Paps and—more generally—the aggression and violence that accompanies his conception of masculinity.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. *We The Animals* was adapted into a feature-length film in 2018. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the NEXT Innovator Award.

5 Under 35. On the merit of *We The Animals*, Torres was included on the National Book Foundation's "5 Under 35" list of young writers to watch.

PLOT SUMMARY

The unnamed narrator spends the majority of his time with his brothers, Manny and Joel. They pass the time together when their mother remains in bed for days, creeping quietly through the house as if it's their duty to avoid disturbing her. On their own, they make their own meals and keep themselves entertained, fearing that their father might come home and beat them for misbehaving. During Ma's unresponsive periods, she'll sometimes emerge suddenly from her bedroom in a state of confusion, not knowing what day or time it is. Once, she comes out in the middle of the night and asks Joel to borrow baking supplies from their neighbor so she can make Manny's birthday cake. When Joel points out not only that nobody is awake at this hour, but that it's not even Manny's birthday, Ma pauses before saying, "I hate my life."

One day, the narrator and his brothers use a mallet to smash

tomatoes so the juices will splatter all over them. Eventually, Ma comes out of her bedroom and asks why they aren't in school, and though it's Sunday, none of them answer. She quickly forgets the matter when she sees what they're doing. Instead of getting mad, she says in an awestruck voice that they look like they did when they first came out of her. She then asks them to make her look "born," too, and they happily oblige, dancing around her as she lies on the floor dripping in tomato juices.

On another occasion, the boys come home to find their father cooking and listening to music. They're afraid of him because he often uses physical force to punish them, but they sense that each beating has greater meaning, as if he's trying to show them how to live. Now, as they enter the kitchen, they watch Paps dance and drink beer, and he encourages them to join. He instructs them to dance in different ways, telling them to dance like they're rich, like they're poor, like they're white, and like they're Puerto Rican. Each time, he tells them to stop, eventually calling them "mutts" because they're neither fully white nor fully Puerto Rican, like him. Going on, he tells them to watch how he dances, and they try to discern what sets him apart from them.

Shortly after their dancing lessons, Paps comes home one day with Ma, whose face is covered in bruises. They ask what happened, and Paps claims that the dentist punched Ma before sedating her, which he says is how dentists loosen teeth. For the next few days, the brothers are forbidden from entering Ma's room, but they finally go in on the morning of the narrator's seventh birthday. Manny reminds Ma that it's the narrator's birthday, and she remarks that this means he'll grow apart from her. This, she says, is what happened when Manny and Joel turned seven: they became "tough" like their father. Hearing this, Manny and Joel are confused but proud, and they exit the room as the narrator asks if she doesn't love his brothers anymore. In response, she says she still loves them but that she had to change the *way* she loves them, since loving "big boys" requires a person to "meet tough with tough." She then makes the narrator promise to stay six for the rest of his life, and he's so overcome with love that he takes her face in his hands and kisses her. In doing so, he touches her bruises, causing her to swear and push him. By the time he hits the ground, he knows he has turned seven.

On another day, Paps takes the family to a lake. Ma and the narrator don't know how to swim, so he drags them through the water until they're in the center of the lake, at which point he lets go of them. Ma panics and clutches the narrator, pushing him underwater. To avoid her, he sinks down, and the next thing he knows, he's swimming on the surface as Ma holds onto Paps and both of them cheer, ecstatic that he's still alive. Despite this, though, Ma is so mad at Paps that she refuses to sit next to him on the ride home. As they drive, she reaches across the narrator's lap and opens the door, asking Paps if she should give the narrator a flying lesson. Paps pulls over, and the boys walk away from the car while their parents violently argue, with Ma screaming at Paps to unhand her. Not long after this, the family is silent as Paps drives them the rest of the way home. Before the ride is over, he turns around and asks the narrator what he thought of his first flying lesson, and everyone—including Ma—bursts into laughter.

For a long period, Paps doesn't come home. Ma stops going to work and, in fact, stops doing everything except sleeping. Once again, the brothers are forced to care for themselves while taking pains not to disturb their mother. Time passes, but there's still no sign of Paps. Until, that is, the phone rings one night during dinner and Ma is certain it's him. Instead of answering it, though, she lets it ring until it stops, but soon it starts again. Unable to bear the tension, Manny says he'll answer the phone, but Ma picks up his dinner bowl and smashes it on the floor as a way of stopping him. Shortly thereafter, Paps returns, and Manny shuts himself in his room while the narrator and Joel hide in a crawlspace beneath the stairs, where they find an old phone and pretend to be their parents, apologizing to each other and making promises about how life will get better, though neither Joel nor the narrator fully understand what, exactly, they're talking about.

Once Paps and Ma make up again, they shower each other with love. One day, the entire family crowds into the bathroom while Paps gives the boys a bath. As he does this, Ma stands at the sink and prepares for work. At one point, Paps lustfully grabs at her, and the boys feel excited because they sense that this is what their mother feels. Reveling in how close and happy their parents seem, they feel unspeakably happy. When Paps drains the tub and dries them off, they hide behind the shower curtain, knowing their parents will playfully try to "find" them. Instead of doing this, however, Ma and Paps start having sex. As the narrator peeks out at them, he sees his mother's face and thinks she's in pain, realizing it must hurt her to love a man like Paps. Upon opening her eyes, she sees him watching, so she tells Paps to stop and then instructs him to get her shoes so she can finish getting ready for work. When he goes to do this, she gets behind the shower curtain with her sons, and together they jump out at Paps when he returns, pinning him to the floor and tickling him as he lets out joyful screams. Eventually, Ma tries to shield him from the boys, so Manny slaps her in the middle of her back. The narrator and Joel wait to see if their father will punish Manny for doing this, and when Paps does nothing, all three of them start hitting and kicking their parents, angrily yelling at them for not trying to find them when they were hiding.

Soon after this, Paps gets a job as a nighttime security guard, but because Ma also works nightshifts, he has to bring the boys with him. Because he falls asleep with the narrator in his lap, he wakes up late one morning and frantically tells them to get in the car, but it's too late: the morning security guard sees them.

While the boys wait in the car, Paps argues with the other guard, knocking his coffee to the ground. On the way home, he starts to cry, though the boys don't know what to make of this because he doesn't simply let tears fall from his eyes. Instead, he pounds the dashboard with his fist, creating a rhythm that the brothers join, eventually chanting along. At home, they continue to chant while Paps sits defeatedly on the couch. When Ma asks what's wrong, he says they'll never "escape" the life they're leading. Hearing this, Ma sternly says, "Don't you dare."

One night, Paps comes home and drags Ma to the bedroom to have sex even though she doesn't want to. The next morning, she loads the boys into the car along with garbage bags full of their clothes. After driving for a short while, she pulls over and takes a nap at a park while the boys wander around trying to entertain themselves. When she finally wakes up that evening, she asks them to tell her what she should do, wanting to know if they should leave Paps. Unable to respond, they remain silent, so Ma loads them back into the car and drives home. Pulling into the driveway, the narrator feels disappointed, though he wouldn't let himself feel this until it was absolutely clear they weren't leaving.

Bored after dinner one night, the boys go into the woods and throw rocks at a camper behind their neighbors' house. They run away when a rock breaks the camper's window, but the neighbors' older son—"the headbanger"—follows them. To their surprise, he isn't mad when he catches up to them, instead saying he wants to show them something. Because none of them want to seem afraid, they follow him into his basement, where he shows them a videotape of a father sexually abusing his son. As he watches this, the narrator wishes there were somebody to stop him from seeing what's playing out onscreen, but he realizes his brothers aren't able to protect him from this.

Because the narrator's grades are good, Paps decides to take him out of school for a trip to Niagara Falls, where he needs to make a delivery. While they're there, Paps gives him money and leaves him at a museum, promising to be back soon. As the hours go by, the narrator becomes increasingly bored and angry, but he passes the time by dancing in an empty room where footage of the waterfall is projected on the wall. After quite some time, he turns to see his father watching him, but Paps doesn't say anything until they're pulling into their driveway late that night, at which point he says that—though he doesn't know what to make of it—he couldn't help but think that the narrator looked "pretty" while dancing to himself in the shifting light of the projector.

Several years later, the boys walk around in the snow one night smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. They're teenagers now, and they can all sense that the narrator is different from Manny and Joel. Frustrated that his brothers see him as different, the narrator provokes them, wanting them to beat him up. But Manny and Joel don't take the bait, instead calling him "fucked up." Consequently, he leaves them where they are, walking to the town's bus station. He's been visiting the public bathrooms at the station rather frequently, trying to work up the courage to have sex with one of the other gay men who use the restrooms as a meet-up. Tonight, he finds the station empty except for one bus, the driver of which invites him onboard and says, "You want me to make you, I'll make you" while reaching into his pants. On his way home afterwards, the narrator yells out, "He made me! I'm made!"

At home, the narrator finds his family in the living room. His journal is open on Ma's lap, and he knows instantly that she has read his detailed fantasies about having sex with other men. Falling to his knees, he says he's going to kill her, causing his father to leap toward him. Manny and Joel restrain Paps, and though the narrator senses something like tenderness in the way his family looks at him, he mercilessly claws at them before turning on himself, scratching his own face. After calming the narrator down, Paps gives him a bath, washing him and clipping his toenails while his brothers wipe snow off the car so the family can take him to a psych ward. This, the narrator says, is the last time he's ever with his entire family, and though he retrospectively thinks things could have gone differently, none of them are able to speak honestly with one another, so he ends up severing ties with them and embarking on a new life.

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator is a boy who lives with his older brothers, Manny and Joel, and his parents, Ma and Paps. The narrator has a close relationship with his brothers, especially since his parents are neglectful and abusive. To that end, the narrator tiptoes around Ma during her depressive episodes, hoping his silence will somehow protect her from further sorrow or pain. Like his brothers, the narrator is afraid of Paps because he's physically abusive and unpredictable, though the narrator suspects that Paps's beatings contain lessons about how to lead a good life—an altogether unfounded idea. Interestingly enough, though, his relationship with his parents isn't always as toxic as it might seem, since he and his brothers frequently share touching moments with Ma and Paps. More importantly, the narrator fiercely identifies with his brothers because, like him, they're both white and Latino, meaning they're the only people he knows who share his racial and cultural identity. Indeed, the brothers' skin color is darker than Ma's but lighter than Paps', and Paps even refers to them as "mutts" and criticizes them for being so cut off from their Puerto Rican heritage, having grown up surrounded by white people in upstate New York. This only strengthens the narrator's bond with his brothers, but as they get older, it becomes increasingly clear to all of them that the narrator is different from Manny and Joel, since he not only possesses intellectual gifts that elude his brothers, but also isn't tough and

macho like them. This creates tension in their relationship, eventually reaching a tipping point when Ma finds the narrator's journal and shares it with the rest of the family, revealing that he's a closeted young gay man. In response, the narrator physically and verbally attacks his family members, who subsequently take him to a psych ward. By the end of the novella, it's clear that he no longer has a relationship with his family, instead leading a new life with people who accept him for who he is.

Ma – Ma is the narrator's mother, a loving woman who often finds herself incapable of giving her children the attention they need. This is largely due to her relationship with Paps, who is physically and emotionally abusive, causing her to go into frequent depressive periods during which she sleeps for days at a time, skips her nightshifts at the local brewery, and fails to care for the narrator, Manny, and Joel. In response, the three brothers take it upon themselves to support her, thereby inverting the standard mother-son dynamic. Accordingly, the brothers are used to Ma's erratic and unpredictable ways, knowing that she's prone to confusion when she suddenly emerges from her bedroom and doesn't know what day or time it is. In these moments, she asks the brothers to do strange things, like borrow baking supplies from the neighbors even though it's the middle of the night. Over the years, they have learned not to correct her when she makes these mistakes, since doing so often prompts her to plunge even deeper into depression, saying things like, "I hate my life." Constantly surrounded by males, Ma values the narrator's sensitive side, which she tells him he'll most likely lose as he grows up. By saying this, she implies that all men grow up to be tough and macho, but this isn't actually the case for the narrator, who—as he gets older—becomes less and less like his father and brothers. Like everyone else, Ma notices this, which is perhaps why she invades his privacy one night when he's a teenager by finding his journal and sharing it with the rest of the family. In doing so, she learns once and for all that the narrator is gay, ultimately enraging him by trying to confront him about this in front of the entire family. This leads to the dissolution of their relationship; after the family puts the narrator in a psych ward, he cuts ties with them—a direct result of Ma's failure to support him and her decision to invade his privacy.

Paps – Paps is the narrator's father, an abusive man who is—surprisingly enough—capable of showing love and affection. A dark-skinned Puerto Rican man, he sees the narrator, Manny, and Joel as "mutts" because they're half-white, so he tries to teach them how to connect with their heritage, though they find this difficult because they live in a predominantly white community. He, on the other hand, grew up in New York City with other Puerto Rican families, deciding to move only because he got Ma pregnant when she was only 14 and therefore needed to go to Texas, where they could legally get married. To that end, Paps can be a very manipulative man, as evidenced by the fact that he told Ma when they first had sex that she couldn't get pregnant from sleeping with him. In keeping with this, he frequently uses his charm to convince her to forgive him after he beats her or after he runs off with other women for long periods of time. No matter what he does, it seems, he can always endear himself to his family members, and though the narrator and his brothers fear him, they also admire him. Paps is the embodiment of stereotypical masculinity, setting an example for his sons by behaving like a tough, macho man. For this reason, he finds it difficult to understand the narrator's version of masculinity, which doesn't align with Paps' narrow conception of what it means to be a man. When, for example, he sees the narrator dancing one night, he's confused by the fact that the narrator looks "pretty," and though he points this out to the narrator in a way that emphasizes his perplexity, he doesn't condemn his behavior. All the same, he has a negative reaction upon finding out that the narrator is gay, though his anger is perhaps due to the fact that the narrator threatens Ma for reading his journal. In the aftermath of this tense exchange, Paps gives the narrator a bath before taking him to a psych ward, and it remains unclear whether or not this act of bathing his son is a display of tenderness and respect or an attempt to wash away what he sees as the young man's sinful ways.

Manny – Manny is the narrator's oldest brother. Like Paps, Manny is wild and tough, though he also has a sensitive side, as evidenced by the close relationship he has with the narrator, to whom he shares his private thoughts about God, life, and someday leaving behind their difficult circumstances. All the three brothers are very close, and they turn to each other for support when their parents prove themselves incapable of giving them the care they need. And yet, Manny's desire to be seen as tough and macho renders him quite similar to Paps, which is why he and Joel (who shares his way of moving through the world) don't know what to make of the narrator when it becomes clear that he's different from them. Indeed, Manny senses that the narrator will have a different life than him because of his academic success. More importantly, though, he also picks up on the fact that the narrator doesn't align with the same vision of masculinity to which he, Joel, and Paps adhere. This makes him uncomfortable, but the brothers are unable to address this dynamic when he brings it up by accusing the narrator of being "fucked up"—this, it seems, is the most he can bring himself to say about the matter, since he doesn't know how to broach such emotionally sensitive topics. At the same time, though, he remains proud and protective of the narrator, eventually working alongside Joel to restrain Paps from hurting him after the narrator threatens Ma for invading his privacy and outing him as a gay man.

Joel – Joel is the middle brother between the narrator and Manny. Like Manny, Joel is wild, rambunctious, and tough, though he lacks some of Manny's sensitive qualities. For this

reason, Manny goes to the narrator when he wants to talk about his feelings or his visions of the future. Still, Joel is not the most dominant brother, since he frequently defers to Manny. This dynamic is especially evident when Joel laughs in disbelief after the narrator drunkenly insults their older brother one night. In this moment, Joel is astounded that the narrator would dare stand up to Manny, but the narrator soon turns on Joel and criticizes him for laughing, calling him "ignorant" and saying that he's embarrassed of both of them. The narrator does this because he knows that his brothers see him as different, so he wants to provoke them into beating him, since violence in their family is a way of showing love and affection. In response to the narrator's taunts, then, Joel grabs his arms so that Manny can pummel him with a stick, but Manny refrains from doing so. Later, Joel helps Manny restrain Paps from jumping at their brother after the narrator threatens Ma for invading his privacy and outing him as a gay man—an action that proves his continued support of the narrator, despite his hesitations about their differences.

Lina – Lina is Ma's coworker and boss at the local brewery, where Ma works nightshifts. When Paps leaves for a long period of time, Lina calls to find out why Ma isn't coming to work, though Ma never answers the phone. Finally, Lina takes it upon herself to come to the house, bringing a bag of groceries that she gives to the boys before trying to console Ma, who weeps in her arms. As the boys watch, Lina kisses Ma all over her face before softly kissing her on the lips—something that deeply confuses the narrator and his brothers, though they don't say anything about it.

Old Man – Old Man is what the narrator and his brothers call one of their neighbors whose garden they raid when Paps is missing and Ma is in a depressive state and therefore unable to care for them. As they eat and trample his vegetables, Old Man watches them from his porch, calling them **animals** and quoting a Bible passage about insatiable locusts. Intrigued by the old man, the brothers sit with him on his porch, and he shows them how to stop mosquito bites from itching. When he goes inside to make them a salad, though, Joel and Manny start fighting, and when he comes out and sees them tearing at each other, he calls them animals again and tells them to leave. Although he doesn't play a large role in the novella, he comes to stand for the kind of adult care the boys are missing out on, since he offers to feed them despite the fact that they've only brought trouble to his garden. However, that they end up driving him to banish them before actually eating his food indicates that the wild and ultra-macho ways they've learned from Paps will ultimately do them a disservice in life.

The Headbanger – The narrator and his brothers refer to their teenaged neighbor as "the headbanger." He is what they think of as "white trash" and they therefore find him unrelatable, though he makes an effort to befriend them. One night, the boys throw a rock at the camper parked behind the headbanger's family's house. The rock breaks the window, at which point the headbanger comes outside and tracks them down. Instead of being angry, though, he says he wants to show them something. Taking them to his basement, he plays them a videotape of a father sexually abusing his son, and though none of the boys want to see this, they don't know how to stop it from happening.

The Bus Driver – The bus driver is a grown man with whom the narrator has his first sexual experience. At first, the bus driver thinks the narrator is a passenger who wants to go to New York City, so he tells him to come back in the morning because it's too snowy to drive at the moment. When the narrator tells him that he's come to the bus station to use the public bathroom, though, the driver tells him not to go in there at night. However, he then begins to understand that the narrator wants to have sex with another man, at which point he invites the boy to board the bus to use its bathroom. Once the narrator comes in, the driver stands and says, "You want me to make you, I'll make you," while reaching into the narrator's pants. Walking home afterwards, the narrator proudly repeats, "He made me! I'm made!"

THEMES

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IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Justin Torres's *We The Animals* spotlights a young boy's attempt to belong to his family and to the world at large. As the narrator navigates a childhood complicated by abuse and poverty, he cultivates a strong bond with his older brothers, Manny and Joel. He takes cues from them about how to behave, establishing a sense of self that's directly tied to their group dynamic. However, the older he gets, the more he realizes that this collective identity doesn't fully resonate with his individuality, and this leaves him feeling estranged from his brothers. Although he feels a strong kinship with Manny and Joel because they share his skin color (darker than their mother's but lighter than their father's) and have experienced the same emotional and physical turmoil as him, the narrator feels different. Part of this has to do with his—and their—growing awareness of his sexual identity as a young gay man, but he also experiences a wider sense of difference, one tied to the general idea that his world will be "larger" than his brothers' world. In keeping with this, the novella ends just as the narrator grasps that, although he has always defined himself in relation to his family, he now must find (or create) a life specifically tailored to his own identity—a

painful, disorienting realization that demonstrates just how difficult it can be for people to be true to themselves.

The narrator and his brothers are keenly aware that they exist between two racial identities, since they are neither light-skinned like their mother nor dark-skinned like their Puerto Rican father. And as if it's not already obvious to them that they don't closely resemble either of their parents, their father calls this to their attention, commenting on the racial ambiguity of their appearances. He also talks about them as if they exist between cultural *identities*, too, something he emphasizes when he drunkenly instructs them to dance in different ways, saying things like, "Now shake it like you're white." When they try their best to do this, he tells them to stop and declares that they're not white. He then urges them to dance like Puerto Ricans. After a moment, though, he calls them "mutts" and notes that they are neither white nor Puerto Rican. What's more, they live in what seems to be a predominantly white community, considering that the narrator refers to his neighbors as "white trash," a phrase that indicates that he and his brothers don't identify with them. In turn, it becomes clear that nobody in their lives reflects their cultural or racial identity—nobody, that is, except for each other. Consequently, they stick together as a group, forming a collective identity that enables them to navigate the fact that they are the only biracial people in their community.

Of course, there are other reasons the narrator and his brothers identify so closely with one another—notably that they also face the same dangers and traumatic experiences. As children of parents prone to abusive behavior, they band together, knowing when to leave their parents alone to avoid disaster. And when they *do* get in trouble, all three of them have to withstand beatings from Paps. In fact, this dynamic draws them together so closely that the narrator refers to his brothers and himself as the "Three Musketeers" and even conceptualizes them at one point as the Holy Trinity, with Manny serving as the Father, Joel as the son, and the narrator himself as the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, they sometimes speak as a collective, saying things like, "Us hungry." When Paps is about to whip them with his belt, the narrator whispers, "Us scared," to which Joel replies, "Us fucked." This illustrates just how tight their bond is, as the three boys act as a single entity—an entity partially defined by their shared fear of domestic violence, which is an ever-present threat. In this regard, then, readers see how the boys' tumultuous home life brings them together, strengthening the bonds of a group dynamic in which they share a collective sense of self.

As the narrator gets older, though, he and his brothers begin to notice the ways in which he differs from them. First and foremost, his brothers and parents recognize that he is intellectually gifted, meaning he'll have opportunities nobody in his family has had—he will, his parents say, have access to a "larger" world. This makes his brothers spiteful but proud, and it has the same effect on the way he sees himself. Suddenly, he doesn't know how to exist "both inside and outside" of his relationship with his brothers, since it's this very relationship that has defined his entire identity. Now, though, everyone in his family can "smell[] his difference." This idea hints at the other part of the narrator's developing identity that sets him apart from his brothers: namely, that he's gay, a fact that nobody in his family is ready to accept. Consequently, the narrator feels alienated from the same people who have always helped him establish a sense of self, and he begins to worry that there's "no other boy like" him anywhere in the world, so he keeps his sexuality a secret—until his family finds his diary and reads it. This happens in the novella's penultimate chapter, in which his family—unable to embrace him as a gay man—decides to institutionalize him. Needless to say, this is a very bleak ending, but the final chapter ultimately suggests that he later finds people who accept him, though it also becomes clear that he no longer has a relationship with his family. In turn, Torres intimates that it is sometimes necessary for people to leave behind unaccepting loved ones in order to fully inhabit and honor their true identities, as painful as this might be.

VIOLENCE, AGGRESSION, AND LOVE

In Justin Torres's *We The Animals*, violence and aggression are often tied to surprisingly tender emotions. The narrator and his brothers grow up in an abusive household, in which their father's violence is a constant threat. Furthermore, the boys' tendency to roughhouse mirrors the physical abuse they've faced, as their own aggression becomes an attempt to normalize violence and, in turn, their own trauma. And yet, the abuse they encounter is also more complicated than it might first appear, since it often seems to signal a certain emotional investment, as if violence and aggression are ways of expressing love. For instance, after beating Manny because he and his brothers decided to sleep in the woods without telling their parents, Paps apologizes by saying that he only used violence because he'd been afraid that something bad might happen to them. Of course, this is the kind of flawed reasoning that abusers often use to justify otherwise unjustifiable behavior, and it ultimately sends a clear and disturbing message to the narrator and his brothers—namely, that aggression is a way of expressing how much a person cares about others. In fact, it is this very reasoning that later makes the narrator want his brothers to beat him up. Sensing that his academic success and emerging sexual identity sets him at odds with Manny and Joel, the narrator tries to provoke them into hurting him, clearly believing that violence would reaffirm their love for him. Accordingly, Torres examines the ways in which violence sometimes serves as an unfortunate and destructive stand-in for healthy emotional expression.

The narrator and his brothers are surrounded by violence at

home, which is why they act out violence amongst themselves by playing wildly and aggressively. Most importantly, the brothers incorporate violence into their lives as if it's a sport, turning it into a game rather than something to be feared. When, for example, they play a three-person version of foursquare, they pretend to be their angry father each time they whack the ball, saying things like, "this is for raising your voice," or, "this is for embarrassing me in public." There's no question that this is a tragic reflection of just how inundated their lives are by violence, but their embrace of aggression is—above all—a coping mechanism. By emulating the darkest parts of their lives in relatively risk-free environments, they're able to work through trauma that would otherwise go unacknowledged. In other words, they accept violence as a part of life because they have no way of avoiding it. In turn, Torres illustrates not only the concerning cycle of familial aggression, but also the complex ways in which young people learn to cope with abuse.

Not only do the narrator and his brothers view violence as an inherent part of life, but they also come to associate it with emotional tenderness. This is partly because their parents' relationship fluctuates between affection and animosity, as Paps physically abuses Ma but (like many abusers) frequently dotes on her and showers her with love. As a result, Paps and Ma exist in a seemingly never-ending cycle of violence and affection, one that unfortunately teaches the boys to view love as inextricably intertwined with aggression. This association is further strengthened when Paps beats Manny for failing to tell him that he and his brothers were going to sleep in the woods. In the aftermath of this beating, Paps insists that the only reason he hurt Manny was because he'd been frightened that something bad might happen to his beloved children. By saying this, he frames violence as a product of love, a sign that somebody truly cares about another person. This is a message that the boys internalize, as evidenced by their decision to unexpectedly start beating both of their parents in the middle of a good-natured tickle fight one night. Suddenly smacking their parents and shouting at them, the three boys express both anger and love toward their parents, having learned that the two sentiments are directly related. This, it seems, is the only way they know how to show their parents how they feel about them.

Aggression in *We The Animals* is a form of emotional currency, but it's also a source of self-destruction. Unable to openly share his feelings of alienation with his brothers, the narrator seeks out the only embodiment of acceptance and affection he knows: violence and spite. This happens during his teenage years, when he fearfully realizes that his intellectual nature and emerging homosexuality set him apart from Manny and Joel. Knowing that they too can sense his differences, he provokes them one night when they're all drunk, insulting them both by saying that they embarrass him. When Manny grabs a stick and threatens to hit him in the face with it, he notes that he actively wants his brother to hurt him. This is because such violence would bind them to one another, since they all see aggression as a manifestation of care and affection. Instead of hitting him, though, Manny drops the stick and tells him there's something wrong with him, saying, "Let's talk about *that*." However, the boys don't talk about their differences, since—as the narrator implies—they're incapable of having honest conversations about such things. Instead, the narrator runs away, and when he returns, he learns that his family has read his diary and discovered that he's gay—a development that leads to the end of his relationship with them. That the narrator's argument with his brothers precedes this falling-out ultimately links the dissolution of their relationship with his inability to genuinely connect with them. With this in mind, Torres shows readers the tragic consequences of expressing emotion only through violence and aggression, demonstrating how disastrous it can be when loved ones don't know how to connect with each other in healthy, nonviolent ways.

SUPPORT AND CARETAKING

In *We The Animals*, Justin Torres examines what happens when people can't depend on those who are supposed to support them. Throughout the novella, the narrator and his brothers are left to their own devices, and though there's nothing inherently problematic about giving children some independence, their parents are startlingly out of touch with their lives, saddling them with the emotional burden of caring for themselves. It's worth acknowledging that this is also a byproduct of Ma and Paps's unhealthy relationship, which is fraught with instability and abuse. Indeed, Ma's mental health problems—undoubtedly tied to her embattled relationship with Paps—make it even harder for her to serve as a consistent source of support for her children. In fact, the boys often find themselves caring for *her*, doing whatever they can to make her feel better. In keeping with this, she comes to rely on them as if they're her caretakers, not the other way around. This is a hefty burden to place on children, one that illustrates the extent to which giving and receiving emotional support isn't always as straightforward as it might seem, especially in families dealing with violence and abuse. In abusive environments, Torres suggests, the way that loved ones care for each other changes, often by inverting the traditional roles of parent and child.

Because Ma's instability makes it hard for her to be an attentive parent, the narrator and his brothers experience an inordinate amount of independence. This is evident as early as the second page of the novella, when the narrator explains that he, Manny, and Joel sometimes have to exert an enormous amount of effort to avoid waking her up, not wanting to disturb her. For long stretches of time, she stays in her bedroom with the door shut, and they feel it's their duty to be as silent as possible. The

narrator even notes that he and his brothers see this as "protect[ing]" her, as if allowing her to sleep is a way of helping her. And when she finally *does* emerge, she's too confused and out of touch to serve as an effective caretaker, asking her children why they aren't at school even though it's the weekend, or sending them to borrow baking supplies from the neighbors in the middle of the night. Consequently, readers see that the boys tragically lack a reliable parent, since they fear their father and are unable to turn to their mother for support.

Needless to say, though, it is largely because Paps is so frightening that Ma finds it difficult to be a dependable caretaker. This is made overwhelmingly apparent when Paps brings her home one evening and falsely claims that she's injured because the dentist started punching her while she was under sedation. In the ensuing days, she stays in her bedroom, and the boys once again do whatever they can to make sure she's able to rest, eventually creeping into her room and gently examining her bruised face and showering her with love. In this moment, they become a source of emotional support for her, as she draws them close and derives strength from their love. Similarly, she later looks to them after packing them into the family truck and driving to a nearby park, intending to run away from Paps. After spending the day in the park, she expresses indecision, saying they can either leave Paps once and for all or return home. "But I need you to tell me what to do," she says, effectively placing the burdensome decision on them and asking for guidance—the kind of guidance parents usually provide for children rather than the other way around. In this regard, she reverses the dynamic that traditionally exists between parents and their children, putting the narrator and his brothers in an impossible position by asking them to take on emotional responsibilities that she herself is unwilling (or unable) to face.

Despite the boys' desire to care for their mother in whatever way they can, there are certain ways in which they simply can't help her. After all, it's one thing to tip-toe around the house and provide loving support for Ma when she needs it, but it's another thing entirely to fully assume a caretaking role and relieve her of all responsibility. For this reason, the narrator and his brothers are unable to say anything when she asks them to tell her whether or not to leave Paps. To make this decision for her would not only exhibit a sense of emotional maturity and resolve that she herself can't summon, but it would also completely transform the landscape of their lives. As young boys, the narrator and his brothers have never experienced anything other than what it's like to live with Paps, meaning that they don't even know what it would mean to leave behind their current life. Ma, on the other hand, has a better understanding of what leaving would do to her family, which is precisely why she should be the one making this decision. Furthermore, asking her children to decide is doubly unfair because they will likely feel guilty no matter what happens—if they leave their father (whom they *do* love, despite his abusive ways), they'll feel bad, and if they ask Ma to stay, they'll feel guilty about forcing her to continue leading an unhappy life. For this reason, they say nothing at all, so Ma quietly drives them all home. By spotlighting this tension, Torres shows not only that caretaking responsibilities can become especially complicated in families struggling with abuse, but also that it's unfair (and ineffective) for parents to depend too heavily on their children to support them, since such support often requires the maturity of adulthood.

MASCULINITY AND COMING OF AGE

Throughout *We The Animals*, Justin Torres examines the narrator's relationship with masculinity. With his brothers, the narrator exhibits the rambunctious energy typically associated with boyhood, but he also moves through the world in a way that feels foreign to the other men in his life. Indeed, he confounds his father by looking "pretty" while dancing alone one afternoon, and though Paps doesn't necessarily condemn his behavior, he doesn't know what to make of it because he has such a narrow conception of acceptable masculinity. Similarly, Manny and Joel jokingly call the narrator "girlie," but they're unable to actually articulate their feelings about the man he's becoming, not knowing how to feel about his lack of macho posturing. In alignment with this, the question of what it means to be a man lies at the heart of *We The Animals*, as the narrator navigates the challenging prospect of growing up in a world that sets forth rigid ideas about masculinity.

In some ways, the subject of masculinity is one of the book's least obvious themes, since the narrator only speaks indirectly about gendered expectations. And yet, Torres weaves this thread throughout the novella, constructing countless scenes in which the narrator and his brothers embody the stereotypical characteristics of boyhood. When they play as children, for instance, they often get into physical fights, exhibiting the kind of ferocity and aggression society generally associates with males. This association, of course, is a self-fulfilling prophecy, as children learn to personify the identities society ascribes to them. However, this stereotypical masculinity is also something the boys learn from their parents, especially since Paps is conventionally macho. Throughout the narrative, the narrator describes his father in animalistic terms and talks about him as if he is literally "indestructible," as if this toughness is what makes him a man. Furthermore, even Ma links boyhood and masculinity to being tough, saying that to properly love "big boys," a mother must "meet tough with tough"—a statement implying that all boys grow up to be tough and hard. It's no surprise, then, that the narrator and his brothers gravitate toward this specific understanding of boy- and manhood.

At the same time, the narrator doesn't actually grow up to

exemplify this stereotypical image of masculinity. As he gets older, he shows himself capable of moving through the world in more than one way. Paps finds this deeply disorienting, unsure how to process the fact that a man can still be a man while also behaving in ways that don't align with the traditional macho image of masculinity. This confusion emerges most prominently when he returns one evening to pick the narrator up from a museum in Niagara Falls and sees him dancing alone in a darkened room. Later that night, Paps confesses that watching him dance made him think about how "pretty" the narrator is, but he adds that he doesn't know what to do with this thought. Going on, he expresses his feeling that this is an "odd thing for a father to think about his son," though this doesn't change the fact that—as he watched the narrator—he couldn't help but think, "*Goddamn, I got me a pretty one.*" This is an interesting moment, one in which it becomes clear that Paps is struggling with his inflexible understanding of masculinity. For his entire life, he has behaved like somebody who is "tough" and "indestructible," committing himself to the idea that to be a true man, one must act macho. When he sees his son defying this notion, though, it is to his credit that he doesn't immediately reject this new (to him) conception of masculinity. However, Paps's confusion and discomfort underscore the unfortunate nature of the narrator's reality—namely, that his loved ones (and society at large) are unsettled by men who don't adhere to a specific interpretation of what it means to be a man.

Because it becomes clear that he'll someday embody a different kind of masculinity than his father and brothers, the narrator is on his own when it comes to charting his path to adulthood. Rather concerningly, this leads to risky sexual behavior, as he seeks out intimate experiences with adult men both as a way of exploring his sexual identity and establishing himself as an adult. Of course, many teenagers of all sexual orientations often find themselves in unfortunately precarious situations while experimenting with their developing desires, but the narrator's quest seems specifically tied to his attempt to enter adulthood—and, more specifically, manhood—in his own way. In keeping with this, the adult bus driver with whom he has his first sexual experience says, "You want me to make you, I'll make you," while putting his hand down the narrator's pants, a phrase the narrator proudly repeats to himself afterwards, saying, "He made me! I'm made!" When he says this, it becomes apparent that he sees this sexual experience as something that has marked his transition into adulthood, as if he was not yet fully formed before this encounter took place. This transition is especially noteworthy because it underlines the notion that the narrator wants to become a grown man in a way that actually reflects his version of masculinity, not his father's or his brothers'. Because his family has a narrow conception of what defines manhood, he seeks out a relationship with an adult stranger to confirm that his non-macho identity doesn't preclude him from maturing into an adult man. More importantly, that his family's narrowminded view of manhood leads him to riskily seek out validation in the arms of an adult stranger illustrates how dangerous it can be to teach teenaged boys that there's only one valid form of masculinity—a belief that can isolate young men and make it difficult for them to come into themselves in secure, developmentally healthy ways.

SYMBOLS

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

ANIMALS

Throughout *We The Animals*, Torres occasionally likens the characters to animals, using this metaphor as a way of representing their relationship with masculinity. In particular, he often describes Paps in animalistic terms, framing him as a strong, instinctive person who gives himself over to the kind of aggression and wildness frequently associated with the natural world and the animal kingdom. Manny and Joel match this animalistic intensity, clearly believing that this is what it means to be a man. The narrator, however, doesn't always align with this way of moving through the world, since he doesn't share his father's and brothers' macho disposition. And yet, the final chapter describes him as living in a zoo surrounded by other animals. This implies that the narrator *is* an animal, despite the fact that he's different from his brothers and father. If being an animal represents masculinity, then, this means that there's more than just one iteration of the male identity. Unfortunately for the narrator, though, he lives in captivity with his fellow animals, ultimately suggesting that his version of manhood is not yet widely accepted by society, which favors his family's stereotypical conception of what it means to be a man.

PAPS'S TRUCK

The large truck that Paps buys to replace the family's car after it breaks down is an embodiment of his failure to prioritize his loved ones over his own desires. Although he thrills his sons with the large vehicle, his decision to buy it enrages Ma, who quickly points out that it's an impractical vehicle for their family to own, since it doesn't even have enough seats to fit all of them. The only way it can transport the entire family is if the boys sit in the bed, which is unsafe. This is a perfect representation of Paps's lack of concern for his sons' overall wellbeing. Instead of focusing on what would be best for them, he allows himself to get carried away with the idea of owning what Ma refers to as a "big-dick truck," which makes him feel tough and masculine. This, it seems, is all he cares about, though he agrees to return the truck the following day after Ma screams at him for being

selfish. And yet, he never actually returns it, a fact that symbolizes not only his unreliability as a husband and father, but his manipulative tendencies. Accordingly, the truck itself comes to stand for his unwillingness to think about other people, along with his controlling and deceptive ways of getting what he wants.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner edition of *We The Animals* published in 2011.

1. We Wanted More Quotes

And when our Paps came home, we got spankings. Our little round butt cheeks were tore up: red, raw, leather-whipped. We knew there was something on the other side of pain, on the other side of the sting. Prickly heat radiated upward from our thighs and backsides, fire consumed our brains, but we knew that there was something more, someplace our Paps was taking us with all this. We knew, because he was meticulous, because he was precise, because he took his time. He was awakening us; he was leading us somewhere beyond burning and ripping, and you couldn't get there in a hurry.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ma, Paps, Joel, Manny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes what it's like for him and his brothers to endure their father's beatings. Because this paragraph appears in the novella's first chapter, Torres effectively foregrounds Paps' violence, marking what will be an important thread throughout the book and framing him as a man who is not only aggressive and hurtful, but *habitually* violent. After all, he spanks and whips the narrator and his brothers so often that the boys come to expect it and even begin to read into the deeper meaning of their abuse. Rather than acknowledging that Paps's disciplinary practices are unusually and needlessly harsh, the brothers try to find meaning in their father's actions, believing that there must be something important "on the other side of pain," as if their father is trying to teach them something valuable about life itself. This, of course, is simply a way of coping with Paps's violence—by allowing themselves to think that Paps is trying to "lead" them somewhere, the narrator and his brothers reframe their father's violence as helpful and kind instead of abusive and cruel. In turn, readers see that people are capable of rationalizing even the worst behavior when they want to believe that their loved ones truly care about them.

But there were times, quiet moments, when our mother was sleeping, when she hadn't slept in two days, and any noise, any stair creak, any shut door, any stifled laugh, any voice at all, might wake her, those still, crystal mornings, when we wanted to protect her, this confused goose of a woman, this stumbler, this gusher, with her backaches and headaches and her tired, tired ways, [...] those quiet mornings when we'd fix ourselves oatmeal and sprawl onto our stomachs with crayons and paper, with glass marbles that we were careful not to rattle, when our mother was sleeping [...].

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps, Ma, Joel, Manny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of how the narrator and his brothers conceive of their mother's absent, withdrawn ways. Although she isn't always locked in her room, Ma often goes through periods during which she sleeps for long stretches of time. The narrator has not yet clarified why, exactly, she does this, but readers already know that her husband is prone to violence, so it's easy enough to intuit that her poor mental health might be linked to her relationship with him. Either way, though, what's overwhelmingly clear is that the boys are largely on their own, forced to take care of themselves in ways that are foreign to most children. During their mother's periods of emotional turbulence, they scavenge for their own meals and stick to themselves, turning to one another in the absence of a dependable caretaker. In this way, they become each other's keepers, banding together emotionally as they try to pass the time until Ma emerges from her depressive episodes. Moreover, they come to see themselves as Ma's protectors, too, doing whatever they can to avoid disturbing her. In turn, there emerges a stark reversal, one in which Ma's children care for her instead of her caring for them, ultimately meaning that they have nobody but themselves on whom they can consistently rely.

2. Never-Never Time Quotes

❝ We had learned not to correct her or try to pull her out of the confusion; it only made things worse. Once, before we'd known better, Joel refused to go to the neighbors and ask for a stick of butter. It was nearly midnight and she was baking a cake for Manny.

"Ma, you're crazy," Joel said. "Everyone's sleeping, and it's not even his birthday."

She studied the clock for a good while, shook her head quickly back and forth, and then focused on Joel; she bored deep in his eyes as if she was looking past his eyeballs, into the lower part of his brain. Her mascara was all smudged and her hair was stiff and thick, curling black around her face and matted down in the back. She looked like a raccoon caught digging in the trash: surprised, dangerous.

"I hate my life," she said.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps, Joel, Manny, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, the narrator outlines the strained dynamic that often arises when his mother finally comes out of isolation and tries to reenter the life she's been neglecting. This, it seems, happens on a regular basis, considering that the narrator and his brothers have developed techniques to help them deal with her fragile state of mind in the aftermath of her depressive episodes. One of these techniques requires refraining from correcting her when she's confused, instead simply going along with whatever she says. They have adopted this tactic because of an uncomfortable situation that took place one time when Joel pointed out that, contrary to what she thought, it wasn't Manny's birthday and—on top of this—it was the middle of the night, not the middle of the day. When she heard this, the narrator explains, she was so flustered and disoriented that she looked "dangerous," as if she were a wild animal that had been cornered. This description says something about her fragile state of mind, framing her as capable of inflicting harm on her children. However, the kind of harm she does to the narrator and his brothers is different than the violence to which Paps subjects them. Indeed, she hurts her sons not by beating them, but with her words. For instance, when Joel tried to correct her about the time and date, she replied by saying, "I hate my life"—a harrowing phrase for a child to hear his mother say. Accordingly, the boys are now extremely careful not to disturb her, lest she say something upsetting. In this regard, then, readers see that the boys face more than violence; they also face emotional cruelty at the hands of their mother.

3. Heritage Quotes

❝ "Mutts," he said. "You ain't white and you ain't Puerto Rican. Watch how a purebred dances, watch how we dance in the ghetto." Every word was shouted over the music, so it was hard to tell if he was mad or just making fun.

He danced, and we tried to see what separated him from us. He pursed his lips and kept one hand on his stomach. His elbow was bent, his back was straight, but somehow there was looseness and freedom and confidence in every move.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Joel, Manny, Paps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the narrator and his brothers enter the kitchen to find Paps listening to loud music, drinking beer, cooking, and dancing. Seeing them, he tells them to dance in various styles, first ordering them to move as if they're white and then—when he finds this unsatisfactory—telling them to dance like Puerto Ricans. According to him, they fail at this, too, so he calls them "mutts," pointing out that they're neither fully white nor fully Puerto Rican. This idea underscores the boys' struggle to come to terms with their racial and cultural identities. Growing up in upstate New York, they're surrounded by white people, and the only person of color they know is their father. However, because they're half white, they have trouble wholeheartedly identifying with Paps, who has darker skin and grew up in New York City amongst other Puerto Ricans. For this reason, they study him closely when he dances, trying to figure out how, exactly, to move through the world in a way that would resonate with his Puerto Rican cultural identity. Unable to fully align themselves with Paps, Ma, or the people in their surrounding community, the three brothers relate most significantly to each other, since they're the only people they know who look like them and have undergone the same experiences. As a result, their struggle to secure a sense of belonging in the world—a struggle that Paps highlights in this scene—ultimately brings them closer to one another.

4. Seven Quotes

"Loving big boys is different from loving little boys—you've got to meet tough with tough. It makes me tired sometimes, that's all, and you, I don't want you to leave me. I'm not ready."

Then Ma leaned in and whispered more in my ear, told me more, about why she needed me six. She whispered it all to me, her need so big, no softness anywhere, only Paps and boys turning into Paps.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps, Joel, Manny, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

On the narrator's seventh birthday, Ma tells him he won't be close to her now that he's no longer six. When he asks why, she explains that Manny and Joel both grew away from her after turning seven. Adding to this, she says that her relationship with his older brothers has changed because they're older, meaning that she has to "meet tough with tough." This idea is worth noting because it underlines Ma's conflation of masculinity, coming of age, and toughness. According to her, all boys grow up to be hard and insensitive because this, it seems to her, is what it means to become a man. Surrounded by Manny, Joel, and Paps, she has "no softness" in her life—except, that is, for the narrator's presence, since he's still a sensitive young boy, which is why she asks him to stay six for the rest of his life. Hearing this, the narrator not only learns that his mother has a narrow and stereotypical understanding of what it means to be a man, but also that she sees him as capable of defying this rigid conception of masculinity. This is important, since he actually *does* grow up to become a man who doesn't adhere to society's inflexible vision of manhood. Tragically, though, Ma isn't truly capable of accepting other interpretations of what it means to be a man, despite what she says in this scene.

I grabbed hold of both of her cheeks and pulled her toward me for a kiss.

The pain traveled sharp and fast to her eyes, pain opened up her pupils into big black disks. She ripped her face from mine and shoved me away from her, to the floor. She cussed me and Jesus, and the tears dropped, and I was seven.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps, Joel, Manny, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

When Ma asks the narrator to remain six years old for the rest of his life, he agrees, wanting to give her the "softness" that she claims her life so sorely lacks. Surrounded by macho men like Paps, Manny, and Joel, she wants the narrator to be different, wants him to resist the pull of age because she thinks that this is the only way for him to avoid becoming hard and tough. In reality, though, it isn't age that turns men into society's stereotypical image of masculinity, but rather the *way* they grow up. If Ma truly wanted to help the narrator become his own person (a sensitive boy who doesn't feel the need to turn into a strong and callous man), she should simply allow him to cultivate an identity that isn't wrapped up in narrowminded and superficial ideas about manhood. Unfortunately, though, she doesn't do this, and this moment—in which the narrator lovingly reaches for her face and accidentally squeezes the bruises on her cheeks—is a perfect illustration of the fact that she mistakenly associates the negative aspects of macho masculinity with age. When the narrator accidentally hurts Ma, she throws him to the floor and yells at him, demonstrating the very same kind of harshness that she wants him to avoid by remaining six years old. This sharp turn from tenderness to violence thereby represents not only that it's impossible for her to keep her son from growing up, but that she's ill-equipped to teach the narrator how to be the very thing she wants him to be: sensitive, loving, and kind.

5. The Lake Quotes

Of course, it was impossible for me to answer her, to tell the truth, to say I was scared. The only one who ever got to say that in our family was Ma, and most of the time she wasn't even scared, just too lazy to go down into the crawlspace herself, or else she said it to make Paps smile, to get him to tickle and tease her or pull her close, to let him know she was only really scared of being without him. But me, I would have rather let go and slipped quietly down to the lake's black bottom than to admit fear to either one of them.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator and his family visit a nearby lake, Paps drags Ma and the narrator into the deepest waters, even though neither of them knows how to swim. Ma explains that she can't swim because she never got the chance to learn until she was an adult. However, she points out that the narrator has grown up around lakes, so she asks him to tell her his excuse for not knowing how to swim. The answer, he knows, is that he's afraid, but he feels incapable of expressing the way he feels. This is because his family is one in which men cannot talk about being afraid. Instead, the narrator is expected to act like his macho father or his wild, rambunctious brothers. Only Ma, it seems, is allowed to say that she's afraid of something, and even when she does, the narrator senses that she's not being serious. In this way, he learns that sensitivity and vulnerability must be hidden and treated as weaknesses—a destructive thing for a young boy to think, as illustrated by the fact that he would rather drown than admit to his parents that he's afraid.

❝ But the incident itself played and played in my mind, and at night, in bed, I could not sleep for remembering. How Paps had slipped away from us, how he looked on as we flailed and struggled, how I needed to escape Ma's clutch and grip, how I let myself slide down and down, and when I opened my eyes what I discovered there: black-green murkiness, an underwater world, terror. I sank down for a long time, disoriented and writhing, and then suddenly I was swimming—kicking my legs and spreading my arms just like Paps had shown me long before [...].

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

After Paps drags Ma and the narrator into the middle of the lake, he lets go of them, forcing them to flail for their lives in the deep water. Frantically, Ma grabs hold of the narrator and tries to stay afloat by clawing at him and pushing him beneath the surface. Although this is a very common thing that non-swimmers do while drowning, it is also a perfect representation of the inverted relationship that Ma has with her sons; instead of doing whatever she can to support them, she turns to them to support *her*. In order to save himself, then, the narrator has to somehow wriggle free from her, a fact that foreshadows that he will later end up severing his relationship with his family so that he can be true to himself. In this moment, though, he dives deep and then suddenly realizes that he's swimming. This is an interesting turn of events, as Paps's cruel behavior ultimately ends up helping the narrator establish a newfound sense of independence. In a way, then, this confirms the narrator's idea that there is meaning behind his father's abuse, though this obviously doesn't excuse his violent and manipulative ways. Instead, this scene simply illustrates that the narrator will be better off if he doesn't depend on his parents to support him, since they will only fail him.

8. Other Locusts Quotes

❝ I yelled for them to stop, that's all I did, yelled that one word over and over, *stop*, *stop*, *stop*. I thought of Ma, whispering that same *stop*, *stop*, *stop* to our father. Manny sucked down the snot from his nose into his throat and spat a lugie in Joel's face, and the mucus slid off, like egg yolk.

"Animals," said Old Man, *"animals."*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ma, Old Man, Joel, Manny

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator watches his two brothers pummel each other. Standing on Old Man's porch, he begs them to stop, but Manny and Joel are too involved in their aggressive conflict to pay him any mind. They're fighting because Joel told Old Man that their mother is dead, and when Old Man went inside, Manny ordered him not to tell lies about Ma. Not wanting to be told what to do, Joel stood up for himself, which ultimately led to this fight. In this moment, then, readers see that the boys' strained relationship with their mother—who is currently in the middle of a major depressive episode—infuses their own dynamic with tension, leading to violence and scorn. What's more, the narrator finds himself repeating the same words that Ma says to Paps. This shows just how accustomed the boys are to witnessing (or hearing) violence, which they then perpetuate by fighting with each other. In turn, it becomes clear that this kind of aggression is cyclical,

something that children learn to embody in their lives outside the home.

10. You Better Come Quotes

❝ […] when I looked at her face she looked like she was in pain, but she didn't look frightened, like it was a kind of pain she wanted.

[…] The faucet poked into the base of her spine, and it must have hurt her, all of it must have hurt her, because Paps was much bigger and heftier, and he was rough with her, just like he was rough with us. We saw that it must hurt her, too, to love him.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Joel, Manny, Paps, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

When Paps returns after mysteriously staying away for a long stretch of time, he and Ma are deeply intimate with one another. They're so intimate, in fact, that they don't even care if their sons see them engaging in sexual activity, which is what happens in this scene when they start having sex while the narrator and his brothers are several feet away. The entire family is in the bathroom, and though Ma and Paps know the boys are hiding behind the shower curtain and that they're supposed to go "find" them, they start having sex instead. As they do so, the narrator peers out and looks at his mother's face, misinterpreting her expression as one of pain and discomfort. In reality, Ma's face is contorted with pleasure, but the narrator isn't completely wrong in the way he identifies her expression. In this moment, her face reflects not only the pain she feels as the faucet digs into her backside, but the extreme difficulty of loving somebody as abusive and unpredictable as Paps. This is what the narrator hints at when he says that "it must hurt her […] to love him," clearly grasping just how painful it must be to feel strongly for someone who can be so violent and unkind.

❝ Then we were all three kicking and slapping at once, and they didn't say a word, they didn't even move; the only noise was the noise of skin and impact and breath, and then our protests, *why don't you come find us, why don't you do what you're supposed to do, come and find us, why don't ya, because you're bad, bad, bad, bad, bad, why don't you do right, why can't you do right, we hate you, come and find us, we hate you, everyone hates you, you better come and find us, next time, next time you better come.*

We hit and we kept on hitting; we were allowed to be what we were, frightened and vengeful—little animals, clawing at what we needed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Joel, Manny, Paps, Ma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

While Ma and Paps have sex, Ma notices the narrator peering out at them from behind the shower curtain, reminding her that all of her sons are still in the room. She then convinces Paps to stop and asks him to go fetch her shoes so she can get ready for work, but when he leaves the bathroom, she gets behind the shower curtain with the boys and prepares to jump out at Paps. When they do this, Ma tackles Paps, who goes down laughing. This is a moment of joy and love, but the boys' laugher soon gives way to something more serious, as they start kicking and hitting both of their parents. Ma and Paps simply let this happen, perhaps understanding that the boys are angry that they don't pay enough attention to them on a regular basis. In this moment, the boys criticize Ma and Paps for not coming to "find" them when they were hiding behind the shower curtain. All they wanted, it seems, is for their parents to play a silly game with them. Instead, Ma and Paps forgot about them and started having sex. This is symbolic of their overall lack of concern for the boys, since they're often too wrapped up in their own lives to properly care for the narrator and his brothers. For this reason, the boys yell that they "hate" them, wanting desperately to know why their parents can never "do right" by them. Simply put, their parents have failed them once again, and—in keeping with how they've been raised—they express their disappointment through animalistic aggression, which they know is the only kind of emotional expression to which their parents respond.

11. Night Watch Quotes

"He crying?" Joel whispered.

"What, with his fist?"

It didn't seem much like crying, seemed like something else, meaner than crying; steadier, too, but not one of us had ever actually seen him cry, so we couldn't know for sure—and Paps, he didn't say a word about it, just the thump, thump, thump, for miles. When we thought he would stop, he didn't; when we thought he would speak or scream or cuss, he was silent. His breathing calmed some, but the water and snot kept coming, and the wheeze, and the gasp.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Joel, Manny, Paps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This scene takes place after one of Paps's coworkers finds out that he's been taking his sons to work with him on the nightshift. The two men have an argument while the boys wait in the car, and it seems overwhelmingly likely that Paps will lose his job. Consequently, he's raw and emotional on the ride home. Instead of simply crying, though, he starts pounding on the dashboard with his fist. The narrator and his brothers are used to seeing him use physical force, but they're *not* used to seeing anything more when it comes to emotional expression. Now, though, they get the sense that he's crying, though he's not doing so in a traditional way by weeping or sniffling out tears. Instead, he's repeatedly banging the dashboard, as if crying "with his fist"—something that makes complete sense for a man who only knows how to express his emotions through physicality and aggression. Sure enough, though, he *is* crying, as made clear when the narrator notes that "the water and snot kept coming," indicating that there actually *are* tears coming from his father's eyes. Once again, then, readers see that the narrator's family is one in which even vulnerability expresses itself with hostile, vaguely violent overtones, rendering aggression inseparable from sadness, disappointment, or any other feeling.

13. Ducks Quotes

Ma flipped the ignition, and the engine jumped to life. We drove back the way we came, and eventually we pulled into the driveway, home again. We had been terrified she might actually take us away from him this time but also thrilled with the wild possibility of change. Now, at the sight of our house, when it was safe to feel let down, we did. I could feel the bitterness in my brothers' silence; I wondered if Ma felt it too.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps, Joel, Manny, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ma drives the narrator and his brothers home after taking them to a park for the day with the intention of leaving Paps forever. Throughout the day, Ma naps in the truck while the boys try to entertain themselves in the park, unsure what, exactly, the future holds for them. When she wakes up, though, she asks them to tell her what she should do, and they're—understandably—unable to answer her question, not wanting to go against their father but also not wanting to force her to return to a life of misery. Responding to their silence, then, she turns on the car and drives them back home, and it isn't until this moment that the boys allow themselves to fully consider what it would have been like to leave their father. Now that they can truly reflect on how close they were to starting a completely new life, they realize how "thrilled" they were by "the wild possibility of change"—a sentiment that suggests that they are, indeed, eager to have a new life, one in which they aren't in constant fear of violence and aggression. And yet, their sudden disappointment is something they can only feel because they *aren't* leaving their father; if they *did* leave Paps, they would feel guilty and sad. In this way, Torres invites readers to empathize with just how difficult it is for the narrator and his brothers to live with such a fraught, tense family dynamic.

17. Niagara Quotes

"I stood in that doorway, watching you dance, and you know what I was thinking?" He paused, but I didn't answer or turn to look at him; instead I closed my eyes.

"I was thinking how pretty you were," he said. "Now, isn't that an odd thing for a father to think about his son? But that's what it was. I was standing there, watching you dance and twirl and move like that, and I was thinking to myself. *Goddamn, I got me a pretty one.*"

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Paps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Speaking to the narrator, Paps tries to express what it was like for him to see his son dancing prettily in an empty museum exhibit. The narrator was dancing this way because Paps left him for multiple hours, so he entertained himself by standing in the light of a projector in a room showing footage of people going over Niagara Falls in barrels. One thing that's important to keep in mind about this moment is that Paps suddenly brings this up after multiple hours of driving in silence. This means he's been mulling it over on his own for quite some time, a fact that accentuates his confusion. As a man who has committed himself to a very stereotypical conception of masculinity, he doesn't know what to make of his sense that the narrator is "pretty," especially since this isn't the sort of descriptor that generally goes along with his notion of manhood. Nevertheless, he can't help but think about how "pretty" the narrator was while dancing, and though he can't reconcile this fact with his broader worldview, he still allows himself to express this sentiment aloud—perhaps because he wants to compliment the narrator, or perhaps because he wants to give him a chance to defend his masculinity (which the narrator does not do).

18. The Night I Am Made Quotes

See me there with them, in the snow—both inside and outside their understanding. See how I made them uneasy. They smelled my difference—my sharp, sad, pansy scent. They believed I would know a world larger than their own. They hated me for my good grades, for my white ways. All at once they were disgusted, and jealous, and deeply protective, and deeply proud.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ma, Paps, Joel, Manny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator and his brothers are several years older than they are in the rest of the book. By now, it has become clear to everyone in his family that the narrator is uniquely his own person, despite how close he is to his brothers. This is partially because he's academically gifted, unlike Manny and Joel, who are struggling in school. However, there is also something else that sets him apart from his brothers—namely, the fact that he doesn't perfectly align with their family's narrow conception of what it means to be a man. For this reason, he senses that Manny and Joel can "smell" his "pansy scent," since he isn't as tough or macho as them. This unnerves them because, like their father, they don't know what to make of a man who doesn't conform to society's stereotypes about masculinity. And yet, it's important to note that they're still "protective" and "proud" of the narrator, despite their reservations about the ways in which he's growing apart from them. This protectiveness will soon bring itself to bear on the narrator's life, when Manny and Joel jump up to restrain Paps after the narrator threatens his mother for reading his journal and revealing the fact that he's gay.

Then Joel was behind me, locking my arms in a full nelson. I tried to shrug him off, but it was no use. They were both drunk; Manny held that damn branch right in front of my face. I imagined the welt of it slamming across the side of my head. And I wanted it.

"Either you're fucked up, or you're getting fucked up. Which one will it be?"

Look at us three, look at how they held me there—they didn't want to let me go.

"Go ahead, Manny, hit me with that stick. See if it makes you feel better." My voice started strong but ended soft, a whisper, a plea. "Just fucking beat me with it."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Joel, Manny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the narrator goes out of his way to provoke his brothers. They've all been drinking, and the narrator takes offense to Manny laughing loudly at the runt of a litter of kittens. Because he sees himself as the "runt" of their family, the narrator lashes out at Manny, insulting him and, when Joel laughs, the narrator turns on him, too. In response, Joel puts him in a wrestling hold while Manny threatens to hit him in the face with a stick. As this happens, the narrator

senses that his brothers don't want to let him go, as if this tense moment is actually a display of affection, an embrace that proves their closeness. Manny and Joel have sensed that the narrator is becoming somebody to whom they won't be able to relate, and they don't want to release him out of their otherwise tightknit triumvirate. Accordingly, the narrator actively wants Manny to hit him, thinking that this will solidify their relationship, since in their family violence is often an expression of love. Once again, then, readers see the extent to which violence and aggression have usurped affection and vulnerability in the narrator's life.

❝ If the lot was full enough, I could emerge from the hedge and walk between two parked buses to the men's room without anyone's seeing. There was no one to explain any of this to me; I figured out the routine on my own, in small, paranoid steps. For weeks I'd been sneaking to this bus station, lurking, indecisive. I hid in the stalls, peeked through the cracks. At the sink, I washed and washed my hands, unable to return the frank stares in the mirror. I didn't know how to show these men I was ready.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ma, Paps, Joel, Manny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator tries to provoke his brothers into hurting him, he makes his way to the town's bus station. This is something he's been doing recently, knowing that the station's public restrooms are a place where men meet to have sex. This passage makes it clear that he put this information together on his own, just as he figured out that he could walk from the woods to the public bathroom without being seen. In fact, everything he's doing he has had to learn for himself. "There was no one to explain any of this to me," he notes, outlining the important point that he lacks anyone to help him navigate not only his sexual identity, but his coming of age process. Because his parents and brothers don't know what to make of a man who doesn't conform to society's stereotypical ideas about masculinity, he cannot turn to them for help. In the absence of guidance, then, he tries to come to terms with his sexuality by going to the only place where there are other gay men: the bus station's bathrooms. Unfortunately, though, this isn't a particularly safe way for a young person to explore his sexuality, since the people who frequent the bus station bathrooms are not only strangers, but adults, too. In turn, the narrator's lack of support at home leads him into risky situations on his own.

❝ "You want me to make you," the driver said. "I'll make you. I'll make you."

And I was made.

I trudged back in the predawn. The winter sky was clouded over, all pink gloom. I wanted to look at myself as he had; I wanted to see my black curls peeking out from under my ski cap. What did he make of my thin chest? What did he make of my too-wide smile? He had blasted the heat, but the cold clung and hovered at the back of the bus. The cold gathered in the tips of those fingers, so everywhere he touched me was a dull stab of surprise. I wanted to stand before a mirror and look and look at myself. I opened my mouth and stretched my voice over the buzz of passing cars.

"He made me!" I screamed. "I'm made!"

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Bus Driver

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

During the narrator's first sexual experience, the bus driver tells him that he will "make" him. That the narrator takes pride in the idea of having been "made" is noteworthy because it suggests he previously felt unfinished, as if having sex—and, more specifically, having sex with a man—was what he needed in order to fully become himself. This makes sense, considering that until this point he has kept himself from acting on his sexual desires, which ultimately make up part of his identity—a part he has been hiding from his loved ones for a long time. What's perhaps most interesting about this passage, though, is when he wonders what the driver "made" of his "thin chest" and "too-wide smile." In one sense, these thoughts suggest that this sexual experience has enabled the narrator to see himself through new eyes, as if he can now examine himself objectively as an individual in the world. What's more, though, his thoughts about what the driver "made" of his features also relate to the more general idea that the driver "made" him, as if the driver took the disparate parts of his identity and assembled them into something greater. Indeed, it is this metaphorical coming together that renders

the narrator's first sexual experience so important, effectively affirming his identity in a way that it has never been affirmed by his unsupportive family.

Paps lunged, and my brothers, for the first time in their lives, restrained him. But that restraint shifted before my eyes into an embrace; somehow, at the same time that they were keeping him back, they were supporting him, holding Paps upright, preventing him from sliding to the floor himself, and in that moment I realized that not just Ma, but each and every one of them had read the fantasies and delusions, the truth I had written in my little private book.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ma, Joel, Manny, Paps

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This is an explanation of the chaotic scene in which the narrator comes home to discover that his mother has found and read his journal, which contains vivid details about his sexual fantasies involving other men. Realizing what she has done, he drops to his knees and tells her he's going to kill her, at which point Paps jumps out of his seat and flings himself toward the narrator. However, Manny and Joel catch him and hold him back, using their strength to protect their brother. This is the first time they've ever "restrained" him—a significant fact, since it demonstrates once again that Manny and Joel are the closest thing the narrator has to caretakers. They are, it seems, the only people who will support him, even if they don't know what to make of the fact that he's gay. Even more interestingly, though, their efforts to restrain Paps turn into something else, becoming something of a tender "embrace" even as aggression and violence continue to course throughout the entire interaction. Once more, then, animosity and love come hand in hand in *We The Animals*, which is—above all—a portrait of a fraught family dynamic.

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.

1. WE WANTED MORE

The narrator and his two older brothers yearn for more of everything—more food, more chaos, more noise. This is partly because they are used to doing without. For instance, they know what it's like to be cold at night, what it's like to do without heat. Sometimes the narrator's oldest brother, Manny, climbs into bed with him and the second oldest, Joel, just so they can be warm together. In other moments, though, the brothers fight each other, yearning for destruction until Paps comes home, at which point they prepare themselves for spankings. As he hits them, they sense that there's a purpose to this kind of pain, thinking that Paps is trying to guide them with each hit.

We The Animals *is a very poetic, episodic novella, meaning that the plot isn't always immediately clear. However, several things become apparent right away: that the narrator's family lives in poverty, that he's close to his brothers, and that they band together to support one another. Furthermore, the mention of Paps's violent ways shows that the three brothers are used to enduring abuse, giving them yet another reason to band together and support each other, though they also apparently perpetuate this kind of violence by roughhousing with one another during their free time, thereby proving the cyclical nature of aggression.*

Beatings from Paps don't deter the narrator and his brothers from living wildly. However, there are periods during which they try to be as quiet and calm as possible. They act like this when Ma shuts herself in her room for multiple days without emerging. During these periods, the boys want desperately to protect her, hoping their silence and obedience will soothe her. The narrator describes her as a "confused goose of a woman," somebody who is constantly tired, who loves her sons fiercely and cries often. When she stays in bed, the boys make themselves oatmeal in the mornings and eat it quietly, and in these moments, they find themselves wanting *less*, not more—less noise, less chaos, less trouble.

The fact that Ma shuts herself off from her children underlines the extent to which the boys are left to care for themselves. Indeed, they must turn to each other for support, since they can't always depend upon the people who are supposed to be their caretakers. Moreover, they come to see themselves as their mother's protectors, trying to do whatever they can to make her life easier. This is why they suppress their wild ways when their mother locks herself away, clearly believing that giving her peace is one of the only things they can do to support her in trying times.

2. NEVER-NEVER TIME

One morning, the narrator and his brothers put on their raincoats and squish tomatoes in the kitchen with a mallet. They do this in imitation of a TV show they saw, taking delight in the way the tomatoes splatter over each other. As they do this, Ma comes out of her bedroom and enters the kitchen in her bathrobe. Squinting, she asks what time it is. They tell her it's 8:15 in the morning, and she says "fuck" several times while rubbing her eyes and picking up the teapot, which she slams back down on the stove. Yelling, she suddenly asks why the boys aren't in school. It's Sunday, but none of them say this because Ma works night shifts at a nearby brewery and often gets confused about the days and time.

Although the narrator and his brothers try to restrain themselves when their mother shuts herself in her bedroom, it's clear in this scene that they aren't always able to keep themselves from behaving rambunctiously. After all, they are mere children, and the overall lack of supervision in their household makes it all too easy for them to play however they please. All the same, they are still careful around their mother, not wanting to upset her by telling her it's the weekend and revealing just how out of touch she is with the outside world. In turn, readers see that the boys shoulder a burden that is uncommon to most children—namely, the burden of preserving their mother's fragile emotional state.

When she's truly confused, Ma will sometimes wake up in the middle of the day and tell the boys to go to bed. Alternatively, the boys will wake up in the middle of the night and find her pulling dinner out of the oven as if it's six or seven in the evening. Once, she instructed Joel to go to the neighbor's house to borrow butter because she was making a cake for Manny's birthday. In response, he told her it was midnight and that everyone would be sleeping. Plus, he added, it wasn't even Manny's birthday. Staring off into space for a while, she turned her eyes on him and said, "I hate my life." From that point on, the narrator and his brothers stopped correcting Ma when she got confused.

As readers learn more about Ma's overall instability, it becomes clear just how significantly her behavior impacts the children. Not only do they lack a consistent caretaker, but they have learned that it's in their best interest to simply let her move through life even when she's out of sorts. This is because correcting her runs the risk of eliciting dark truths from her, drawing out troubling statements like "I hate my life" that will only upset the boys and force them to consider the idea that their love and concern aren't good enough to make her happy.

When none of the brothers tell her why they're not in school, Ma notices tomato juice dripping down their faces. Astonished for a moment, she remarks that they look like they did when they came out of her as babies. They find this comment disgusting, but she's too awestruck to care what they think. Instead, she tells them to cover her in tomato juice, too. "Make me born," she says. Obeying, they give her a raincoat and tell her not to open her eyes. Because they're out of tomatoes, they use a ketchup bottle, which they smash with the mallet. Her face covered in ketchup, she lies on the floor while her sons crowd around her, yelling, "It's a mom!" and "Congratulations!" Banging pots and pans in celebration, they triumphantly march around her.

This scene is poignant because it suggests that the narrator and his brothers are capable of enjoying moments of happiness with their mother even when Ma is depressed. Her willingness to participate in their strange game shows a certain playfulness, framing her as an adult who isn't too serious to horse around with her sons. However, her desire to look like a newborn baby also hints at her overall unhappiness, since it is symbolic of her wish to start life over again, wanting to go back to the beginning to escape her current reality. In this way, Torres combines a beautiful kind of innocent fun with deep, fraught emotions—a dynamic that recurs many times throughout the novella.

3. HERITAGE

One day, the narrator and his brothers come home from school to find Paps in the kitchen. He's listening to music as he cooks, and his eyes are shining excitedly. The boys watch him dance, and then he draws them into the room to join him. Following his lead, they prance around the kitchen. Turning up the music, Paps takes a beer from the refrigerator. The narrator and his brothers watch him do this and then notice the many empty cans on the counter. Manny rolls his eyes, but none of them stop dancing, though now the narrator and Joel are following Manny, not their father.

This is the first scene in which Paps actually appears. At this point, the only thing readers know about him is that he often spanks the boys when he comes home. Now, though, Torres presents a somewhat sympathetic portrait of the narrator's father, who—like Ma—is apparently capable of being playful with his children. At the same time, though, it's obvious that he's a heavy drinker, and the fact that he stops dancing to drink beer indicates that he prioritizes drinking (and generally whatever he wants) over spending time with his children. With this dynamic at play, Manny steps in as the leader of the dance, symbolizing that the brothers support one another in the absence of uncompromised parental attention.

Paps tells the boys to dance like they're rich. Sticking up their noses, they try to follow this directive, but he quickly says they're clearly not rich. He then instructs them to dance like they're poor. They try, but he soon declares that they're not poor, either. Moving on, he tells them to dance like they're white, and when they fail to do this, he tells them they're not white. Continuing, he tells them to dance like Puerto Ricans, and they try to imitate the way he himself dances, but he stops them, taking a sip of his beer and calling them "mutts." He then adds that they're neither white nor Puerto Rican, ordering them to watch how he—a "purebred"—dances. Taking the floor, he demonstrates the way he learned to move in Spanish Harlem and Brooklyn, where he grew up. This, he says, is the boys' heritage.

When Paps calls his sons "mutts," he calls attention to their lack of connection to Puerto Rican culture—something they're connected to only through Paps himself. However, he also points out that they're not fully white, nor are they rich, nor poor. According to this viewpoint, then, their racial and socioeconomic identities exist beyond singular, clear-cut designations. This is an important notion to keep in mind as the novella progresses, since the narrator becomes increasingly concerned about who he is and how he fits in with the people in his life.

4. SEVEN

Paps brings Ma home one day and carries her inside. Laying her down in bed, he gently touches her hair and whispers to her. When the narrator and his brothers ask what happened, he tells them that the dentist started punching her after sedating her. This, he says, is how dentists loosen teeth for extraction. For the next three days, Ma stays in bed and takes pain medication, and Paps forbids the boys from entering the bedroom. Finally, though, they decide they can't wait anymore and creep inside, where they find her lying with bruises on her face. This is the same morning as the narrator's seventh birthday, and when Ma wakes up, she looks at her boys and calls them beautiful. This embarrasses the narrator, who turns away as Manny reminds Ma that it's the narrator's birthday.

Given that Paps uses physical force to punish the narrator and his brothers, it seems sinister and concerning that he brings Ma home with injuries on her face. Even more discomfiting is the fact that he tells the boys that dentists loosen teeth by punching their patients in the face—an obvious lie that makes it seem even more likely that he's the one responsible for her injuries. Afraid for their mother, the boys keep their distance for as long as they can, but their eventual decision to visit her against their father's wishes indicates just how protective they are and the extent to which they care about her wellbeing. Indeed, they care so much that they ultimately find themselves acting like caretakers to their own mother, thereby inverting the standard dynamic between parents and children.

Manny tells Ma that the narrator is seven now, and she says, "He'll leave me, now he's seven." When the boys ask what she means, she says both Manny and Joel grew apart from her when they turned seven, since this is what older boys do. The narrator says he won't do this, but Ma ignores him, saying that Manny and Joel suddenly wanted to fight and break things when they turned seven. This confounds Manny and Joel, though the narrator notes that they look somehow proud, too. The narrator, for his part, says he doesn't want to break things or get into fights, so Ma suggests that he remain six for the rest of his life. She then gets up and brings a hand mirror to her face as the boys leave the room. With tears in her eyes, she asks, "What did he do to me?"

In this scene, Ma links the male coming of age process to aggression and wildness. Because Paps himself signifies this kind of masculine energy, it makes sense that Manny and Joel feel oddly proud about what their mother has said, clearly reveling in the idea that they're rowdy and tough. The narrator, on the other hand, wants to remain close to his mother, ultimately hoping to preserve a sensitivity that everyone in his life thinks boys can only possess when they're young. In this moment, then, readers see that the narrator is growing up in a social environment in which there are very specific ideas about what it means to be a man—ideas that don't necessarily align with what the narrator wants for himself.

The narrator stays in Ma's bedroom and tells her the dentist punched her to loosen her teeth. Hearing this, she throws the mirror at the wall and yells, asking if he thinks it's funny that a man beat her. Frightened, the narrator hides behind a curtain. After a few moments, his mother calls him back to the bed, where she sits on the edge and sings him a song. She then asks him to promise to stay six for the rest of his life. With each new year, she says, he can simply say that he's six plus one, or six plus two, and so on. By doing this, she explains, he will make it clear that he's always his mother's baby. This way, she adds, he'll never become "slick and tough." She needs him to remain soft, she adds, unlike his brothers, who are turning into Paps.

When Ma gets mad at the narrator for repeating what his father told him, it becomes rather obvious that Paps was the one who injured her. With this in mind, it makes sense that Ma doesn't want the narrator—her youngest son—to turn into the same kind of "tough" man as his father, who gives himself over to aggression and violence. Interestingly enough, she doesn't tell the narrator to simply become a kind, nonviolent man, but tells him not to grow up. This is because she can't even imagine a grown man who isn't "slick and tough," thereby suggesting that she thinks it's impossible for men to be sensitive—a biproduct of society's narrowminded conception of what it means to be a man.

Looking at his mother's swollen face, the narrator is overcome by his love for her. He wants to do whatever he can to make her feel better, and in a moment of tenderness, he reaches out, takes her face in his hands, and kisses her. In pain, Ma rapidly turns away and pushes the narrator to the floor. As he falls, he hears her swearing. By the time he hits the floor, he knows he has turned seven.

Because Ma can't even conceive that a grown man could be sensitive and loving, she makes an absurd request: that the narrator remain six for the rest of his life, thereby preserving his innocence and kindness. This, however, is impossible, since there's no way to keep a person from growing up and leaving childhood behind. Indeed, that the narrator's attempt to express his love ultimately backfires and causes Ma to lash out at him signifies just how impossible her request really is.

5. THE LAKE

One evening, the family visits a lake. The narrator and Ma don't know how to swim, so Paps paddles them into deeper waters. He keeps swimming and swimming, taking them to the center of the lake. This frightens Ma, who tells him not to go too far, but Paps ignores her. The narrator wonders where his father learned to swim, noting that Paps seems to know everything about survival. He is, the narrator thinks, nearly "indestructible." Ma, for her part, doesn't know how to swim because she grew up in Brooklyn and never had a chance to learn. The narrator, on the other hand, has lived in upstate New York for his entire life, surrounded by lakes. When Ma asks why he can't swim, he can't bring himself to give her the answer, which is that he's simply too afraid to try.

This family trip to the lake quickly devolves into a meditation on just how much the narrator can depend upon his parents. As Paps drags him and his mother to the deepest waters, readers are forced to admit that he's solely responsible for their wellbeing—a frightening prospect, considering that Paps isn't always much of a caretaker. What's more, the narrator's inability to admit he's scared illustrates that he's tragically hesitant to share his true feelings with his family, worried they won't accept him because he isn't tough in the way that his father and brothers are.

Once in the middle of the lake, Paps announces that the narrator and Ma are going to finally learn how to swim. Saying this, he lets go of them, and Ma instantly panics. She grabs the narrator, clawing at him and trying to use him to stay afloat. In the car on the ride home, she makes Manny sit next to Paps in the front because she's too angry to be near her husband. When Paps asks her how else the narrator is going to learn to swim, she reaches across the narrator and opens the door. The pavement rushing by, she asks Paps if she should teach the narrator how to fly. Nervously, Paps pulls over, at which point the boys get out of the car to pee by the side of the road while their parents argue.

Again, it's quite obvious that the narrator cannot depend on his parents to protect him in the way most children can look to their guardians for support. Instead, he must constantly remember that his parents are volatile, unpredictable people who might very well put him in danger. Consequently, he must cultivate a form of independence that will enable him to survive when his true caretakers—his brothers—aren't there to help him.

Outside the car, Manny and Joel ask the narrator what, exactly, happened in the lake, and he tells them that Ma climbed onto him and almost drowned him. This infuriates Manny, who says, "What kind of…" but doesn't finish his sentence. The boys then hear Ma yelling at Paps to let her go. When they're all back in the car, Paps drives in silence with his hand placed on the back of Ma's neck. After a while, he turns around and asks the narrator what he thought of his first flying lesson, and the entire family bursts into laughter.

When the narrator and his family laugh at Paps's joke, they prove that they've become inured to animosity, anger, and aggression. Indeed, Paps left both Ma and the narrator to drown, Ma endangered the narrator by opening the car door, and Paps grabbed hold of Ma in a violent manner during their argument—and yet, the family finds itself capable of laughing in unison before they even reach home again. In turn, it becomes obvious that they're quite used to this tumultuous dynamic. In fact, their ability to laugh in this moment is more than a sign that they're accustomed to troubling circumstances; it's also a way of coping *with these circumstances.*

Despite his laughter, though, the narrator thinks in bed that night about what happened at the lake. He remembers diving deep to escape Ma, frantically wriggling in the water until he realized he was swimming on the surface just like Paps had tried to teach him when he was younger. Ma was clutching Paps once again, and they both watched as the narrator came up from the depths of the water and began to swim. He remembers seeing how happy and relieved they were—Ma started crying, and Paps shouted out, saying, "He's alive!"

As this scene demonstrates, some of the troubling things that take place in We The Animals *do not have completely negative results. It's easy to say that the trick Paps pulls in the lake is cruel and even abusive, but it is this very act that pushes the narrator out of his comfort zone in a way that allows him to finally start swimming on his own. Therefore, it's arguable that Paps's decision to let go of Ma and the narrator is a necessary step toward helping his son learn how to be independent. At the same time, though, the fact remains that this method of teaching the narrator to swim is quite harsh and ultimately rather dangerous, thereby aligning with Paps's abusive tendencies.*

6. US PROPER

Sometimes, the three brothers decide to dress up as a woman. Because he's the lightest, the narrator is the head, while his two brothers huddle beneath him in a trench coat. Inevitably, they fall to the ground, so they usually pretend to be the Three Musketeers instead, using forks as swords and having duals. No matter what game they play, though, they always feel unified as a group of three—so unified, in fact, that they speak as a single unit, saying things like, "Us hungry." During one of Paps's beatings, the narrator turns to Joel and says, "Us scared," to which Joel replies, "Us fucked."

Needless to say, all children play dress-up, but it's worth noting that the narrator serves as the head when he and his brothers pretend to be a tall woman. This is significant because of the gender dynamics that emerge slowly throughout the novella, since the narrator has more and more trouble identifying with his brothers' and father's macho brand of masculinity. For this reason, it is symbolic that he is the one who serves as the most important part of this tall, fake woman. On another note, readers will notice once again that the three brothers are extremely close—so close that they regard themselves as a single entity. This makes sense, considering that they all must face the same threat of abuse. Because of this, they band together so closely that they become inseparable.

The boys used to pretend to be "Three Billy Goats Gruff," the narrator explains, but this game changes when Ma teaches them about sex. Ma, for her part, never learned about sex, which is why she asked Paps if she could get pregnant after the first time they had sex, when Ma was only 14. Paps was 16, and he led her to believe that she couldn't get pregnant. Sure enough, though, Manny started growing inside of her, so Paps agreed to marry her. After they got married, they quickly had Joel and the narrator. Upon learning this story, the three brothers no longer pretend to be Three Billy Goats Gruff. Rather, they play a game in which trolls trick the goats into having sex, creating Manny, Joel, and the narrator—three half-**animal** offspring.

Once more, the readers learn about Paps's manipulative ways. This time, he proves his untrustworthiness by lying to Ma when she's only 14, taking advantage of her lack of reproductive knowledge and experience. Years later, the boys mirror this manipulative behavior by inventing a game in which trolls trick goats into having sex. This suggests that abusive, unkind behavior runs the risk of perpetuating itself, as children like Manny, Joel, and the narrator incorporate their father's actions into their make-believe world. And though the game they play is obviously harmless, the fact that they latch onto Paps's behavior and reinvent it in their lives serves as an uncomfortable indication that they might someday fully embody his unsavory behavior.

7. LINA

For a stretch of days, Paps disappears and Ma stops going to work. She also stops eating and cooking, leaving the boys to fend for themselves. As she sleeps on the couch, the narrator and his brothers move quietly around her, preparing meager meals of saltines, peanut butter, and other random provisions they find in the cupboards. Meanwhile, Lina—Ma's supervisor—calls multiple times, wanting to know where she is. Finally, she decides to come over, arriving with a bag of groceries. As the boys tear into the bag, Manny tells Lina that their mother is sleeping, but she ignores him and calls out for Ma, who comes running toward her and starts weeping in her arms. Comforting her, Lina kisses Ma all over her face, finally giving her a soft, slow kiss on the lips. As the boys watch, nobody knows what to say.

Once again, the narrator and his brothers cannot depend on their parents to support or care for them. This is largely due to the tumultuous nature of Ma and Paps's relationship, which destabilizes the entire household. It also the result of Paps's unpredictable ways, which render him utterly undependable. The boys, however, are used to caring for themselves by this point, though it's difficult to know what they would do if they ran out of food. Thankfully, this doesn't happen because of Lina, who apparently cares about Ma enough to lend her support. In fact, the context of Lina and Ma's relationship is rather inscrutable, since Lina is her boss but seems to feel strongly for her on an emotional level—so strongly that she kisses her on the lips. And though this kiss is most likely not sexually charged, it's important because it is the first same-sex affection the narrator witnesses, though he doesn't know what to make of it.

8. OTHER LOCUSTS

One day, the narrator and his brothers sneak into their neighbor's garden. They refer to him as Old Man, and they brazenly stomp on his plants, eating whatever they find. When they look up, they see that Old Man is watching from his porch. He calls them locusts, and when Manny asks what this means, he quotes, "What the locust swarm left, the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left, the young locusts have eaten; what the locusts have left other locusts have eaten." Going on, he accuses them of invading his land, but he agrees to draw a picture of a locust for them, and he even invites them onto the porch. As the evening fades, they sit there on the porch, and Old Man teaches them how to stop mosquito bites from itching.

When Old Man quotes a Bible passage about locusts devouring plants, he frames the narrator and his brothers as insatiable and destructive. Because they don't have anyone properly caring for them at home, they barge into the outside world and take what they need from other people, paying as little attention to matters of ownership as starving insects would pay. By pointing out this similarity, Old Man emphasizes the boys' desperation, even if they themselves think they're only invading his garden for fun. In reality, he recognizes that they've come to him because they have nowhere else to go, which is perhaps why he simply watches as they ruin his garden.

At one point, Manny tells Old Man that they ran away from home, and Joel says that their mother is dead. When Old Man goes inside the house to make the boys a salad, they find a wiffleball bat and start playing with it. Manny then tells Joel not to joke about Ma dying, and though the narrator notes that their mother is still distraught because Paps hasn't come home, he thinks about the fact that she's still very much alive. Joel, for his part, refuses to let Manny tell him what to do, so they start fighting while the narrator begs them to stop. As he does this, he thinks about how his mother often does the same thing to Paps, saying, "*Stop, stop, stop.*" When Old Man emerges from the house and sees Manny and Joel, he calls them **animals** and tells them to leave.

As Joel and Manny start fighting, the narrator finds himself in a familiar position, one in which it's his job to get them to stop. Unfortunately, this is a role he knows all too well, since he has seen his mother beg his father to calm down when he's overtaken by violent fits. In the same way that he finds himself imitating his mother, then, his brothers mirror Paps's aggressive behavior, ultimately acting so destructively that Old Man sends them away without feeding them. In turn, readers see the adverse effect of violence and aggression on the boys' lives, since they effectively cheat themselves out of a free (and rather necessary) meal.

9. TALK TO ME

At dinner one night, the phone rings. Ma doesn't get up to answer it, but she says it must be Paps. The boys sit at the table and listen to it ring, waiting for her to answer, but she refuses. When it starts to ring a second time, Manny says he'll answer, but Ma smashes his dinner bowl on the floor before he can get up. After dinner, Paps comes home, and Manny locks himself in his bedroom while Joel and the narrator sneak into the crawlspace beneath the stairs and pretend to talk on the phone, enacting a conversation between their parents, saying that they miss each other.

Caught in the middle of their parents' turbulent relationship, the narrator and his brothers have two choices: they can either get involved, or try to steer clear of anything that might take place between Ma and Paps. But when Manny decides to answer the phone (clearly wanting his father to return), Ma reacts violently, showing the boys that she won't actually let them get involved. Accordingly, Manny locks himself in his bedroom, and the narrator and Joel shut themselves into the crawlspace, taking refuge in one another and pretending to be their parents. This game, it seems, is the only safe way for them to engage with their current reality.

On the fake phone call, Joel and the narrator apologize to each other. Pretending to be Paps, Joel says he got a job, but then the conversation takes a turn and the boys ask each other—still in character—what they're going to do. The narrator doesn't quite know what they're talking about anymore, but he and Joel continue the exchange. He asks Joel if things will be like this forever, and Joel assures him they won't. When the narrator asks what they're supposed to do now, Joel says, "Well, we'll do whatever it takes, I guess." The narrator no longer knows which parent Joel is imitating, and when he asks Joel what, exactly, it takes, Joel says he doesn't know.

Pretending to be their parents is Joel and the narrator's way of coping with the anger and division running throughout their family. Because there is so much uncertainty in their lives, though, this mock conversation becomes serious in a way neither boy fully understands. As they parrot things they've clearly heard their parents say in the past, they try to piece together what their future will look like, but this is nearly impossible because riding the ebbs and flows of Ma and Paps's relationship is the only existence they've ever known.

10. YOU BETTER COME

One day after Paps returns, the family crowds into the bathroom as he gives the boys a bath. While he scrubs them, Ma stands at the mirror in a bra and applies makeup. The narrator looks at his parents and considers the fact that his skin is lighter than Paps's but darker than Ma's. Watching his shirtless father scrub him and his brothers, he notices Paps's muscles, thinking that he's like an **animal**—a "physical and instinctive" being. Ma, on the other hand, is small enough to ride atop Paps's shoulders. When Paps stands, the narrator sees his penis, which issues forth a thick and heavy stream of urine.

In the bathroom, the narrator makes important observations about his parents, observations that ultimately inform his own sense of self. He has, it seems, developed a new kind of awareness, one that causes him to compare himself to his parents. In doing so, he begins to grasp his own biracial identity, noting that his skin is lighter than Paps's but darker than Ma's. Furthermore, he is suddenly very attuned to his father's body, seeing him as a model of masculinity and strength. As the novella progresses, these kinds of observations become increasingly important, since the narrator himself becomes more and more conscious of the ways that he does and does not fit in with the men in his family.

Upon finishing at the toilet, Paps zips his pants and comes up behind Ma, putting his arms around her and sliding his hands beneath her bra. Seeing this, the three brothers feel "giddy" because they sense that this is what Ma herself feels. Their parents are happy together, and none of the boys want to disturb this happiness. Turning his attention back to his sons, Paps drains the tub and towels them off. When he dries the narrator, Paps remarks that he's grown—a statement that makes the narrator immensely proud. Ma and Paps then discuss how quickly all three boys are changing, and the brothers delight in this peaceful moment of familial closeness, loving the idea of growing up to be strong and healthy.

This scene makes two things apparent. First of all, it becomes clear that sexual affection is not something that Ma and Paps hide from their children (nor, for that matter, are anger, aggression, and hostility). Second of all, readers see that the narrator's family highly values the process of growing up, as evidenced by how happy the narrator is when Paps comments on how big he's getting. In a family in which there's a premium placed on stereotypical notions of masculinity (notions involving strength and vitality), this is perhaps the highest compliment the narrator could ever receive. More importantly, though, the narrator and his brothers are delighted simply to be spending time with their parents, relishing the rare opportunity to experience the kind of attention most parents give to their children on a regular basis.

The narrator and his brothers get back into the empty bathtub and hide behind the shower curtain. Their parents pretend not to notice, and Paps playfully asks Ma where they went. Excitedly, they wait for their parents to look for them, but instead Ma and Paps start kissing. Paps has Ma up against the counter, and she wraps her legs around him. Before long, they start moaning, and when the narrator peers out from behind the shower curtain, he sees them having sex. Ma leans backward, the faucet gouging into her skin in a way that seems painful. He watches as she clinches her face and Paps moves strongly into her, and he thinks that his mother must be in pain, though he also senses that she actively *wants* this pain. Thinking this way, he considers the fact that it must hurt Ma to love Paps.

Everything about Ma and Paps's relationship is on constant display for the narrator and his brothers. When they're fighting, they make hardly any effort to keep their roiling anger hidden. Similarly, when they feel strongly for one another, they have no problem letting their children witness their sexual intimacies. Of course, this must be a confusing thing for the narrator to process, since he isn't yet mature enough to witness this kind of sexuality (to say nothing of the fact that nobody wants to see their own parents having sex, regardless of their age). And though he perhaps misinterprets Ma's facial expression as one of pain, his assessment is surprisingly accurate; loving Paps is *very difficult, a rollercoaster of emotion, unpredictability, and intensity.*

Turning her head, Ma sees the narrator and his brothers looking out from behind the shower curtain, so she tells Paps to stop. Discouraged, he begrudgingly separates from her so she can get ready for work, since she's already late. She then asks him to fetch her shoes, but when he leaves the bathroom, she turns off the light and climbs into the empty tub with her sons, hiding from him. In this moment, the boys are overcome by their love for her. When Paps enters again, it seems as if he already knows what's about to happen, but he still pretends to be surprised when Ma and the boys jump out at him.

When Ma hides with the narrator and his brothers, she aligns herself with them, showing them that her intense relationship with Paps hasn't caused her to forget about them. This is an important message, since she often fails to prove to them that she's invested in their lives. Now, though, she playfully invites them to feel unified with her against Paps, playing a fun but rather meaningful joke on him, one that underscores the fact that he is the family's primary antagonist.

As Ma pins Paps on the floor, the brothers tickle him. Eventually, she tells them to stop, but they keep going, overtaken by raw energy. Trying to protect him, Ma drapes herself over Paps, at which point Manny slaps her hard across the back. He then tells his parents that they were supposed to find him and his brothers while they were hiding. Joel and the narrator wait to see if Paps will punish Manny for hitting their mother, but Paps does nothing, and they realize their parents are willing to give themselves up for punishment, so all three of them start slapping and kicking, yelling about how they were supposed to find them. As they wallop their parents, they ask why they never do what they're "supposed to," saying that they hate them. Yelling and hitting like this, the boys act like "little **animals**" "clawing at what [they] need[]."

In this scene, Torres presents readers with an overflowing of both love and anger. At first, the boys pile onto their parents in a joyful way, taking immense pleasure in simply passing the time as a cohesive family. Because this isn't something they often experience, though, they know all too well that this kind of connection is fleeting—in fact, by having sex instead of coming to find the boys, their parents have just reminded them that they can't always depend upon them to give them the attention they deserve. For this reason, their joy turns to anger and desperation, and they express these emotions in the only way they've learned to process complex feelings: through violence.

11. NIGHT WATCH

Paps gets a job as a nighttime security guard, and because Ma also works nights, the boys accompany him on his shifts. One night, the narrator wakes up and finds his father sitting at the front desk smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. The narrator can't sleep, so he crawls into Paps's lap. Looking up, he sees a lightbulb in a small metal enclosure, so he asks Paps why it's in a cage. Paps tells him it's so the lightbulb—like a bird—won't fly away. When the narrator asks him if he can unlock it, Paps doesn't answer, simply saying, "What do you think?" The next thing he knows, the narrator wakes up to the sound of Paps cussing to himself, urgently telling him, Manny, and Joel to gather their things because they're late; Paps fell asleep, and now the morning security guard has arrived.

Reading We The Animals, *it's easy to focus exclusively on Paps and Ma's many failures as parents, but it's important to remember that they're struggling against poverty. Of course, this doesn't excuse Paps's abusive ways or Ma's neglectful tendencies, but it* does *provide a contextual backdrop for some of their shortcomings as parents. In this scene, for instance, readers sense just how hard it must be for Paps to care for his children while also holding his job as a nighttime security guard. Though he often behaves poorly, in this moment he tries to support his children by looking after them and making money for the family at the same time—two things that are undoubtedly quite difficult to do at once.*

In the commotion of trying to round up their belongings, Manny starts laughing, but Paps slaps him across the face and tells him to take the narrator and Joel to the car, where they are to wait for him underneath their blankets. On their way out of the building, though, they encounter the new security guard, a white man who quickly notices that they're carrying sleeping bags and asks what they were doing. Interjecting, Paps asks him if they can step aside for a talk, but the guard continues to address the boys, asking if their father has been making them sleep on the floor. Again, Paps tells them to go to the car, so they retreat, watching from the backseat as the two men talk. The boys can tell that Paps is yelling at the man, and Manny predicts that he'll hit him.

Once again, Paps's violent side comes out, this time because he's worried he'll lose his job for bringing his sons with him to his shift. Needless to say, he has no excuse to hit Manny, though it's worth noting that everything else about this scene (at least up until this point) has humanized Paps by showing the fact that he's working hard to support and look after his sons while also earning money to keep the family afloat. Unfortunately, though, he lets his anger get the best of him, perhaps because this is the only way he knows how to express his exasperation. As someone who resorts to anger and violence in the face of conflict, he is emotionally ill-equipped to handle situations like this one levelheadedly, which is why Manny worries that he'll punch the other security guard.

In the car, Joel suggests to his brothers that the argument between Paps and the security guard isn't their fault, since Paps himself fell asleep. However, Manny points out that Paps will still probably blame them, at least partially, since something is always their fault. As he says this, Paps walks over to where the guard set down a Styrofoam coffee cup and swats it to the ground before furiously getting into the car, grabbing Manny's hair, and shouting for the keys. As they drive home, Manny works up the courage to ask if Paps is going to get fired, but Paps only laughs. When Manny asks what the guard said, Paps says, "What do you think?" and punches the ceiling. This, the narrator points out to his brothers, is exactly what Paps said the night before when he asked him if he could unlock the caged light.

Manny thinks Paps will blame him and his brothers because he's used to receiving his father's wrath, even when he doesn't deserve it. This illustrates just how quick Paps is to take his anger out on his innocent sons, yet another indication that he resorts to violence when he doesn't know how to process his emotions. In keeping with this, he punches the ceiling when Manny asks him if he's going to get fired, declining to actually answer the question because—presumably—he finds it difficult to talk about what might happen. Instead of dealing with his feelings, then, he resorts to physical aggression.

From the backseat of the car, Joel says he's certain his father could unlock the caged light. The other brothers agree, but Paps doesn't say anything, simply clearing his throat, though he soon starts beating the dashboard with his hand, pounding out a slow, plodding rhythm. Watching, Joel asks if he's crying, and the brothers wonder if it's possible to cry with one's fist, since what Paps is doing doesn't quite seem like crying. However, they've never seen him cry, so they don't know what it looks like. All the way home, Paps pounds out his beat, and the boys join him, slapping whatever is closest to them and adding words to the rhythm, chanting, "No More Work!" and "No More Floor!" and "No More Crying!"

Again, Paps expresses his emotions through physicality, though this time it isn't in the form of violence. Instead, he pounds on the dashboard in a cathartic manner that doesn't harm anyone else. In turn, the boys join him, sensing that his actions are imbued with deeper meaning, even if they don't understand what, exactly, is going through his head. As they excitedly beat out this rhythm with their father, they combine cathartic joy with desperation, uniting around the hardship that Paps faces, which they sense affects them, too.

The chanting continues even when Paps and the boys enter the house. The noise startles Ma, who rushes over to Paps on the couch and asks what's wrong, though he doesn't respond because he's sitting with his face in his hands. As the boys chant "No More Crying!" Ma insists that Paps must be overtired, but he finally looks up and tells her that they're never going to "escape." In their confusion, the boys become quieter, very softly pounding out the beat. Gesturing all around him, Paps says that nobody in their family is going to escape all of "this," and finally the boys go silent. Taking his hand and gripping it hard, Ma says in an alarmingly strong, calm voice, "Don't you dare."

The life Ma and Paps lead is not easy, as evidenced by the fact that Paps has to take his sons to work in order to look after them at night. Unfortunately, though, this causes him trouble at his job, putting him in a lose-lose situation; he must work in order to support his children, but this requires him to abandon them at night, leaving them without a caretaker. This dilemma is why he feels as if it's impossible to "escape" life's hardships, and even though the boys are acting rather joyfully in this moment, it's clear that he feels nothing but despair. Because they must depend upon each other, though, Ma doesn't let him speak this way, warning him against losing hope because this is simply not an option.

12. BIG-DICK TRUCK

When the family's car dies, Paps goes to the dealership and comes home with a large pickup **truck**. The boys spot him from afar as he wheels into the neighborhood, and it isn't long before other young boys and neighbors excitedly crowd around to watch his triumphant approach. Stepping out of the truck, Paps proudly tells his sons that this is the family's new ride, but the general excitement abates when Ma angrily asks how many seats the truck has. In response, Paps admits that it has a bench instead of seats. Soon enough, Ma berates him for buying an impractical car that is not only too expensive, but also incapable of properly transporting a family of their size. As the neighbors slink away, she yells that Paps bought this car simply because it's a "big-dick truck."

When Ma calls Paps's truck a "big-dick truck," she addresses his desire to align himself with a stereotypical version of manhood, one that indulges macho fantasies about strength, toughness, and even virility. This, it seems, is everything that Paps represents, since he himself is a large, aggressive man. Furthermore, it's worth keeping in mind that the narrator listens to his mother criticize the absurdity of this truck, berating Paps's desire to be seen as tough and ultimately framing his vision of masculinity as an impractical fantasy. Considering that the narrator himself is less stereotypically masculine than his brothers and father, this is an important moment, one that shows him that life doesn't always reward the values his father holds dear.

Paps slaps Ma on the side of the head, but she doesn't stop berating him, yelling, "Big-dick **Truck**! Big-dick truck!" Seeing how upset she is, he steps toward her and tries to take her in a hug, but she hits his chest over and over. Finally, he tells her that he'll return the truck, that he understands why she's upset. But tonight, he says, the family will enjoy it by driving it around so they can always remember the evening they owned a truck. After dinner, then, Ma gets dressed up in a red dress and large gold earrings, and the boys climb into the bed of the truck while Paps proudly drives it through the neighborhood. In the back, the brothers play with toy guns, pretending to shoot down the stars overhead.

Once again, animosity and turbulence lead to a form of joy, as the family piles into the truck and proudly drives it around the neighborhood. The boys know that the truck must be returned, but this knowledge perhaps enables them to fully enjoy the present, urging them to savor happiness while it lasts. In this regard, they allow their contentment to sit alongside their parents' aggression and hostility, accepting that sometimes it's impossible to separate joy from unhappiness or disappointment.

13. DUCKS

One evening, Paps comes home and starts lustfully reaching for Ma, who's already late for work. She tells him to stop, but he doesn't, instead pulling her toward the bedroom. At first, she calmly tells him that she needs to leave, but when he refuses to stop, she becomes more frantic, reaching for the walls as he brings her to the bedroom. Finally, she grabs hold of their bedroom's doorframe while he laughs and pulls her backward. In the hall, the brothers note the desperation in her face as she stares at them, wanting their help while Paps tugs at her body. When she sees that her sons won't intervene, her face falls and she gives them a sad smile, giving up as the bedroom door closes.

Throughout the novella, the narrator and his brothers often serve as caretakers or protectors to their mother, inverting the standard dynamic between parents and children. However, there are certain things from which they simply cannot protect her, chief among them Paps and his intense, aggressive ways. In fact, it's unfair for her to expect them to intervene in this moment, since they don't possess the adult maturity nor the physical strength to stop Paps from transgressing against Ma's will. To her credit, she eventually recognizes that it's unfair to place the burden of saving her on the boys, which is why her face falls and she tries to smile at them, as if to tell them that they shouldn't feel guilty.

The boys go to bed, and Ma finally leaves for work. When she comes home, she wakes them up and tells them to get into the **truck**, which Paps never returned. She then drives to a park, where she tells them to play while she sleeps in the truck. They notice plastic bags of their clothing loaded in the bed of the truck, but they distract themselves from this by wrestling and, when that gets old, walking to the nearby highway, where they sit on the edge of the guardrail with their feet dangling over the edge of a small bridge. Cars honk at them while passing, but they pay no attention until a woman pulls over and offers to take them somewhere. They refuse, but she persists, eventually prompting Manny to call her a "bitch," at which point they throw stones in her direction until she leaves.

Ma's decision to take the boys to the park signals her desire to rid herself and her sons of Paps's toxic influence. However, she hasn't fully followed through with this decision yet, instead stopping at this nearby park and taking a nap. As a result, the boys find themselves suspended between two lives, not knowing if they're actually running away from Paps or if they're simply going to turn around and go back. As always, the only kind of support they can depend on comes from each other, so they try to preoccupy themselves by wrestling and causing trouble on the highway, though it's unlikely that any of them actually manage to forget their current circumstances.

The boys return to the park, where they watch ducks swimming in a stream. Finding a canoe, they put it in the water, get in, and take a nap. When the wake up, Ma is looking at them, yelling that she thought they'd been kidnapped. When she gathers them back into the **truck**, she talks about the possibility of moving to Spain. The narrator is skeptical of this plan but says nothing, and eventually Ma stops dreaming about Europe. It's dark now, and Ma turns to her sons and asks them what she should do—should they go back home to Paps, or should they leave forever? She tells them she'll do anything they tell her to do, as long as they make the decision. However, none of the boys respond, so Ma turns the key and drives them home.

Once again, Ma looks to her sons for support, hoping they'll be able to make this meaningful decision for her. However, for them to decide to leave Paps would mean going against their father, whom—despite his flaws—they love. And yet, to tell Ma to return to her abusive husband would also make them feel guilty, since it would ensure her continued unhappiness. Consequently, the boys find it impossible to help Ma decide what to do, which is why they stay silent—a reminder that they're far too young to make such choices and that it's unfair to expect so much of them.

14. TRENCH

One summer morning, the narrator and his brothers wake up to find Paps digging a hole in the backyard. They joke that he's digging a grave, but then Manny suggests that it's a trench. For several weeks, the boys have been obsessed with pretending they're in the army, since Ma brought home old ill-fitting army fatigues for them. Still, Joel maintains that the hole is a grave, not a trench, though he doesn't know whose—perhaps, he says, it's Ma's grave, or the narrator's. When the boys finally approach their father, they find him lying in the ditch. "I'll never get out of here," he says, staring up at them. When they try to pull him up, he playfully pulls them into the hole, and dirt rains down on them all.

Paps's behavior in this scene recalls the defeatist attitude he displayed after getting into an argument with the white security guard. In both cases, he exhibits depressive qualities, this time implying that his life would be better if he remained inert in the ground. However, he mixes this melancholy sentiment with a sense of playfulness by pulling the boys into the ditch with him, once more combining sorrow and joy in a way that endears him to his sons even as he struggles to be happy.

Exiting the hole, Paps goes to get Ma from work, but several hours later Ma returns drunk and angry, wanting to know where Paps is. All the boys can tell her, though, is that he dug a trench and then left. When they voice the idea that perhaps the hole is a grave, Ma pauses and tells them all to go take naps. She then goes outside and lies in the hole. Just as she does so, it begins to rain, and the boys suggest that the hole is magic. When she finally comes inside, they help her towel off, and she asks (rhetorically) if Paps thinks she's simply going to "take this." Having decided not to let Paps come near Ma for the rest of the day (if he comes home), the boys go one by one to the hole, each of them lying inside it beneath the rain.

Everyone in the narrator's family is apparently compelled by the hole Paps dug in the backyard, finding it oddly alluring. This is perhaps because they live a difficult life and therefore welcome any opportunity to change their perspectives—something that lying in a hole might help them do. Ma, for her part, lies in the hole because Paps has once again disappointed her by disappearing and failing to pick her up from work. Feeling desperate and raw, then, she has a cathartic experience beneath the rain while lying in the ditch.

When it's the narrator's turn to visit the hole, he takes off his clothes and gets in. Instantly, he feels that the hole is a grave—*his* grave. Because he thinks it might be magic, though, he stays in it, feeling far away from everyone in the house. Gazing up, he feels movement, as if he's both sinking and floating at the same time. Feeling pleasantly disoriented, he makes a wish, though he never specifies what it is. All the same, he gets lost in the moment, and it isn't until he hears Joel, Manny, Ma, and Paps laughing above him that he snaps back to attention. His brothers laugh at him, calling him a baby, and Ma affectionately tells him he can come out now. Paps, for his part, reaches down and helps him up, informing him that the war has ended.

What's perhaps most interesting about We The Animals *is the ways in which it combines simple childhood wonder with deeper, more complex emotions. For all intents and purposes, this particular vignette about lying in a hole is just a quirky, beautiful story about a strange afternoon the narrator passes with his family. However, there is something touching and sad about the fact that the narrator lies in the hole for so long, clearly appreciating this solitude. His contemplative nature in this scene hints that he isn't fully content in his everyday life, and though the anecdote ends on a playful note, the fact that readers never learn what, exactly, he thinks about while lying in the hole suggests that he feels things he isn't comfortable sharing—an important notion, since the novella eventually centers on his inability to be truthful with his family about who he is and the life he wants to lead.*

15. TRASH KITES

Led by Manny, the boys walk several miles through the woods carrying backpacks and sleeping bags. In a clearing, they make kites out of trash bags and spend the remaining daylight hours flying them in the wind. When it's dark, the lights of Paps's **truck** suddenly appear, and Manny curses, wishing aloud that they'd chosen to set up camp in the woods, not in the clearing. Knowing that the idea must have been Manny's Pap's grabs him and starts beating him, punching him in the face and crotch. All the while, Manny screams at him, calling him a murderer.

Once more, Paps reveals his abusive side, this time tracking down his sons and beating Manny for deciding to camp in the woods without asking for permission first. Of course, it's understandable that Paps is angry, since he was most likely worried when he couldn't find his sons, but this is no excuse to use violence against Manny—especially such intense *violence, considering that he punches the young boy in the face. It goes without saying that this is a disproportionate response to the kind of behavior that all children exhibit from time to time. Because Paps constantly resorts to physical aggression, though, it's unfortunately unsurprising that he reacts this way.*

That night, Manny gets into the narrator's bed and whispers to him about how he dreamt of kites in the sky. What he outlines sounds like a confused, strange dream, but this doesn't surprise the narrator because Manny is always saying crazy things to him. Manny seeks the narrator out because he knows he'll listen, unlike Joel, who blocks Manny out whenever he speaks this way. As Manny whispers, the narrator senses that he's incredibly tense, thinking he might even cry out or scream. Instead, though, Manny tells him Paps apologized for hitting him with closed fists. Apparently, Paps said he was afraid something bad might happen to his sons, which is why he lost his temper.

The effect of Paps's violence emerges in this moment, as the narrator senses just how tightly wound Manny is after his encounter with his aggressive father. Interestingly enough, it also becomes clear that Paps is remorseful about how he reacted, subtly implying that he hit Manny out of love, since he claims that the only reason he responded so violently was because he was terrified that something bad might happen to his children. It's rather uncomfortable to consider that this might be true, since Pap legitimately does *process his emotions by resorting to violence and physical aggression. However, this doesn't excuse his behavior, especially considering just how thoroughly it affects Manny, who is now so tense and troubled that it seems like he might scream out at any moment.*

Manny also tells the narrator that in his dream, there were good kites and bad kites, but all of them got tangled up with one another. He says he used to believe that he and his brothers could escape, thinking—for example—that the kites in the field that day could lift them into the safety of heaven. Now, though, he knows the good and the bad are all mixed up in the world, as if God threw a handful of seeds into the mud. As the narrator begins to fall asleep, Manny continues talking, saying that they need to find a way to reverse gravity so they can fall toward heaven—an image that works its way into the narrator's hazy, half-asleep mind, creating a picture in which he and his brothers fall through the stars until reaching God's safety.

This is a touching moment in which Manny seeks refuge in his brother's bed, speaking softly to him about his strange dream. As the narrator listens, the strength of the brothers' bond is undeniable, and readers see that they truly do turn to one another in times of duress, depending on each other to furnish the emotional support that their parents are so unable to give.

16. WASN'T NO ONE TO STOP THIS

One evening, the narrator and his brothers play a three-person version of foursquare. Each time they smack the ball, they imitate their father, saying things like, "This is for raising your voice," and "And this is for embarrassing me in public." Whenever a car passes carrying other children, they stick their tongues and middle fingers out at them, feeling glorious with their anger beneath the beautiful fading sky. At one point, Manny starts talking about magic. Recently, he has been talking about God, and now he tells his brothers that there are two kinds of magic: white magic and black magic. Saying this, he leads them into the woods to try to find poisonous mushrooms, which are evidence of the black magic God put on earth.

The angry expressions the boys call out while playing are reflections of their father's aggression. Unable to stop Paps's violence, they incorporate his hostile mentality into their everyday lives, thereby normalizing it in a way that just might make it easier for them to cope with the trauma of living in constant fear of his animosity. By this point in the novella, it's clear that they are growing up and gaining some independence, as they strike out into the woods on their own and generally seek ways of entertaining themselves beyond the tense environment of their home.

It's dark out, but the brothers don't want to go home. They heard other parents calling their children in for dinner, but Ma and Paps haven't summoned them (nor, it seems, will they). Moving through the dark woods, Manny and Joel decide to hurl their hard rubber ball at a camper stationed behind their neighbors' house. They don't know this family all that well, except that they're white and that they have a boy several years older than them. Taking turns, Manny and Joel try to break the camper's window. After the first hit, a light goes on inside, and then Manny throws a rock, which shatters the glass. Instantly, the boys start running, turning only to see that the family's son—whom the narrator refers to as "the headbanger"—has come outside to investigate.

It seems that Ma and Paps have two distinct modes of parenting: either Paps violently polices the boys' behavior, or both he and Ma pay them no attention at all. Accordingly, the boys are able to enjoy quite a bit of freedom. In fact, they are completely at liberty to act out without consequences because of their parents' absent style of caring for them. It's no surprise, then, that they do things like throw rocks at the neighbors' camper, behaving badly simply because they can (and perhaps as a way of seeking out attention from others, including their parents).

The boys hide in the woods as the headbanger tracks them. When he gets close, Manny emerges and sits on a nearby log, and his brothers follow suit. The headbanger asks them how they're doing, knowing they broke his camper's window. Still, he seems friendly enough. The narrator notes that the headbanger has recently been trying to befriend them, though they don't know why. They think it might be due to the fact that they're the only other people out past dinnertime, though the narrator admits that his desire to befriend them could be more sinister. All the same, the boys don't identify with him, thinking of him as the kind of "white-trash" their parents have warned them to avoid. Plus, they don't need him, since they have each other. Indeed, even if the narrator's brothers often call the narrator a "faggot" and a "pest," they are all still very close.

This is the first time in the novella that the narrator specifically addresses the way his brothers taunt him for failing to conform to their ideas about what it means to be a man (or, at least, what it means to be male, since they're still just boys). He reveals that they call him derogatory names like "faggot," and though it's clear that they say this in jest, their jokes hint at a certain tension developing between the brothers, one based on Manny and Joel's discomfort with the idea that the narrator isn't tough and macho like them. And yet, this internal rift pales in comparison to gulf that the three of them sense between themselves and the headbanger, whose race and socioeconomic class set him apart from them. This makes it difficult for them to understand why, exactly, he would want to befriend them.

The headbanger tells the narrator and his brothers he wants to show them something, and though the narrator is deeply hesitant, he follows as his brothers agree to go with the headbanger back to his house, where he takes them to the basement. Upon entering, the brothers are unsettled by the dank room's smell, but the headbanger tells them to stop acting scared, so they pretend to be tough and uninterested. In one of the corners, they see, the headbanger has constructed a makeshift room using two discarded window shutters. Entering this small space, they find a TV and a VCR, into which the headbanger inserts a videotape. Onscreen, a white teenager lies reading on a bed, and then his father enters and admonishes him for failing to do the dishes.

The boys' interaction with the headbanger is very strange and sinister, but none of them want to be the one to express their fear or concern. Believing that they must be manly in the stereotypically traditional sense of the word, they think that admitting their fear would be embarrassing. In reality, though, their unwillingness to voice their hesitations leads them into a precarious situation, one in which they find themselves crowded in a stranger's basement watching a videotape that is likely pornographic in a very disturbing way, since one of the subjects onscreen is a minor (and the other character appears to be his father).

Watching the headbanger's strange video, the narrator remembers when—a few months before—a mother and her daughter accidentally entered the men's changing room at the public pool, where he, Paps, his brothers, and other men were in various states of undress. Startled, the mother impulsively put her hand over her daughter's eyes and said, "*My goodness*." Although the boys and men in the changing room normally didn't look at or acknowledge each other, they suddenly exchanged glances and burst into laughter. Now, the three brothers sit transfixed before the headbanger's TV, certain that there really are such things as black magic. It's soon quite clear that the tape is pornographic, and the narrator thinks about how there's nobody to stop them from seeing what they're about to see, nobody like that girl's mother to shield their eyes.

In an odd way, the experience of watching the headbanger's disturbing video is something of a bonding experience, since all three brothers are forced to endure this unsettling thing together. Unfortunately, though, none of them think to shield one another's eyes, nor do they volunteer to be the one to suggest that they leave. In this way, they fail to take care of each other in the way they normally support one another. This, in turn, proves that, though they're capable of looking out for each other in the absence of parental guidance, there are some things that are simply too adult for them to handle as a threesome of young brothers.

17. NIAGARA

Paps has to deliver a package to Niagara Falls, so he takes the narrator with him, pulling only him out of school because Manny and Joel are failing their classes. Leaning over the edge at the falls, the narrator stares at the rushing water while his father holds him. Standing like this, Paps points out that the narrator would die if he let go of him. Later that day, he brings the narrator to a small museum and gives him five dollars, telling him to wait here until he returns. Bored, the narrator wanders through the tiny exhibits. Multiple hours pass, but his father hasn't returned, so he sits in a room where a movie plays on repeat, showing footage of people going over the waterfall in barrels.

By this point in the novella, readers might notice that certain differences are emerging between the narrator and his brothers. Not only do Manny and Joel make fun of the narrator for not conforming to their idea of masculinity, but the narrator sets himself apart from them by performing well in school while they struggle to keep up their grades. Noticing this, Paps decides to reward the narrator's academic success by taking him to Niagara Falls. However, this reward is somewhat empty, since Paps effectively abandons the narrator instead of spending time with him, once again leaving him to his own devices.

Eventually, a museum clerk comes in and asks where the narrator's parents are, and when the narrator says that Paps will be back soon, the man looks concerned. Before exiting the room, he says he wants to talk to Paps at the ticket booth when he arrives. Alone again, the narrator starts dancing in the projector's shifting light, letting the image of the rushing water play over him as he gracefully moves his body. When he looks up, he sees Paps watching him from the doorway. They stop for dinner on the drive home, and Paps tries to make the narrator laugh. However, the narrator is angry at him for leaving him behind for so long, so he doesn't respond to his father's attempts to cheer him up.

On his own, the narrator entertains himself in a way that doesn't make sense to somebody like Paps, who presents himself as an ultra-masculine person in a very stereotypical sense. In keeping with this, it's unlikely that Paps is all that comfortable when he sees his son dancing gracefully—something that doesn't align with his vision of masculinity. Under normal circumstances, the narrator would never find himself alone like this, since his brothers are constantly by his side when his parents aren't around. Now, though, he has the freedom to fully explore his interests and the way he wants to be in the world, so he seizes this opportunity.

After many hours on the road, Paps and the narrator finally pull into the driveway late that night, at which point Paps starts speaking as if they're in the middle of the conversation. He says he was standing in the doorway of the museum and watching the narrator dance, and though he doesn't know what to make of this, he says he couldn't help but think about how pretty his son was in that moment. "*Goddamn*," he thought to himself, "*I got me a pretty one.*"

Paps's reaction to the narrator's dancing is noteworthy because it illustrates his overall confusion about how, exactly, a male can be a male without adhering to stereotypical ideas about manhood and masculinity. Even more interestingly, he is confused by his own response to the narrator's stereotypically feminine self-presentation. To that end, he doesn't immediately react negatively to watching the narrator dance like this, but instead finds himself admiring the young boy. And yet, he doesn't know what to think, ultimately underscoring his inability to broaden his understanding of what it means to be a man.

18. THE NIGHT I AM MADE

The boys are teenagers now and have spent their entire lives as a triumvirate of sorts. Standing one snowy night on a loading dock, they smoke cigarettes and talk about robbing stores. As an aside, the narrator notes that—in the years to come—one of the brothers will drive his own face into a mirror because of a woman, and another will "slice up his arms." They will also fail in class, get into car accidents, look at pornography, drop out of school, hang out with people who eventually seem vastly different than them, since they see themselves as "mutts," estranged from other Puerto Ricans just as much as they're estranged from white people. For now, though, they stand proudly on the loading dock, feeling tough and invincible.

In the novella's second-to-last chapter, Torres focuses closely on the topic of identity, as the three brothers work hard to define who they are and where they fit into the world. When they talk about robbing stores, they demonstrate their desire to seem tough and daring—a mentality that Torres implies leads to lives of destruction and calamity, ultimately suggesting that this kind of macho posturing can be toxic and dangerous to a person's overall wellbeing. Torres also draws attention to the fact that the boys feel out of place in their predominantly white community, having taken to heart Paps's notion that they are "mutts" who don't fit in anywhere.

Standing with his brothers in the snow, the narrator exists both "inside and outside their understanding." He makes them uncomfortable because they can sense that he's different. To that end, they think he will experience a life they themselves will never know, and they resent him for his academic success and for the general way he moves through the world. Feeling this way, they're jealous of him even as they're also proud, wanting to protect him at any cost.

The narrator and his brothers have a complicated relationship. This is because the brothers don't know how to process the fact that he isn't exactly like them. Whereas they have trouble in school, he excels and is intellectually curious. Furthermore, they champion a kind of masculinity that doesn't resonate with the narrator, and though he apparently tries to hide this by talking like Manny and Joel, it's clear to them that this is an act. As they grapple with this uncomfortable truth, they simultaneously resent and admire him. And though this is a fraught dynamic, the narrator's brothers are still protective of him, once more illustrating how accustomed they are to caring for one another because of their overall lack of parental guidance.

The boys drink liquor and walk around in the snow. Upon finding a litter of homeless cats, they buy a carton of milk and set it out for the kittens. Manny wonders aloud how long it will take for the kittens to turn on the runt of the litter—a statement that makes him and Joel laugh, though it offends the narrator, who knows that he's the runt of their family. Angrily, he swears at them and says he's tired of "creeping around." He then calls Manny a creep, criticizing him for talking about God so much but also talking about girls as if he has a sex life, which, the narrator suggests, he doesn't. When Joel laughs—astonished that the narrator is so brazenly insulting Manny—he turns on him, too, saying that he's "ignorant" and that both of them embarrass him.

The narrator, it seems, is keenly aware that he's different from his brothers, but instead of remaining quiet and simply tagging along with them, he picks a fight. At first, this might not make sense, since readers might assume that the narrator would want to fly under the radar in an attempt to blend in with Manny and Joel. However, it's worth considering that lashing out at his brothers is actually the best way to behave like them, since they are the kind of young men who are quick to start fights. Even though the narrator doesn't identify with the kind of masculinity his brothers champion, he tries to mirror it by turning it back around on them, as if this might distract them from noticing that he has a different way of moving through the world.

Recently, Ma and Paps have been talking to the narrator about his academic success, telling him that he'll be able to live an easier life than anyone else in his family—an idea he resents. Having challenged his brothers, he now faces them and waits for a beating. Manny picks up a branch and holds it close to his face while Joel holds his arms back. While Manny threatens him, he thinks about the branch hitting him in the head and yearns for the pain, so he pleads with Manny to hit him.

The narrator's brothers aren't the only ones who are uncomfortable about the fact that he's different from the rest of his family. Indeed, he himself is unsettled by this idea, resenting the notion that he might have a better life than his loved ones. After all, this makes him feel estranged from his brothers, who have always been so close to him. Not wanting to lose this closeness, then, he tries to provoke them into beating him, since all three of them have learned by watching Paps that violence and aggression can sometimes signify love. In other words, he wants to goad his brothers into proving that they care about him, and the only way he knows how to do this is by engaging with their violent ways.

After pretending to wind up, Manny drops the stick and becomes serious, saying that there really is something "fucked up" about the narrator, saying, "Let's talk about *that*." However, they don't talk about it because, as the narrator notes, they can't. Instead, they light new cigarettes, and Manny says that Ma told him several days ago that the narrator can accomplish anything in life. Joel chimes in to say that she told him the same thing. Going on, they say that Ma told them to protect him from other kids—and from himself. Hearing this, the narrator backs away from his brothers until he's turning a corner in full retreat while they yell after him, calling him "girlie" and asking where he's going. On his own now, he wonders if there is any other boy on earth like him.

That Manny and Joel don't end up beating the narrator deeply troubles him, since he wanted them to pummel him as a way of confirming their closeness. Instead, though, Manny says there's something "fucked up" about the narrator, but none of the brothers are capable of actually talking about what, exactly, this means. By this point, it seems quite likely that the narrator is a young homosexual man living in the closet, and the fact that Manny thinks there's something "fucked up" about him underscores why he doesn't want to come out about his sexuality: it's clear that the people he cares about most will not accept him as a gay man. Unable to fight and unable to speak openly, then, the narrator simply backs away from Manny and Joel, not knowing how else to respond to the things they're saying about him.

The narrator walks the three miles to the town's bus station, a place he's been visiting frequently. When the parking lot has enough buses, he can emerge from the woods and walk between two buses to the public bathroom without the risk of anyone seeing him. He has been doing this for weeks, though all he's done is stand in the bathroom, unsure of how to indicate to the men around him that he's "ready." The closest he's gotten to having contact with another man came when he was standing by the sinks and a stranger took his face in his hands, called him a "cute kid," and told him to leave. Now, though, there is only one bus in the parking lot, and as he passes the door opens. The driver asks if he's going to New York, but the narrator simply tells him he needs to pee.

Although the narrator hides his sexual identity from his brothers and parents, he is truthful with himself about the fact that he is attracted to men. Unfortunately, though, he has nobody in his life he feels he can talk to about this sort of thing, so he's forced to explore his sexuality completely on his own, something that leads him to practice rather unsafe behavior—the kind of behavior that makes him (a mere teenager) vulnerable to adult strangers. This, it seems, is one of the many drawbacks of creating environments (like the one Ma and Paps created in their household) that don't allow young people to express themselves openly and honestly.

The driver tells him he can't pee in the public restroom at this time of night, though he doesn't answer why. Instead, he says that he told everyone hoping to board the bus for New York to go home and come back in the morning because of the snow. He then tells the narrator that, if he has to pee so badly, he should board the bus and use its bathroom. He accepts this offer and hears the door shut behind him, and as he asks where the bathroom is, the driver stands before him. The narrator doesn't move, wanting what he hopes will happen next. Sure enough, the driver reaches into the narrator's pants, his fingers cold as he says, "You want me to make you, I'll make you." Later, on his way home, the narrator triumphantly yells, "He made me! I'm made!"

It's worth acknowledging that the narrator's first sexual encounter takes place with an adult. Needless to say, this is problematic, since the narrator is still a teenager. Whether he would have had a healthier first sexual experience if he hadn't needed to hide his sexual orientation is, of course, impossible to say, but it's quite likely that he wouldn't have found himself having sex for the first time in such an unsafe setting. Putting this matter aside, though, the narrator is happy simply to have had his first sexual experience. He even repeats the bus driver's phrase about being "made," implying that he has finally become the person he's supposed to be.

Back at home, the narrator enters to find his entire family sitting together, a heaviness hanging over them. When they look at him, he's shocked by the intensity of their eyes, and he senses that something has been lost forever—things will never again be easy between him and his family. With tears on her face, Ma says something, but the narrator doesn't hear her because he sees his journal sitting in her lap. Inside this journal, he knows, are long, detailed descriptions of his fantasies about the men at the bus station. These entries are intense and graphic, and the narrator feels at once that they're perverse. Just then, everything in him seems to drop to the floor, and he falls to his knees, looking at his mother and saying, "I'll kill you."

When the narrator's entire family read his journal, they invaded his privacy in a way that made it impossible for them to continue to ignore what they most likely already knew—namely, that he is a young gay man. In an accepting, communicative family, this wouldn't necessarily have to be such a harrowing event, but the narrator has been raised in a family with very narrow ideas about what it means to be a man, a family in which violence and aggression take precedent over love and kindness. Consequently, he undoubtedly braces for the worst and even preempts his family's harsh reaction by setting forth his own animosity by telling his mother he's going to kill her.

Enraged that the narrator would threaten his own mother, Paps jumps at him, but Manny and Joel manage (for the first time ever) to keep him back. The narrator observes as the struggle between his father and brothers turns into an "embrace," in which Manny and Joel support Paps even as they keep him from lunging forward. Seeing this, he understands once and for all that his entire family has read his journal and knows about his fantasies.

Once again, violence and tenderness come hand-in-hand in the narrator's family. This time, the narrator recognizes this blend of anger and emotional support when his brothers crowd around their father, keeping him at bay while simultaneously helping him stand. This, it seems, is the closest their family can get to talking about difficult matters.

In just two hours, the narrator will find himself en route to the hospital, where his parents will check him into a psych ward. In retrospect, he recognizes that he must have *wanted* his journal to be found—otherwise, he wouldn't have written down his fantasies. Before this realization and before the hospital, though, he looks at his family members in the living room, his brothers holding up Paps, his mother putting a hand on his chest to keep him back. This is the last time, the narrator notes, that all five of them are together, and he retrospectively believes that he could have stood up and let them embrace him. Instead of doing this, though, he acts like an **animal**, trying to tear their faces with his hands and, when this proves impossible, attacking his own face. Soon enough, they're trying to restrain him even as he challenges them.

The narrator's reaction in this scene recalls his earlier attempt to provoke Manny into hitting him with a stick. He recognizes that his family members do not support his identity, but he still wants to know that they care about him. And because violence in their family is often a way of showing love and affection, he tries to engage with them in an aggressive, physical capacity. Unfortunately, though, this only further exacerbates the preexisting tensions, and it is perhaps because he behaves so wildly that his family finds it necessary to put him in a psych ward (though it's also possible that they do this simply because they are homophobic and see his homosexuality as something that must be cured). Regardless, though, what's obvious is that his aggression in this moment does nothing but further estrange him from his loved ones.

When the narrator calms down, Paps takes him in his arms and brings him to the bathroom, where he lowers him into the bathtub and fills it with water. He then sets about taking off the narrator's clothes and bathing him. While he gently washes his son's body, Ma collects the narrator's belongings, packing them up and bringing them to the **truck**, where Manny and Joel sit warming up the cabin and testing the windshield wipers. Returning, she sits on the closed toilet seat as Paps clips the narrator's toenails. Sitting there, she wants to tell him that he can put as much hate on her as he wants, but she remains silent while Paps whistles a song—his way, the narrator believes, of saying goodbye. "Yes, ma'am," Paps says to Ma. "We're going to get him fixed up."

There's an extraordinary amount of tenderness in this scene, despite how emotionally devastating it is that the narrator's family is about to send him away to a psych ward, effectively persecuting him for being a gay man. When Paps washes him, it is perhaps the most sensitive thing he's done, delicately clipping his son's toenails in a doting, caring way. Also of note is the fact that Ma wants the narrator to put his hate on her, meaning that she understands his anger and resentment and wants to help him shoulder the burden of these troubling feelings. And yet, she doesn't actually say this, since their family is all but incapable of expressing and articulating genuine emotion to one another. Furthermore, Paps's loving attention eventually reveals itself to be motivated by something else, as is made clear when he says that he's going to get the narrator "fixed up," thereby making it seem like he's bathing him simply to wash off the young man's sinful ways. In turn, it seems likely that Paps hopes to fundamentally change the narrator—something that is, of course, impossible and futile, since what the narrator truly needs is somebody to support him, not change him.

19. ZOOKEEPING

"These days," the narrator says, he sleeps with **animals**—peacocks and lions slumbering next to him on leafy blankets. In his dreams, he stands upright and lives a less complicated life with "no hot muzzles, no fangs, no claws, no obscene plumage." For now, though, he sleeps in cages with other animals, all of whom treat him like a prince, adoring and supporting him while he dreams of living "upright."

The final chapter of We The Animals *provides little in the way of concrete information, since it's so poetic and resists literal interpretation. Still, it's worth remembering that the narrator previously mentioned that the night Ma showed everyone his journal was the last time the family was together. This suggests that he no longer has a relationship with his family. Now, it seems, he has a new family, a self-made family of other "animals"—or, to put it less figuratively, people who fully accept him for who he is. These people apparently dote on him and treat him well, unlike his family members. In the metaphor he outlines, he and his new loved ones are like animals at the zoo, and though he likes his new life, he dreams of leaving his cage, feeling trapped and unable to fully engage with the world. What he wants, he says, is to live "upright," intimating that people like his family (and society at large) have forced him to lead a life as an animal in captivity, and though this life is rewarding in certain ways, he wishes he could simply stand up and walk free without having to deal with the same terrors—the "fangs" and "claws" and overall violent aggression of toxic masculinity—that tormented him before he was out of the closet.*

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