

Winter's Bone



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DANIEL WOODRELL

The author of nine novels, Missouri native Daniel Woodrell is, to many, the literary ambassador to the Ozark mountains. Born in Springfield in 1953, Woodrell dropped out of high school at seventeen years old and enlisted in the Marines. He later attended the University of Kansas and received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop. He lives and writes in West Plains, Missouri, a small Ozark Mountain town near the Arkansas border, and his family's ancestral home. He is well-known in the literary community for his "country noir" novels, books heavily inspired by—according to the author himself—"Greek conceptions of storytelling and tragedy." Five of his nine novels have been chosen as *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year, and his novel *Tomato Red* won the PEN West Award for the Novel in 1999.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Winter's Bone is set in the early 2000s, and much of the driving action takes place within the underworld of the Ozarks, especially concerning the methamphetamine trade that has, over the course of the last fifteen years, overtaken this rural American enclave. Similar to the place moonshine runners held in the underworlds of Appalachia and the Ozarks in the past, cooks of methamphetamine—or crank, as the characters in *Winter's Bone* refer to it—are the modern-day outlaws hunted by both the authorities and rival cooks and dealers alike.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Daniel Woodrell's work has been described as "country noir," which can be characterized as an offshoot of the Southern Gothic literary tradition. From the mid-1920s on, writers like William Faulkner ([As I Lay Dying](#); [The Sound and the Fury](#)), Flannery O'Connor ([Wise Blood](#) and many short stories) and Carson McCullers ([The Member of the Wedding](#); [The Heart is a Lonely Hunter](#)) wrote novels and stories that explored the macabre, the grotesque, and the absurd against the backdrop of the American South. Recurrent themes of decay, despair, and uncertain or changeable morality define much of the work within the Southern Gothic tradition, as does careful attention to the world of the physical, and the nature that characterizes the American South. *Winter's Bone* follows in the footsteps of this tradition, as the physical atmosphere of the Ozark Mountains is just as important as the book's emotional atmosphere, and the two seem to each grow out of and around each other as the novel unfolds.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Winter's Bone*
- **When Written:** Early 2000s
- **Where Written:** West Plains, MO
- **When Published:** 2006
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary fiction
- **Genre:** Fiction; Country noir; Southern Gothic
- **Setting:** Ozark Mountains, Missouri
- **Climax:** Ree's relatives lead her to an icy pond where her father's body lies frozen in the water.
- **Antagonist:** Uncle Teardrop; Merab; nature; methamphetamine
- **Point of View:** Close third person perspective which tracks Ree Dolly.

EXTRA CREDIT

Launching Lawrence. In 2010, an independent film adaptation of *Winter's Bone*, written and directed by Debra Granik, was released to great critical acclaim. The film won the Grand Jury Prize for a dramatic film at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival, and subsequently received four 2011 Academy Award nominations. It also helped to launch the career of Jennifer Lawrence, who has since 2015 been the highest-paid actress in the world. *Winter's Bone* was filmed on location in rural Missouri on a modest two million dollar budget.

Close to home. Woodrell says he lived "for years" next door to a meth lab in his Ozark hometown, and kept a club at his front door for protection.



PLOT SUMMARY

Deep in the Ozark mountains of Missouri, Ree Dolly and her family live in an old house on the edge of a sprawling timberwood. Though they have fallen on hard times and food and comfort alike are scarce, Ree takes dutiful care of her two younger brothers, Harold and Sunny, and her mother, Connie, who is "medicated and lost to the present." One morning, amidst heavy snow, a deputy from the sheriff's department—Baskin—arrives at Ree's house to inform her that her father, Jessup—a "half-famous **crank** chef" is missing just a week ahead of his upcoming court date. Baskin tells Ree that her father has put the house and timber acres up for his bond, and that unless he turns up in time for his arraignment, Ree and her family will lose both their house and their property. Ree assures the deputy that she will find her father.

Ree decides to start her search by going to her uncle Teardrop, also a crank chef, “though he scare[s] her.” He and his wife Victoria live just a few miles away, and Ree visits them and expresses her dire need to “run [her father] to ground.” Teardrop tells Ree that it’s Jessup’s choice whether or not to show up, and advises her to stop her search. When Ree presses him further, he grabs her by the hair and shakes her, then retreats to his room. Victoria follows, and emerges with fifty dollars. She gives it to Ree, and warns her once again to stay close to home.

Ree visits her best friend, Gail Lockrum, who dropped out of high school and married a local boy named Floyd; together, Gail and Floyd have an infant son named Ned. Ree asks to use Gail’s husband’s truck in order to follow up on a lead—she needs to get to the Arkansas border to visit April, one of her father’s old girlfriends—but when Gail asks her husband, Floyd, for permission, he refuses.

The next day, Ree hitches her way to Hawkfall, a village where some of her distant relatives live. When she arrives, a young woman, Megan, emerges from one of the homes. Ree asks after Little Arthur, an acquaintance of her father’s. At Little Arthur’s, Ree asks after her father, and Arthur deflects, claiming that he hasn’t seen Jessup in nearly a year; Arthur flirts with Ree and offers her crank and weed. After she refuses, he tells her to leave. Megan tells Ree to go up the hill and talk to Thump Milton, who will surely know her father’s whereabouts, though Megan warns Ree that Thump Milton “scares” her, and that he may not even agree to talk. When Ree arrives at Thump Milton’s home, his wife Merab turns her away. Ree implores Merab to give her a chance, invoking their distant blood ties. Merab goes into the house, and, when she emerges again “after most of an hour,” tells Ree that Thump Milton refuses to see her. Ree, indignant, shouts loudly at Thump Milton from outside of the house. Merab sends her away with a warning not to return.

Ree returns home, where her cousin, Blond Milton, is waiting for her. Angered, he tells Ree that people throughout the Ozarks are talking about her, telling each other of her ill-advised hunt for Jessup. Blond Milton drives Ree to the ruined shell of an exploded meth lab, which he claims was Jessup’s last-known whereabouts. Ree notes that the meth lab is full of “chin-high” weeds, and thus a false lead.

At home, Ree teaches her brothers how to fire a shotgun, having realized that they may need to be able to defend themselves sooner than she’d imagined. While in the middle of a lesson, Gail shows up, her son in tow, revealing that she has obtained the keys to her in-laws’ truck. She offers to drive the two of them, plus the baby, down to the Arkansas border to visit April.

When the girls arrive at her home, April relays a story about Jessup that frightened her; though she doesn’t know his current whereabouts, she remembers having seeing him in a

bar just a few months ago. He was in the company of a group of unsavory characters, April says, and he refused to recognize her in order to “protect” her.

On the drive home, Ree thinks that she sees her father’s car on the road; she implores Gail to follow it, but they lose sight of it.

The next day, Gail shows up at Ree’s house; her husband, upset that she stayed out so late, took their baby to his parents’ house and kicked Gail out. Ree takes Gail in, happy to have her.

Ree teaches her brothers to hunt and skin squirrels. The three of them and Gail eat heartily, and Ree falls asleep peacefully on the couch. She wakes to find Teardrop standing over her. He tells her that the authorities found Jessup’s burnt car earlier that morning, but that he wasn’t in it. Teardrop gives Ree some more money; Jessup was due in court earlier, and didn’t show. He advises Ree to sell off the timber acres while she still can, and offers her crank once again. She refuses, and he leaves.

Gail’s husband arrives with their baby and asks Gail to come home. Gail chooses to stay at Ree’s, and her husband leaves the baby with her.

The next day, a bondsman, Mike Satterfield, arrives at Ree’s home. Ree assures the bondsman that if her father missed his court date, he must be dead. The bondsman tells Ree that she has about thirty days left before her home and land is repossessed, and that there is nothing more she can do to reclaim them unless she can prove to the authorities that Jessup is dead.

Despite Gail’s warning not to, Ree returns to Hawkfall, to Thump Milton’s house. She knocks on the front door, and Merab and two other women emerge and begin to beat Ree mercilessly.

When Ree regains consciousness, she is being held in a barn, with many members of the Thump clan, including Megan, around her. Thump Milton approaches Ree, and she begs him for help in proving that her father is dead. Her words are met with silence. The sound of a truck pulling up the drive can be heard; it is, the bystanders say, Teardrop’s truck. The Thumps agree to release Ree to Teardrop as long as he agrees to “stand for her.” He does, and she is released to him.

On the drive home, Teardrop tells Ree that she “owns” him—if she continues to “do wrong, it’s on [him.]” Teardrop reveals that Jessup “turned snitch” after being caught in another bust. Jessup leaked information to the deputy Baskin about the Dolly clan’s rivals. Teardrop claims that he suspects one or two men in Jessup’s murder, but that he can’t ever know who—and he implores Ree to never let him know who is responsible for Jessup’s death, as “that’d just mean I’ll be toes-up myself soon,” he tells her.

Back at home, Gail and the women of Rathlin Valley tend to Ree’s horrific wounds and soothe her with the help of painkillers. Over the course of the next several days, Ree begins

to recover, though she still frets endlessly about how to prove Jessup's death and regain her claim on her home and her land. She tells Gail that she plans to bring her mother to a hospital and "leave her on the steps," then "beg" Victoria and Teardrop to take her younger brother Harold in. Gail tells Ree that she needs to return home to her husband for the sake of her child's safety and happiness. Ree offers to sell the timber acres to Gail and Floyd; "if I've got to sell these woods," she tells her, "I'd want it to be you'n yours."

Eventually the Thump women visit Ree, and tell her that they are going to "fix [her] problem for [her.]" Ree is angry and distrustful, but the Thump women point out that Ree has no better option, and no choice but to trust them. They "need to put a stop to [the] upset talk" they've heard spreading through the Ozarks, they say, and they tell Ree that they will take her to her father's "bones."

The Thump women drive Ree, with a bag over her head, to a frozen pond, bring her out into it in a small boat, and tell her to crack the ice, reach down, and find her father's body. Merab tells Ree that she needs to saw off **Jessup's hands** so that the law will know he is dead. The Thump women help Ree to sever Jessup's hands, as Ree imagines that she is far away, "on a distant tranquil shore."

Deputy Baskin is called, and he comes for the hands the next morning. Ree tells him that "somebody flung 'em on the porch." After Baskin departs, Ree tells her younger brothers that their father is dead, and the three of them start to clean out his shed. Teardrop arrives, and he offers to "scare up" some money for Ree. She tells him she "won't touch crank," but he tells her that there are other things she can do to earn money, if she'll agree to do them. Satterfield, the bondsman, arrives, and Ree lets him in. He hands her a blue sack, "fat with crinkled bills," and tells her that it belongs to her. He tells her that a man with no name posted what remained of Jessup's bond in cash—the home and land was not enough. What's left of the bail now belongs to Ree. Satterfield leaves, and Teardrop tells Ree that he knows now who is responsible for Jessup's death. Ree embraces him, and he leaves. Harold and Sonny ask Ree if the money means she will "go away," and she assures them that she won't. They ask her what they'll buy with the money, and Ree answers them definitively: "Wheels."

Harold live. Ree's father's court date is approaching, and if he does not show himself, the land will be repossessed. Ree's journey to find her father becomes one not only of self-discovery, but of uncovering an entire network of violence, decadence, and secrecy throughout the Ozark underworld. Ree makes a name for herself in Rathlin Valley through her struggles with the neighboring Thump clan of Hawkfall, some of whose members may or may not be involved in her father's disappearance.

Sonny Dolly – Ree's younger brother, a tough and hostile boy. He is ten years old, but already has a sense of responsibility and initiative, and is often shown to be itching to prove his maturity. He offers to get into fights on Ree's behalf, and is eager to learn how to shoot and scrap. His true father is Blond Milton, one of Ree's cousins.

Jessup Dolly – Ree's father, a well-known **crystal meth** cook. Though he is not physically present in the novel, his absence drives the narrative. Before the start of the novel, in order to get himself out of jail after a recent incarceration—presumably for cooking methamphetamine—Jessup put up as his bond his house and land, a vast swath of ancient, valuable timber woods. It's eventually revealed that Jessup was murdered for betraying other meth cooks to the police, and the gruesome exhumation of his corpse by Ree and the Thump women is the emotional climax of the book.

Uncle Teardrop – Ree's uncle and Jessup's brother, nicknamed Teardrop for the teardrop prison tattoos on his face. A fearsome figure and **crystal meth** cook, Teardrop seems at first to be the novel's antagonist. His violent demeanor and physical disfigurement (the result of a meth lab explosion) intimidate Ree, but as the hunt for her father intensifies and she finds herself delving deeper and deeper into the increasingly dangerous underworld of the Ozarks, Teardrop becomes her ally and protector.

Gail Lockrum – Ree's best friend from high school, forced to drop out after becoming pregnant. Gail is Ree's ally and confidante, and helps her with both her hunt for her father and with the care of her younger brothers. Gail's constant struggles against her cheating husband, Floyd, bring her closer to Ree—she lives with her for a time, though Gail eventually returns to her husband's home when Ree's troubles with the neighboring Ozark clans escalate, and she fears for the safety of her son.

Merab – Thump Milton's wife and the leader of a violent attack against Ree; she eventually brings Ree to her father Jessup's body. Merab is tough but practical, and though her actions are brutal, the logic behind them is, to her, clear as day. Her devotion to her husband, to protecting the "old ways," and to the preservation of her own reputation are all staunch and unmovable. In many ways, the only match to her stubbornness and allegiance to her clan is Ree herself.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ree Dolly – The protagonist of the novel, sixteen-year-old Ree Dolly is the primary breadwinner for and caretaker of her family. Stubborn, resilient, and introspective, Ree is charged with the task of turning up her missing father Jessup, who some time ago put up as his bail bond the house and land where Ree, her mother Connie, and her younger brothers Sonny and

Blond Milton – A member of Ree’s extended family, he brings her to a long-ago-exploded **meth** lab in an attempt to deceive her into believing her father died there. Later, he offers to take in one of Ree’s younger brothers in order to lessen the burden upon her, an offer she vehemently refuses due to his involvement with the drug trade.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Harold Dolly – Ree’s youngest brother, eight years old and only eighteen months younger than Sonny. He tries desperately to be as tough as his older brother, but is much more sensitive.

Connie Dolly – Ree’s mother. The victim of a nameless mental illness, she has difficulty speaking. She spends much of her time seemingly trapped inside her own head, and throughout the novel experiences only a few small moments of clarity and coherence.

Sonya – Blond Milton’s wife and one of Ree’s cousins and neighbors. On several occasions throughout the novel she offers Ree help, food, and, in the wake of Ree’s attack at the hands of the Thump clan, painkillers.

Little Arthur – A **crank** cook and a volatile acquaintance of Ree’s father Jessup. Ree goes to him to seek answers to Jessup’s whereabouts, but the meeting ends only in harsh words and threats of violence.

Deputy Baskin – A police officer who visits Ree on several occasions to apprise her of Jessup’s disappearance and bond. Eventually, Ree delivers her **father’s severed hands** to Baskin as proof of Jessup’s death and the bond’s status as null and void.

April – Jessup’s former mistress. Ree and Gail travel to the Arkansas state line in order to ask April whether she knows anything of Jessup’s whereabouts.

Victoria – Teardrop’s third and fifth wife, a warm and kind woman. Ree looks up to her.

Floyd Langan – Gail’s husband. He is an unfaithful and controlling partner.

Ned Langan – Gail and Floyd’s infant son.

Thump Milton – The fearsome leader of the Thump clan of the Hawkfall valley.

Megan – One of Ree’s distant cousins from Hawkfall who eventually becomes complicit in the attack against her.

Mike Satterfield – The bondsman looking to collect on Jessup’s bail.

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



SILENCE AND SECRETS

Winter’s Bone follows Ree Dolly’s epic journey through the Ozarks in search of an answer to her missing father Jessup’s whereabouts; he’s on the run from the law, and has put up as his bond his family’s house and timber woods. If Ree is unable to turn him up by the date of his scheduled appearance in court, the Dolly family home will be repossessed, leaving Ree, her silent, mentally ill mother Connie, and her two young brothers Sonny and Harold with nowhere to go. Ree makes her way through the physically desolate and economically isolated landscape of the Ozark mountains, encountering a labyrinthine network of increasingly distant relatives who consist of **crank** (meth) cooks, drug dealers, and powerful, shadowy figures. Each member of her extended family whom she encounters warns Ree against seeking the truth, and advises her to stay close to home and out of trouble. The secrets that keep the communities within the Ozarks alive and functioning are the selfsame secrets that stand to tear them apart. Ree’s defiance of the veil of secrecy over the Ozarks and her journey toward understanding disrupts a longstanding, seemingly ironclad pattern of hidden, unspoken things and brings to light—for everyone she encounters—the true consequences of silence and the effect it has created throughout the Ozark community.

“Talkin’ just causes witnesses,” says Thump Milton’s wife Merab when Ree first requests an audience with him. The Thump clan frightens Ree, but soon we learn that they, in turn, are frightened of her and what she represents: a thirst for understanding, a new way of communicating, and a bringing to light of the dark and dangerous inner workings of their family’s business.

Daniel Woodrell, an Ozark native and the author of *Winter’s Bone*, is clearly demonstrating something in the novel about the cycle of silence in rural communities. By choosing as his main character a young girl, Ree, who is (though tough, self-sufficient, and in many ways wise beyond her years) seemingly in a lowered position of power, Woodrell is forcing readers to challenge their perceptions of what and who can act as an agent of change in parts of the country that are governed by an ancient, esoteric kind of law.

It’s revealed, eventually, that Ree’s father Jessup was murdered because he snitched—he betrayed his own, and was killed for his breach of the silence that keeps the Ozark crank operation running just out of sight of the law. Though Ree is indeed an agent of change in her community, it’s implied that there are some traditions that will never be broken and some breaches of custom that will never go unpunished. Ree’s horrifying exhumation of Jessup’s corpse at the novel’s end is an



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have

unforgettable focal point in the narrative, showing the lengths the community is willing to go to preserve its secrets and hidden workings. Yet at the same time, this literal uncovering of the physical evidence of a secret suggests that a change or a break in the cycle of silence at last seems possible.



FAMILY, DESTINY, AND INHERITANCE

Family is paramount in the Ozark community of Woodrell's novel—blood ties are shown to carry a weight that is at various turns burdensome,

protective, and redemptive. Ree Dolly clings to the idea that blood is “s’posed to mean somethin’,” to provide her with leverage and immunity against those who might otherwise harm her, her mother, or her brothers. Ree knows that she is bound inextricably to her family, and that her future, as well as her brothers’, will be determined by the bonds of loyalty and duty that define the Dolly clan. Ree even tells the bondsman, Mike Satterfield, who comes looking for her father that she is a Dolly, “bred and buttered.” The idea that being a Dolly denotes a certain set of values—independence, resilience, loyalty—is one that Ree holds on to, and one that she knows the locals and the law know well, too.

Ree teaches her younger brothers Sonny and Harold how to make deer stew, how to shoot a gun, and how to hunt for squirrels to use as meat. She is desperate, at times, to pass onto them the bits of knowledge that might mean the difference between life and death in the event of her disappearance, ailment, or absence. The idea that they stand only to inherit what Ree can give to them weighs heavily on her, and deepens the atmosphere of dark destiny that seeps through the novel.

The boys and men of the Dolly clan, Ree knows, are named at birth for what their roles within the family will be. In order to keep out of sight of the law, and to confuse those who might attempt to harm, trespass, or “keep accounts” against the Dolly clan, the overwhelming majority of men born into the family are named, over and over again, either Milton, Haslam, Arthur, or Jessup. “To have but a few male names in use,” Woodrell writes, “was a tactic held over from the olden knacker ways.” Each first name serves as a sort of code for what the man’s role in the clan will eventually be, and what duties will fall to him. “Some names,” Ree observes, “could rise to walk many paths in many directions, but Jessups, Arthurs, Haslams, and Miltons were born to walk only the beaten Dolly path.” Ree wants for her brothers to be able to live lives free of crime and duty, able to “rise” to meet new paths. Their inheritance, though, of a tradition of dangerous and nefarious “bloodline customs” becomes more palpable to Ree with nearly every passing day, and as the threat of the repossession of her home and her land looms larger and larger.

As Ree’s journey into the heart of the Ozarks stretches on, she is confronted with the dark side of unquestioned loyalty; there are costs to living in this world, and Ree learns them when she

pursues information from the secretive, volatile Thump clan. In the wake of her attack at their hands, Ree’s loyalty to her own family—her mother and her brothers—does not waver, but the sense that the bonds of loyalty between Dollys, Thumps, and the other clans that make up the Ozark landscape is more of a prison than a safety net sharpens in Ree’s mind. At the end of the novel, the surprise of the surplus bond money and the promise it holds seems to be an opportunity for Ree to break the cycle of dark destiny and dangerous inheritance that’s imprisoned her family for centuries.



VIOLENCE AND DECAY

From the meat carcasses swinging low on the branches of the Dolly family’s timber woods at the start of the novel to Ree’s sickening encounter with her father Jessup’s corpse at its end, decay defines the atmosphere of *Winter’s Bone*. Woodrell painstakingly shows his readers time and time again how the environment’s physical destitution reflects the emotional voids his characters experience due to a lack of stability, lack of trust in one another, and lack of hope for a better future, both economically and emotionally.

The physical decay Woodrell describes directly reflects the intense moral decay that blights Ree’s world, and physical injuries characters suffer are similarly used to illustrate those characters’ injured internal states as well. Ree’s Uncle Teardrop, a complicated moral figure throughout the novel, is disfigured from a **meth** lab explosion, and is covered in prison tattoos. His compromised physical form reflects the consequences of his dangerous and morally shaded past. When Ree is beaten by the Thump women, her injuries are described in mortifying detail; two of her teeth are knocked out, one of her eyes is swollen shut, and she soils herself out of fear. Readers are confronted with an image of Ree that directly reflects her internal state; she is exhausted, beaten down, and completely at the mercy of the shadowy figures that comprise her rural community.

Ree helping to sever **Jessup’s hands** from his bloated, pond-sunk corpse is easily the most horrifying image in the novel. Merab Thump and her sisters, in the wake of their beating Ree, recognize that their reputations have been tarnished by “upset talk” traveling through the Ozarks. In exchange for her continued silence, the Thump women offer to take Ree to her “Daddy’s bones.” They bring Ree to a frozen lake, cut through the ice, and tell her to reach down for his body; when she does, they sever his hands (“flecks of meat and wet bone hit Ree in the face” as they do) so that Ree can bring his hands to the police as evidence of Jessup’s death, and can keep her home and land.

Ree’s having to be complicit in the mutilation of her own father’s corpse for her own benefit, and that of her family, is both physically and emotionally grotesque. It represents a

point of no return—though in finding her father’s body Ree is able to uncover a secret and obtain both closure and freedom for herself, her mother, and her brothers, she has had to succumb to the influence of the cyclical violence and horror that permeates her homeland in order to do so.



ISOLATION AND INDEPENDENCE

The physical, psychological, and emotional atmosphere of *Winter’s Bone* is one of extreme desolation. The cold valleys and ramshackle hillside compounds that the characters inhabit are cut off from much of what traditional readers would consider “civilization.” A trip Ree makes to a nearby grocery store is one of the few times we see her in the public sphere; her life is almost entirely enveloped in the remote and the rural. Because of this, Ree, her family, and the other clans who make their homes in the Ozarks have a fiercely independent worldview that excludes and rejects almost everything and everyone outside of their insular community.

Woodrell creates this atmosphere in order to display the conditions necessary for the persistence of the cyclical way of life that the Ozark clans cling to and inherit from one another. An isolated community is one that must protect its own in order to ensure its survival. It is a community that demands isolation in order to maintain its independence from the rest of the world. That isolation is not just physical, but also economic and emotional. And yet, Woodrell makes clear in his portrayal of this community that such staunch adherence to the principle of independence, and the isolation required to maintain that principle, ultimately harms the community itself.

“Never ask for what ought to be offered,” Ree warns her younger brother Harold in the opening pages of the novel. These words define Ree’s worldview from the outset—she is dependent on the other members of her family, but is also proud, strong, and reluctant to ask for help lest she make herself appear weak and incapable of making do, or, worse, revealing to the stronger, more wily members of her family a weakness that might be exploited or preyed upon. Though this is a network of families that rely on each other and, for the most part, take a certain kind of care of one another, there’s a ruthlessness and a dog-eat-dog mentality to the Ozark clans.

Ree understand this nature of her community abstractly at the start of the novel, but as the novel progresses and her search for her father brings her in contact with other extended family members she comes to understand it more concretely. Sonya, one of Ree’s cousins, brings her and her siblings a box of goods early on in the novel; later, Teardrop and Victoria give Ree money; everyone Ree visits offers her **drugs**. There’s the sense that there’s a very specific kind of symbiosis in this community. Favors and goods are given and traded, but always with a price, or always as a stand-in for what *should* be offered—in Ree’s case, information or help in finding her father.

Ree’s independent nature and need to prove herself make her strong and also make her vulnerable. At just sixteen, she is the primary provider for her younger brothers and her sick mother Connie. She is both too proud and too fearful to allow herself to become indebted to her extended family, however, and so her burden deepens and worsens the more she isolates herself from them. Ree’s predicament is thus a microcosm of the larger predicament of the Ozark community as a whole.



WOMEN AND MATRIARCHY

At the heart of *Winter’s Bone* is the question of who, truly, is in charge of the Ozark underworld. While it seems at first that men are the ones in power in the Dolly clan and the clans that comprise their many extended relations, it becomes clearer to the reader as the novel progresses that the women, too, wield a quiet and dangerous power.

Ree is, for all intents and purposes, the matriarch of her own family, and mother-figure to her younger brothers. She is strong, capable, and independent. She is a survivalist, and her headstrong ways both help and harm her as the novel unfolds. On the one hand, she knows the fearsome power and dangerous doings that define much of her extended family; on the other, she is desperate to save herself, her mother, and her brothers, and she wants, in some ways, to break the cycle of silence and male domination that surrounds her. By going into the homes of people who frighten her, of people who don’t take her seriously, and of people who intend to mislead, deceive, and even harm her, Ree proves her strength and worth.

It’s Thump Milton’s wife, Merab, and her sisters who perpetrate the violent attack against Ree that forms a huge part of the novel’s emotional climax. And it is the Thump women, too, who eventually bring Ree to the frozen pond where Jessup’s body lies buried beneath the ice. The women in *Winter’s Bone* are agents both of the most devastating violence against Ree and, in the end, the greatest service to her. The double-edged power that the Thump women possess speaks to Woodrell’s vision of a community so entrenched in its customs and traditions that it’s unable to see the ways in which things actually unfold, and which individuals are actually the arbiters of action, vengeance, justice, and even charity.

In choosing for his main character a young woman, Woodrell creates a protagonist who seems to have the odds stacked against her, but who rises to meet her fate with a kind of courage and resolve not demonstrated by any other character in the novel—especially any of the men. By the novel’s end, Ree has made herself not just known, but both unforgettable and sympathetic to several members of her extended family. She cements her place as a provider and an agent of change when she brings **Jessup’s hands** to the law and, in return, is allowed to keep her home and her land. The novel ends on a note of hope, as Ree tells her younger brothers that she plans to use

the extra bond money given to her to procure a set of “wheels,” a literal vessel—a vehicle—that might give her mother, her brothers, and herself all an opportunity for movement and freedom such as they’ve never seen or experienced.



SYMBOLS

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



REE'S CLOTHES

Ree Dolly tromps through the desolate landscape of the Ozark mountains in a pair of black combat boots. She dresses in delicate, weather-inappropriate dresses and skirts, threadbare hand-me-downs from her many relatives. She wears a coat passed down to her from her grandmother. Ree is outfitted in pieces of clothing that function as an outward expression of more than just a personal sense of style. Her hand-me-down pieces represent her oft-unwanted lineage and her duty to that tattered inheritance. Ree is a Dolly, and as such is bound to certain codes, burdens, and allegiances to family, to secrecy, and to the old ways and traditions of Rathlin Valley. Her boots, though, symbolize her own status as an iconoclast and rule-breaker. Her boots give her mobility, protection, and a toughness that might not be readily ascribed to her at first glance.



REE'S TAPES

As she chops wood for her family's hearth and takes long walks through the Ozark mountains, Ree Dolly listens to white noise tapes with titles like *Alpine Dusk* and *The Sounds of Tropical Dawn*. The tapes allow her to transport herself elsewhere and picture herself near a beach or a stream; while she's listening to her tapes, her restless mind is somewhat quieted to the constant onslaught of worry as to how she'll provide for her family and keep them safe. The tapes are symbolic both of Ree's desire for escape and her inability to do just that. Throughout the course of the novel, Ree harbors hopes of joining the army and leaving Rathlin Valley behind, and flirts with the idea of allowing her younger brothers to be taken in and raised up by nearby relatives. She also eventually uses painkillers given to her by her aunt Sonya to dull the extreme pain she faces after a merciless assault by the Thump clan. Despite all of these little “escapes,” Ree eventually finds herself bound to her family, her home, and her land—though she dreams still, in the novel's final lines, of procuring a set of wheels.



CRYSTAL METH / CRANK

Just as the Dolly clan's ancestors worked as moonshine makers and runners, its current members are cooks and dealers of crystal meth, or crank, as it's referred to throughout the novel. The street name, crank, represents the wired state of mind it induces in its users; every time a character in the novel uses crank, the tension and sense of imminent danger ramps up immediately. Ree is constantly surrounded not just by manufacturers of the drug but users of it, and her refusal to become a user differentiates her from the vast majority of her friends and relatives. Throughout the novel, crystal meth represents a few different things: a sign of both the physical and moral decay of the community Ree and her family are a part of, a narrative shorthand for or indicator of impending violence, and a symbol of the ways in which the heart of the trades and secrets of the Ozarks remain unchangeable.



JESSUP'S HANDS

In the emotional climax of the novel, Ree Dolly, with the help of Merab and two other Thump women, finally finds her father Jessup's body. Ree's search for Jessup has formed the entirety of the novel's physical and emotional structure, and her discovery of his corpse—frozen beneath the surface of an icy lake—is both redemptive and horrific. In order to prove to the law that Jessup is in fact dead—and thus retain the deed to her home and her land—Ree and the Thump women use a chainsaw to sever both of Jessup's hands from his body so that Ree can deliver them to the authorities. Jessup's severed hands represent the severance and the destruction of many things: of Ree from whatever small shreds were left of her childhood and innocence; of the code of silence in Ree's labyrinthine Ozark community; of Ree from her father's legacy. The severed hands, though grotesque, symbolize a sort of freedom and a new way forward for Ree. With the sacrificial offering of Jessup's hands, she can make a new life for herself and her younger brothers, one that seeks to creep out from beneath the shadow of her outlaw father.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay Books edition of *Winter's Bone* published in 2007.

Chapter 1 Quotes

“Never ask for what ought to be offered.”

Related Characters: Ree Dolly (speaker), Harold Dolly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Within the first few pages of the novel, Ree Dolly tells her brother Harold (who is wondering if he should ask their neighbor and relative Blond Milton for some meat) that he should never ask for anything that should be, or should have been, offered to him or inherited by him. Thematically, this quote sets up the entire atmosphere of the novel; it shows that the Dollys, though often in need of assistance, are proud, staunch, and value independence. Although the interconnectedness of their community and the cyclical inheritance of property, duties, and grudges suggests that favors are freely given and taken, we learn quickly that every transaction between members of the Dolly clan also comes with some kind of price tag. Ree, who acts as a mother figure to her brothers, tries at every available opportunity to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to protect themselves from the more dangerous members of their family—those who might attempt to draw the boys into a web of debt and dependence.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛☛ Ree's grand hope was that these boys would not be dead to wonder by age twelve, dulled to life, empty of kindness, boiling with mean. So many Dolly kids were that way, ruined before they had chin hair, groomed to live outside square law and abide by the remorseless blood-soaked commandments that governed lives outside square law...The rough Dollys were scornful of town law and town ways, clinging to their own.

Related Characters: Sonny Dolly, Harold Dolly, Ree Dolly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Ree knows that children born into the Dolly clan are ushered too soon into lives of crime for the sake of the continuation of the dangerous and illegal activities that keep the clan afloat. Her hopes for her young brothers' safety and happiness, illuminated here, drive her actions throughout the novel; everything Ree does is to ensure that her brothers are able to survive the "rough" world into which they've been born. Ree does her best at every turn to discourage in her brothers the qualities that might

otherwise allow them to more easily fall into "remorseless[ness]" or cruelty; Sonny's scrappiness, Harold's suggestiveness, and both of the boys' naïveté are all, in Ree's eyes, liabilities that need to be seen to. This quote deals with the themes of both inheritance and isolation throughout the novel—she knows that her brothers run the risk of being "groomed" for a certain lifestyle by their more nefarious elders should she lose control of her family, and is attempting to shield them from that by keeping them away from the rest of their kin. Just as the Dollys isolate themselves from the "law and town ways" in order to protect themselves, Ree is isolating her brothers from the darker depths of their extended family in order to keep them safe.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ Ree needed often to inject herself with pleasant sounds, stab those sounds past the constant screeching, squalling hubbub regular life raised inside her spirit, poke the soothing sounds past that racket and down deep where her jittering soul paced on a stone slab in a gray room, agitated and endlessly provoked but yearning to hear something that might bring a moment's rest.

Related Characters: Ree Dolly

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Ree is often shown lost in thought or wishing she were elsewhere than where she is. And as she's the protagonist, we're granted access to her thoughts and desires, particularly her dreams of leaving town, of finding a better life, and of having "her own concerns." Part of her survival is stoking the fires of these dreams; her tapes of gentle nature sounds, which are often invoked within the narrative at times of great distress, allow Ree small moments of escape and an illusory but nonetheless comforting refuge from the difficult and "squalling" tenor that defines her life. This quote demonstrates how Ree embodies the novel's themes of isolation and independence. Though devoted to her family and protective of them, she is in many ways an island unto herself. Her stubbornness and her search for truth throughout the book separate her from the rest of her extended kin, and her frequent retreats into her own mind,

aided by the tapes, demonstrate concretely her desire to have a life of her own.

☞ Ree nearly fell but would not let it happen in front of the law. She heard thunder clapping between her ears and Beelzebub scratchin' a fiddle. The boys and her and mom would be dogs in the field without this house. They would be dogs in the field with Beelzebub scratchin' out tunes and the boys'd have a hard hard shove toward unrelenting meanness and the roasting shed and she'd be stuck along side them 'til steel doors clanged shut and the flames rose. She'd never have her own concerns.

Related Characters: Connie Dolly, Sonny Dolly, Harold Dolly, Jessup Dolly, Deputy Baskin, Ree Dolly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Ree experiences an intense physical and emotional reaction to the news that her father, Jessup, has put up as his bond their family's home and land. It is one of Ree's only moments of weakness in the novel—she “nearly” falls, but her refusal to appear weak or frightened in front of the hated lawman who is delivering the news—Deputy Baskin—keeps her from succumbing to her distress and fear. The invocation of Beelzebub (a devil who is, in Christian tradition, second in command to Satan) reveals an allegory, in Ree's mind, between her father's actions and those of a dark, taunting demon. Ree's two greatest fears—her brothers yielding to “unrelenting meanness,” and the decimation of her own desires—are seemingly made manifest by this news of Jessup's betrayal. Themes of secrecy and silence are also at play here; Jessup, we discover, often makes himself scarce, as his nefarious dealings and involvement in the crystal meth trade require him to often leave his family without a moment's notice. Though Ree is used to secrecy when it comes to Jessup, the betrayal of his placing the house and land up for bond ignites a deep fear and a violent anger in Ree.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ “Didn't want you-all to fear we'd forgot you for good.”

Related Characters: Sonya (speaker), Sonny Dolly, Harold Dolly, Connie Dolly, Ree Dolly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Sonya, though the victim of a past betrayal at Connie's hands—Connie's infidelity with Sonya's husband, Blond Milton, resulting in the illegitimate birth of Sonny—is still bound to Ree, Connie, Harold, and Sonny by blood and the duties assumed because of it. As it's well-known within the valley that Jessup has all but abandoned his family, and that Connie is ill and incapable of caring for her children, it falls to other members of the Dolly clan to help provide. In this scene Sonya seems to be pointedly addressing her own loyalty in the face of such poor treatment, as if to either ensure future repayment or to underscore her unflinching allegiance to the code of loyalty by which the Dollys live. Themes of family obligation and inheritance are important here, as well as the complicated relationships between women within the landscape of the Dolly family. Though often forced to bend to their husbands' wills, women in the novel have their own power struggles between themselves, and Ree's observations of how these struggles (often the result of multiple infidelities) operate—those between Sonya and her mother, between her mother and Jessup's mistress, April, and between Ree herself and Merab Thump—allow the reader to understand how cryptic and cyclical these female relationships are, and the circumstances that necessitate such fraught interactions.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ “Don't you, nor nobody else, neither, *ever* go down around Hawkfall askin' them people shit about stuff they ain't *offerin'* to talk about. That's a real good way to end up et by hogs, or wishin' you was... Our relations get watered kinda thin between this valley here and Hawkfall.”

Related Characters: Uncle Teardrop (speaker), Ree Dolly

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Ree, though fierce and determined and capable in many areas, is naïve to many of the ways of the dangerous and insular world of which her family is a significant part. When she asks Teardrop if it's possible to reach out to distant relatives who live in Hawkfall and inquire as to whether

they're privy to Jessup's whereabouts, his reaction (quoted here) is both fearful and violent—and readers will later learn that his intense wariness is justified, once Ree finds herself entangled in the complicated mechanics of the Hawkfall community and the fearsome Thump clan. Secrecy, violence, isolation, women's prescribed roles, and complicated familial ties are all at work within this passage, as Teardrop hopes to prevent Ree from entangling herself in matters that don't concern her and could stand to bring her harm by preying on her womanhood and her instincts toward isolation. By invoking what's "offer[ed]"—or isn't—by the Hawkfall clan, he's forcing her to reckon with her own notions of what "ought to be" given, shared, and offered between family members. Blinded by a combination of fear, rage, and a desire for the truth, however, Ree is unable to heed her own earlier advice to her brothers and only ask for what is offered to her.

Chapter 10 Quotes

“Settin’ out food’ll draw em close—that’s likely how they’ll come too close and get shot, Harold. Don’t set no goddam food out. It looks like you’re doin’ nice, but you don’t. You’re just bringin’ ‘em into range, is all.”

Related Characters: Ree Dolly (speaker), Sonny Dolly, Harold Dolly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation functions as a metaphor for Ree's current situation—just as the hungry coyotes will be drawn into shooting range by any scrap of food that they catch a whiff of, Ree is, unknowingly, about to be drawn into the “shooting range” of the powerful and violent Thump clan. She's so desperate to find information as to Jessup's whereabouts that she'll put herself directly in danger—just as the coyotes would for food—and she does so, time and time again, seemingly blind to each and every consequence that may result from her tireless search throughout the Ozarks. Ree seeks to make her own destiny, but is too close to the situation and unable to see her dangerous quest clearly. She can point out and describe instances in which violence is possible or even probable (as she does here, in telling her brothers not to put food out for the coyotes), but in her own life she generally disregards her well-being and seems to ignore the likelihood of peril befalling her.

“He cooks crank.”
“Honey, They all do now. You don't even need to say it out loud.”

Related Characters: Megan, Ree Dolly (speaker), Little Arthur, Jessup Dolly

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

The rampant drug consumption throughout the Ozarks is matched only by its production. The inheritance of the Dolly clan—and the Thumps, and the other nameless clans that comprise the population of the novel's Ozark world—is the legacy of moonshining. Just as the moonshiners of old did, the Dolly men now must cook and sell crank, or crystal meth, as there is little other work available to them. The entire ecosystem of the Ozarks is primed to support this deadly trade, and there is little of Ozark life that remains unaffected by the threat of its casualties. Themes of silence and secrecy run through this interaction between Ree and Megan, as the goings-on of the Dolly and Thump men who operate within the Ozark underworld are both secret (or at least unspoken) and well-known. Though their business is, for all intents and purposes, common knowledge, it's still taboo—or perhaps just useless—to even try to talk about it.

“It's been this way with our people forever, goddam it. For-fuckin'-ever. You go see Thump. Go up there'n knock gentle on his door, and wait.”

Related Characters: Megan (speaker), Thump Milton, Ree Dolly

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Ree and Megan, though young, are both aware of their “people's” ancient ways and “bloodsoaked customs.” The cycle of secrecy, violence, and inherited loyalties and grudges alike calibrates every interaction. Though Ree and Megan are technically related, the gulf between them is vast and marked by mutual distrust; nonetheless, Megan suggests that Ree, determined as she is for answers, call

upon Thump Milton, the leader and most powerful, knowledgeable member of Megan's family. She gives Ree both permission and protocol to head up the mountain to Thump's house, but makes sure to leave her with the reminder that gentleness and patience are of high import—and even then, they may not be enough to secure the information she needs. Thematically, this quote from Megan speaks to ideas of family and destiny; though we largely come to understand the history of the Ozark clans from Ree's point of view, we can see that Megan too understands the cyclical nature and seemingly predestined outcomes of any interaction or attempt at peace between these very different groups of people.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ “Ma’am, I got a real bad need to talk with Thump Milton...I need to, I really, really need to, ma’am. Please—I *am a Dolly!* Some of our blood at least is the same. That’s s’posed to *mean* somethin’—ain’t that what is always said?”

Related Characters: Ree Dolly (speaker), Merab, Thump Milton

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Ree, desperate for answers, finds herself up against Merab, Thump Milton's imposing wife. Merab refuses to let Ree inside Thump's house, or even to tell him that she's outside; Ree begs and begs and, finally, invokes their families' blood ties. By referring to "what is always said," Ree is doing the additional work of invoking the old ways: the ancient codes of loyalty, cooperation, and allegiance to which the Ozark families of the novel are bound. Ree ultimately exposes a weakness in Merab through these pleas, and, though she isn't granted an audience with Thump, she realizes that perhaps the only chink in his armor is his and his family's reverence for ancient ways. Isolated from the only route to truth she sees, this interaction will come to fuel Ree's desperate search for the answer to Jessup's whereabouts. It informs her anger toward, resentment of, and stubbornness against the entire Thump clan, and it emboldens her to continue to rail against them, despite how dangerous and bound to silence and secrecy they are.

☞ To have but a few male names in use was a tactic held over from the olden knacker ways...Let any sheriff or similar nabob try to keep official accounts on the Dolly men when so many were named Milton, Haslam, Arthur or Jessup... Jessups, Arthurs, Haslams and Miltons were born to walk only the beaten Dolly path, live and die in keeping with those bloodline customs fiercest held.

Related Characters: Sonny Dolly, Harold Dolly, Uncle Teardrop, Thump Milton, Jessup Dolly, Ree Dolly

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

So insular is the Dolly clan and the community they inhabit that they have constructed intricate mechanisms for upholding their codes of secrecy, loyalty, and isolation. By giving most male children born into the family one of just a few names, they are able to ensure that when those children are grown and join the "family business," so to speak, their roles will be defined; furthermore, they will be all but untouchable when it comes to legal action and intervention at the hands of the local police. In this world, names hold within them a destiny; certain names denote certain duties, and Ree fears her brothers' involvement in an arbitrary but nonetheless effective cycle of categorization that has ruined the lives of so many Dolly men.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ “You son of a bitch. You go straight to hell’n fry in your own lard. Sonny’n Harold’ll die livin’ in a fuckin’ cave *with me’n Mom* before they’ll ever spend a single fuckin’ night with *you*. Goddam you, Blond Milton, you must think I’m a stupid idiot or somethin’—there’s horseweed standin’ *chin-high* inside that place!”

Related Characters: Ree Dolly (speaker), Connie Dolly, Sonny Dolly, Harold Dolly, Blond Milton

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Though loyal and dutiful to the rest of her family, Ree is most fiercely protective of her own immediate kin. When Blond Milton attempts to deceive her as to her father's whereabouts by showing her a long-ago-blown meth lab

and offering to take Sonny—his biological son—off of her hands by taking him into his own home, Ree lashes out, declaring that keeping her family together is the most important thing in her life, and that she will die before giving it up. As the self-appointed matriarch of her little family, Ree knows that she must stand up to others—even her elders, and even men—in order to ensure the survival of those she holds closest. Blond Milton is attempting here to do exactly what Ree fears most—take one of her brothers from her and indoctrinate him into the countless line of Dolly boys and men who’ve been used like so much chattel to further the clan’s interests in the drug trade. In the face of violence, deceit, and the threat of having her home, land, and family torn from her, Ree reacts with her characteristic stubbornness and intelligence, using them to lay bare the deceptive secrets Blond Milton attempts to use to take advantage of (and silence) her and her brothers.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ “Somethin’ real wrong was goin’ on, and since then I’ve gone over it and over it in my head and think I finally get why he didn’t even nod my way. He was protectin’ me, see, by ignorin’ me. That’s when I understood your dad had loved me. I understood it from how he’d looked away.”

Related Characters: April (speaker), Jessup Dolly, Ree Dolly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Secrecy is both a destructive and lifegiving force within the unforgiving underworld of the Ozarks. On the one hand, it enables the established power structures to remain intact; on the other hand, ignorance can literally be one’s salvation in this world, as knowing the wrong secrets—even just one—can render one a serious liability. Here, April helps Ree to understand secrecy’s full power firsthand. She knows, she says, that something dangerous was going on with Jessup the last time she saw him because of how he purposefully ignored her. Though she was at first confused and offended, she finally realized that the greatest gift he could give to her was to keep her out of whatever danger he was in by refusing to acknowledge her as someone close to him, as someone who could stand to be hurt by association with him.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞ “Mom, I’m goin’ to need you to help. There’s things happenin’ that I don’t know what to do about. Mom? Look at me, Mom. Mom?” Ree waited kneeling for several minutes, kneeling as raised hopes fell to modest hopes, slight hopes, vague hopes, kneeling until any hope at all withered to none...She released Mom, stood and walked away into the shadows.

Related Characters: Ree Dolly (speaker), Connie Dolly

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Ree, though more capable than her mother mentally, is still only sixteen, and thus is still a child. Her mother’s incapacitation, though, has forced Ree into a kind of motherly role that she never asked to assume and that, though she carries out with grace and skill, wears on her day after day. In the thick of such turmoil, Ree turns to her mother and begs her, on a walk through the woods, to give her any guidance at all, but her pleas go unanswered and unacknowledged. Ree finally accepts that her mother will not be able to aid her in any way, and that she is on her own. The theme of silence functions in an interesting way here; rather than the voluntary or forced silence we see in the Thump clan, in April, or in Teardrop, Ree’s mother’s silence is a byproduct of her trauma and illness. It is frustrating and heartbreaking to Ree on a very different level than the deliberate silence of other members of her family, and it provokes in her a more flattened, emotional reaction than we’ve yet seen in the novel.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☞ Ree pushed a mulish shopping cart in the Bawbee Store...The wheels were splayed like walleyes, so the cart would not easily go where it looked to be aimed but screeched off-line in half-moon spins toward one side of the aisle, then the other.

Related Characters: Ree Dolly

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

This scene is one of the only times we see Ree out in the

more public world of general civilization—she is grocery shopping. As she moves through the store, her grocery cart, as described here, is an illustrative metaphor for Ree’s loss of control over her circumstances and her own life. Try as she might to “steer” herself and those around her toward a certain outcome, forces she cannot see or understand assail her from all sides and make it nearly impossible for her to proceed in the direction she once “aimed” to go. Try through Ree might to establish herself as a stubborn, capable adult, she is still viewed by the members of her family and the Thump clan as a child, and as someone whose influence is negligible at best. Of course, Ree eventually proves herself to be an independent and even powerful entity within her world; she ultimately subverts her elders’ ideas about her, and out-manipulates those who try to do her harm. At this point in the novel, though, we are seeing Ree at her most powerless and thus her most desperate, and the cart helps to illustrate that low point and to express the duality of Ree’s frustration with her circumstances and subsequent desperation to assert control over them no matter the cost.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☞ “I got two little brothers who can’t feed themselves...My mom is sick and she is always goin’ to be sick. Pretty soon the laws’re takin’ our house away n’throwin’ us out...to live in the fields...like fuckin’ dogs. The only hope I got to keep our house is I gotta *prove* Dad’s dead. Whoever killed him, I don’t need to know that. I don’t never need to know that. If Dad did wrong, Dad has paid. But I can’t forever carry...them boys’n Mom...not...without that house to help.”

Related Characters: Ree Dolly (speaker), Sonny Dolly, Harold Dolly, Connie Dolly, Thump Milton

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Ree finally is granted an audience with the fearsome Thump Milton—though not under the circumstances she imagined. After being mercilessly beaten at the hands of Thump’s wife and her sisters, Ree regains consciousness inside a barn, where several members of the Thump clan have gathered around her. Ree pleads with Thump to give her answers, to help her prove that her father is dead; without that grace from him, she knows, she will lose everything.

Even in the face of extreme and humiliating violence, Ree retains her independent nature and her allegiance to her brothers and her mother. She places their needs, even in her

lowest moment and in direct peril, above her own. She doesn’t know at this point what it will take to lift the veil of silence that shrouds her father’s disappearance, and doesn’t understand how her well-intentioned search for answers could have led her to such a point. With nothing left to lose, Ree makes one last-ditch effort to break the cycle of secrecy and obtain what she feels is owed to her: information as to her father’s whereabouts.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☞ “You own me now. Understand? You purty much own me now, girl. You do wrong, it’s on me. You do big wrong’n it’s me that’ll pay big.”

Related Characters: Uncle Teardrop (speaker), Ree Dolly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

After Teardrop rescues Ree from Thump Milton and his family, he agrees to “stand for” her—Thump makes Teardrop swear to assume responsibility for Ree before releasing her to him. Because of Teardrop’s agreement, any other trouble Ree starts, any violence she perpetrates, or any act of ill will she commits will be on Teardrop, and he will have to answer for her. Teardrop wants Ree to understand the gravity of this situation; her reckless behavior, endless wandering, and relentless search for answers at any cost cannot and must not continue lest both of them be made to answer to a fearsome and unforgiving force.

Responsibility for each other’s actions is one more thing that falls under the umbrella of dark inheritances within this community. Teardrop, already having inherited a legacy of secrecy, violence, and corruption, now stands to “inherit” any and all mistakes, trespasses, or insubordinations that Ree perpetrates against the Thump clan or any of their allies.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☞ *This was how sudden things happened that haunted forever.*

Related Characters: Ree Dolly (speaker), Uncle Teardrop

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

As Uncle Teardrop pulls a gun on Deputy Baskin, Ree has a slow, internal moment of panic and realization tied together in one. So much of her life is tied to a largely obtuse and unspoken ancient code, or to respecting hallowed roles and traditions. Here, she realizes that these institutions that calibrate her life, and the lives of everyone around her, can be made or broken in just a second; legacies of hatred and violence are created in single moments, and, by the same token, ancient grudges can be erased in a second—though not, she realizes, without grave consequences. Since inheritance is such a prevalent theme throughout the novel, it's fitting that Ree experiences this realization toward its end; she is coming to understand that though the near-holy ancient ways of her family and the families connected to them are responsible for the status quo, that tension between “sudden” things and “haunted” things is more fluid and more complex than she previously could have imagined. All haunted things were born from sudden moments of violence or desperation (like this scene of potential violence between Baskin and Teardrop), and all those sudden moments have ripple effects and repercussions that betray their split-second nature.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☛ “We’ll carry you to your daddy’s bones, child. We know the place.”

Related Characters: Merab (speaker), Jessup Dolly, Ree Dolly

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Though unconventional to be sure, this quote represents a kind of redemption for Merab and the Thump women. As perpetrators of gross violence against Ree, the Thump women are intimidating and antagonistic figures. Yet here, though they are only helping Ree in order to quell the rumors about their despicable acts that have been spreading throughout the Ozarks, they are still giving her what she’s been after all along: the knowledge of Jessup’s fate. Their not-entirely-pure motives are representative of their way of life, though; the world of the Ozarks in the

novel is a world of violence, retribution, and, above all, survival at any cost. Any other ending for Merab and her sisters would have felt false, and would have betrayed their allegiance to the old ways they hold dear. Additionally, themes of women’s power in this world are exposed through their actions here; the Thump women are the ones who “know the place,” and the ones who can “carry” Ree to it. None of the men Ree has sought assistance from have been a help to her, and though the Thump women humiliated and betrayed Ree, they are ultimately the only people who can offer her the grace, information, and deliverance she’s so desperately sought.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☛☛ Sonny said, “What’ll we do with all that money? Huh? What’s the first thing we’ll get?”
 ...Ree stood and stretched. Twilight dimmed the snow, but icicles overhead held that gleam. “Wheels.”

Related Characters: Ree Dolly, Sonny Dolly (speaker), Connie Dolly, Harold Dolly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Ree has saved her family’s house and land, and has furthermore been given the mysterious sack of cash that someone had provided to fulfill the rest of Jessup’s bond. Here, in the final lines of the novel, she decides that the first thing she will buy with this money is “wheels”—a car. The promise of “wheels” symbolizes the possibility of Ree and her family’s escape from—or at least assumption of control over—their circumstances. Though the word “wheel” suggests repetition or circuitous spinning, Woodrell is, by using it as the book’s final word, insinuating that it perhaps can come to hold a new meaning—a symbol of Ree actually using a mechanism that resembles the cyclical imprisonment that has kept her family in such dire straits in order to finally outpace it. Ree confirms here that she and her brothers will not fall victim to the traps that have kept other members of her family in service to an endless landfall of secrecy, violence, isolation, and destruction. Here, she emerges as both an individual with a healthy measure of independence and as one who can provide for her family and their needs.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

Sixteen-year-old Ree Dolly stands on the front porch of her house in Rathlin Valley, Missouri, looking out at meat carcasses hanging from the trees in the Ozark mountain yards of her neighbors and relatives. She can smell snow approaching, and considers how she'll prepare her home for the oncoming storm.

From the novel's first pages, we see how Ree's entire life—young though she is—revolves around providing for her family and ensuring they are able to survive in the harsh landscape of the Ozarks.



Ree thinks of how her father, Jessup, didn't split enough wood for a strong fire before he left home several weeks ago, and he certainly didn't leave enough food or money. He promised to return soon with both cash and "a trunkload of delights," but has not made himself seen or heard since departing.

Jessup, though absent throughout the novel, is a constant presence in Ree's mind. From the start, she struggles to understand how he could have abandoned his family without the means to provide for themselves and lied about his impending return.



Ree's younger brother Harold emerges from the house wearing long johns. He stands with Ree and looks out at the carcasses, wondering if their cousin Blond Milton will bring some meat over for them to eat later. Harold suggests they go to him and ask for some. Ree grabs Harold's ear and twists, and tells him "Never. Never ask for what ought to be offered." She then sends Harold back inside to eat grits—the only food they have left.

Ree, already stepping into the role of primary provider and caretaker at just sixteen, works hard to instill in her brothers values of pride, independence, and self-sufficiency. Though her extended family is capable of help, Ree does not want her brothers to grow up thinking they are owed any kind of debt or special treatment.



CHAPTER 2

Ree's mother, Connie, sits in a chair next to the stove, quiet and unmoving. Ree notes that her mother had "once been pretty." Now, though, she is heavily medicated, and "lost to the present." Ree tells her brothers to finish their breakfast, as the school bus will be arriving soon. Her brothers complain that their socks smell, but Ree begs them to put their socks on and hurry along so that they are not late for school. The two boys are eighteen months apart, and have different fathers; the older boy, Sonny, is a "scrapper," while Harold is gentle, vulnerable, and often "in need of fixing."

Connie's apparent inability to remain tethered to the world around her, combined with Jessup's frequent absence, has forced Ree into a matriarchal role. Here she is shown caring for her brothers as a mother would. Her mother's mental decay mirrors the financial and moral decay running rampant throughout the Ozarks and, in a way, acts as a metaphor for the shattering effect of bearing witness to such violence over an extended period of time.



Ree hopes that her brothers will not be “dulled to life” and “empty of kindness” by the time they are twelve, as “so many Dolly kids” are. There are two hundred Dollys, plus extended Dolly relations, living within thirty miles of Rathlin Valley. Some are “square” and some are “rough,” but all Dollys are subject to a set of “remorseless blood-soaked commandments that governed lives led outside square law.” Ree once again hurries her brothers off to school, reminding them to wear their hats, as snow is coming.

Ree is so protective of her brothers and invested in their care partly because she knows that if they aren't raised up right, they'll fall into the lawless, violent underworld so many of their older male cousins and uncles inhabit.



CHAPTER 3

Ree splits wood in the yard as the snow finally begins to fall. Wrapped in her **grandmother's overcoat**, she expertly splits timber for a fire, making up for the work her father left undone when he departed. After a while, she takes a break and sits down. She pulls headphones out of her overcoat pocket and turns on **a tape** comprised of soothing ocean sounds that allow Ree to envision herself somewhere else; somewhere calm.

Though her clothes generally represent Ree's lineage and her often-unwanted duties to it, it Ree's coat—inherited from her grandmother—also shields her from the harsh weather as she toils. Ree's expertise at chopping wood shows that she's had to do her father's abandoned work many times.



Just as the snow begins to cover Ree, a pair of headlights shine up the rut road to Ree's house. She removes her headphones and heads down toward the road. She sees that the approaching vehicle is a sheriff's car, and that her brothers are in its backseat. Ree shouts at the man driving, but her brothers slide out of the backseat laughing. The officer tells Ree that he simply brought the boys back from the bus stop, as snow has shut down the school. Ree tells her brothers to head inside, and to bring the split wood in with them. She warns them that they do not need to be “ridin' around with the law.” As the boys head inside, the deputy, who Ree recognizes as a man named Baskin, who once arrested her father on their front porch late at night, tells her that he was on his way up to her house anyway.

Ree's aversion to interaction with law enforcement of any kind is inherited from witnessing her family's many run-ins with the authorities. Dollys are taught from an early age to deeply distrust the local law enforcement, and have devised deliberate tricks, procedures, and codes meant to keep Dolly men and women out of the way of the law. Baskin especially is a familiar and loathed figure, and his presence on Dolly land is anything but welcome. At the same time, though he's a reviled figure in this community, he's still a well-known and integral part of it.



The deputy tells Ree to ask him inside, as he needs to talk with her mother. Ree tells him she is “not in the mood,” but Baskin doesn't listen to Ree, and insists on speaking with Ree's mother. Ree allows him inside, but Baskin quickly realizes that Connie is lost in time, and unable to hold a conversation. Ree tells the officer to relay whatever message he has to her, since her mother will be unable to comprehend it. The officer suggests that they talk on the porch so that the boys don't overhear them.

Ree's dutiful shielding of her mother from the world at large is on display here—Baskin is forced to accept that Ree is the primary caregiver in her family, and capable of hearing whatever it is he has to tell the family.



Out on the porch, Baskin tells Ree that her father is out of jail on bond. “You know he cooks **crank**, don’t you,” Baskin asks, and Ree responds by telling the officer that those are only the charges pressed against him. Baskin tells Ree that her father is a “half-famous” crank chef, and the best the Dolly clan has ever seen. Regardless, Baskin says, he is not here to bust Jessup on crank-cooking charges. Jessup’s court date is a week away, and Baskin is unable to turn him up. He tells Ree that Jessup put up as his bond the house and the timber acres he owns. If Jessup doesn’t show for his trial, Baskin says, Ree and her family will lose their home and land. Ree panics briefly, but pulls herself together, and tells the deputy that she will find her father. Baskin seems skeptical, but Ree assures him that she’ll be able to turn her father up.

The shocking revelation that Jessup sold out his family and his property as bond form the narrative engine of the novel, and launch Ree entirely into adulthood. Whatever illusions she maintained about the ruthlessness of the world her family inhabits are shattered by Baskin’s news. Ree’s assuring Baskin that she will be able to turn her father up when the authorities have been unsuccessful demonstrates her fiercely independent nature, and her allegiance to protecting her family and their shared secrets.



CHAPTER 4

The snow finally lets up near dusk. Harold and Sonny cough and snuffle, sick with colds. Ree reprimands them for not wearing their hats out in the snow. Connie, in a brief moment of lucidity, tells Ree that there is some whiskey in her bedroom closet; she tells her to mix it with honey and feed it to the boys. There is then a knock at the door, and Ree greets her cousin, Sonya, who is carrying a large box filled with venison, cans of food, and sundry goods. Sonya is Blond Milton’s wife, and he once cheated on her with Connie—together, they had Sonny. Sonya tells Ree that she “hasn’t forgot” her, her mother, and her brothers. She gives Ree the food, and offers to bring over some additional split wood as well.

Though Ree was careful to tell Harold that he should “never ask for what ought to be offered,” she certainly will not refuse assistance from Sonya once it has indeed been offered. Ree’s relationship with Sonya is one of the book’s more tender ones, despite the tension between Sonya and Connie. The fact that Blond Milton and Connie are cousins further emphasizes and serves as an underscoring metaphor for the incestuous nature of this insular community.



Sonya asks Ree what the deputy was doing up at the house earlier, and Ree tells her that he was hunting for Jessup. Sonya tells Ree that she doesn’t know of Jessup’s whereabouts. Sonya leaves, and Ree and her brothers sort through the box of goods, which is full of groceries. Ree tells her brothers that she’ll be cooking deer stew, and that they should stay in the kitchen with her and start to learn how to make it themselves.

Sonya is curious as to the secretive nature of Baskin’s visit, but Ree is quick to share information with her and prove that she’s not hiding anything. Ree continues, once Sonya departs, to instruct her brothers in basic life skills. She wants for them to be able to feed and sustain themselves, and realizes that it’s her role to ensure that that happens.



CHAPTER 5

Ree decides to start her hunt for her father’s whereabouts with her uncle Teardrop, Jessup’s older brother, “though [he] scare[s] her.” Ree walks down the railroad tracks the three miles to Teardrop’s house, wearing an **overcoat, a skirt, and combat boots**.

Ree shields herself with her most beloved items of clothing for the walk over to Teardrop’s, demonstrating further how badly frightened of him she is, and how she feels she needs protection.



When Ree arrives at Teardrop's house, his wife Victoria opens the door. Ree is always surprised by Victoria's beauty, and by the beauty of all of Teardrop's ex-wives; he himself is a "nightmare" to look at, according to Ree, and a frightening figure as well. A **crank** chef and the victim of a blown meth lab, Teardrop is intimidating and disfigured, with three blue teardrop tattoos on his face that are the mark of "grisly deeds" done during his time in prison. Ree tells Victoria that she is looking for her father. Victoria tells Ree that Jessup isn't at the house, but invites her inside and offers her coffee.

On the kitchen table, there is a pistol, a bag of marijuana, and a bag of **crank**. Ree explains her dire situation to Victoria, and tells her that they need to "run [Jessup] to ground and get him to show." As she says this, Teardrop comes out of his bedroom. "You ought not do that," he says, and advises Ree to stop running after her father. "The choice" to show up for court "is up to the one that's goin' to jail to make," he says. Teardrop tells Ree that he hasn't seen Jessup; Ree asks if he might be "runnin' with Little Arthur" and a bunch of men from Hawkfall. Teardrop threatens to smack Ree, but relents. He tells her never to go looking for answers in Hawkfall, and reminds her that she should know better.

Ree protests, reminding Teardrop that much of the Ozark community is related, and asking if he can reach out to relatives in Hawkfall. Teardrop refuses, again physically threatening Ree. She presses on, though, and finally he grabs her by the hair and shakes her. He releases her, takes the bag of **crank** from the kitchen table, and retreats to his room. Victoria follows. After a few minutes, she emerges, hands Ree fifty dollars, and urges her to heed Teardrop and stay close to home.

CHAPTER 6

On the walk back from Teardrop's house, Ree sits on a stump to think. She imagines her ancestors, moonshiners and their wives, and the difficult lives they must have endured. Ree realizes that her father could be anywhere, and that in the past he often got himself into serious trouble. Once, high on **crank**, he'd gotten shot in the chest. Rather than driving to the hospital, he'd driven to a nearby tavern to show off the "glamorous" bullet hole. Jessup, Ree notes, is "tough" but "not much on planning."

Ree remembers that her mother Connie finally lost her mind when Ree was about twelve, after learning about Jessup's girlfriend, April. Ree remembers that April taught kindergarten and owned a "pretty yellow house down around the Arkansas line," and Ree wonders if that's where Jessup is now.

Ree finds a sort of mother figure in Victoria, and is unable to reconcile her relative sweetness with Teardrop's ferocity. Teardrop's involvement in the crank business makes him all the more repulsive to Ree, as she despises the fact that her own father cooks crank and has seen what his involvement in the trade has done to their family.



The objects just in Teardrop's kitchen establish his home as a dangerous place. Teardrop's appearance and his immediate insistence that Ree stay out of her father's business further establish him as a morally dubious character, and his allegiance to the Ozark code of silence paints him as an obstacle and, in some ways, direct antagonist to Ree.



Teardrop's use of violence against Ree is shocking—it speaks to the imbalance of power and dearth of respect not just between men and women but between elder and younger members of the Dolly clan. Teardrop makes an attempt to silence Ree with money, though it's implied through the exchange of it that he is fearful of her initiative and drive to discover the truth.



Ree contemplates whether or not her family has come very far at all from their dangerous moonshining roots. Her father has acted recklessly time and time again under the influence of his own product, and left his family to pick up the pieces of his messes.



Ree seems emotionally detached from the memory of her father's infidelity and her mother's subsequent breakdown, seeing it only as a potential clue to his whereabouts.



CHAPTER 7

Before reaching home, Ree stops off at the Langans' home; her best friend, Gail Lockrum, was "required by pregnancy" to marry Floyd Langan. Now the two live together in a single-wide trailer on Floyd's parents' property. Gail's baby, Ned, is now four months old. Upon entering Gail and Floyd's home, Ree notes how controlling Floyd is, and how "stunned" Gail seems by her sudden role as a wife and mother.

Ree and Gail go into Gail's bedroom, where Ree fills her in on all that's been happening with her father's disappearance. Ree asks Gail if she will drive them down to Reid's Gap, where April lives. Gail tells Ree that she'll have to check with Floyd, and she does; he refuses to let the girls borrow the car. Ree tells Gail that she is disappointed in her blind obedience to her husband. Gail tells Ree that she suddenly feels tired, and asks her to leave.

Though Gail is a mother and Ree is not, Gail seems less suited than Ree by far to the role of motherhood. Gail and Floyd's unhappy, unwanted union seems to perpetuate the cycle of inherited despair and violence within these Ozark communities, and their rather childish arguments betray the ubiquity of a larger, festering epidemic.



Ree's best friend has come under the control of a verbally abusive, emotionally unavailable man. Ree is only slightly less shocked than Gail by her friend's new role, and looks down on Gail's dependence on and subservience to her husband. Ree clearly values her independence greatly.



CHAPTER 8

Ree walks home. After a while she sits down on a big rock and puts her headphones on. She plays one of her **tapes**—*The Sounds of Tropical Dawn*—and watches the snow fall.

The tapes symbolize a chance at escape for Ree, and she listens to them in times of distress as a way to visualize a different life for herself.



CHAPTER 9

Ree washes Connie's hair in the sink, showing Sonny and Harold how to properly care for her. While combing her mother's hair dry by the stove, Ree reminisces about her childhood, and about watching her mother get dressed up to go out on dates while Jessup was in jail. Her mother had once been beautiful and engaging, and had an affair with Blond Milton that resulted in Sonny's conception.

Ree continues instructing Harold and Sonny in the duties that they'll one day need to perform, suggesting that there is little place in this community for a happy or carefree childhood. She feels badly that they cannot remember better days, when their mother was not just lucid but vibrant.



CHAPTER 10

Ree, Sonny, and Harold wait for the school bus while coyotes howl in the hills. Harold wonders aloud if the three of them should set food out for the coyotes. Sonny says the three of them should shoot the coyotes, and Harold says that even though he's fearful of them he still wouldn't want to shoot them. Ree explains to Harold that setting food out for the coyotes, then, would only draw them into shooting range. The bus arrives, and Ree and her brothers board it.

Harold feels bad for the hungry and howling coyotes and wants to feed them, but Ree insists that leaving food out would just lure them into the open, where they could be shot by anyone. The coyotes are a metaphor here for Sonny and Harold themselves; Ree is doing her best to ensure that her brothers will never be so defenseless or so easily lured into dangerous situations.



Once the bus pulls up to the boys' school, Ree warns Sonny and Harold not to get into any fights unless they do so in order to defend one another from troublemakers or bullies. Ree disembarks the bus and hitchhikes her way to Hawkfall, a "creepy [and] sacred" valley where some members of her extended family live.

When Ree arrives, a young woman emerges from one of the Hawkfall houses and asks who she is. Ree introduces herself as a Dolly from Rathlin Valley; the woman says it "might as well be Timbuktu." Ree explains that she is looking for Little Arthur, a friend of her father's. The woman somewhat reluctantly offers to bring Ree to Little Arthur's house. On the way to Little Arthur's, the woman introduces herself to Ree as Megan; Megan concedes that she does know Ree and recognizes her from some extended family reunions. Megan says that she knows who Ree's father is, but has never spoken with him. Ree tells Megan that Jessup is a **crank** chef; Megan replies that "they all [are] now."

As they approach Little Arthur's house, Megan warns Ree: "if he's been runnin' on **crank** for a day or two, you should just leave." Little Arthur opens the door, and asks Ree if he's been in her dreams. Ree tells Little Arthur that she is looking for her father. Arthur insists that he hasn't seen Jessup since the spring, when he'd come up to Rathlin Valley for a weekend. While staying there, Little Arthur had given Ree psychedelic mushrooms, and the two had slept together. Afterwards, Ree had considered turning Little Arthur into her father, but ultimately decided against it. Ree begs Little Arthur for her father's whereabouts, but he insists that he hasn't seen him. Little Arthur offers Ree and Megan crank and marijuana, and when they refuse, he sends them out of the house.

Megan tells Ree that if she wants information, she should go up the hill and request an audience with Thump Milton, though she advises Ree that he probably won't be willing to talk with her. Ree refuses, telling Megan that Thump Milton scares her. "Scared's not a bad way to be about him," Megan tells Ree, but insists that Thump is the only person who might have an answer as to her father's whereabouts. She warns Ree to be "careful [not to] say I sent you," and sends her up the mountain, reassuring her that "it's been this way with our people forever."

Ree wants her brothers to be strong, but not stupid. She urges them not to fight unless they absolutely have to, wanting to discourage any violent nature they might have (and also possibly to avoid creating any new family grudges or feuds).



Though Megan pretends at first to not know who Ree is, she eventually reveals that she recognizes Ree as her kin. This defensive, manipulative way of interacting is shown throughout the rest of the novel to be characteristic of many of the residents of Hawkfall, a place Teardrop has warned Ree not to go. However dangerous the Dolly clan may be, the residents of Hawkfall are equally so—and possess the added threat of being only loosely related to the Dollys, and therefore untethered to the bonds and protections of family.



Ree is embarrassed by her history with Little Arthur, who is an older and slightly dangerous man. On the one hand, it's clear that (at least legally speaking) Little Arthur has raped Ree. He incapacitated her with drugs, after all, and she was also too young to consent. Nonetheless, what Ree thinks about what happened is ambiguous. While the encounter may be upsetting to the reader, Ree herself doesn't seem all that upset about it, and the book doesn't describe the encounter in violent terms (unlike the brutality that pervades the rest of the narrative). That Ree considers getting Little Arthur in trouble with her father afterwards suggests that she knows something wasn't right, but she doesn't actually seem upset about what happened and focuses instead on the power this gives her over Little Arthur—power that she might use to her benefit now that she's hunting for Jessup. It's possible to read Ree's lack of upset about the encounter with Little Arthur as a broader indictment of the community in which Ree lives: abuse and brutality are so common in Ree's life that it doesn't seem abnormal to her to have an intoxicated sexual encounter with her father's friend, whether or not she considers it rape.



Megan sends Ree on a mission to visit Thump Milton, though Megan herself seems not just wary but frightened of Thump, and reluctant to admit to any involvement in Ree's dealings with him. Megan too, though, is conscious of the old ways, and the code of respect between the many mountain clans.



CHAPTER 11

Ree climbs to Thump Milton's house, where an older woman in an apron, Merab, stands outside the front door. The woman calls out to Ree, and tells her that she is probably in the wrong place. Ree introduces herself, and explains that she is looking for Thump Milton, but the woman tells Ree to get away. Ree pleads with the woman, telling her that "some of [their] blood is the same." Merab tells Ree to wait, though Thump Milton probably won't agree talk to her, and goes inside the house.

After almost an hour, Merab emerges from the house and tells Ree that Thump Milton will not speak with her. "Talkin' just causes witnesses," she says, "and he don't want for any of those." Ree, indignant, tells Merab she will continue to wait until Thump Milton grows "weary." Merab reenters the house.

While waiting outside Thump Milton's house, Ree distracts herself from the cold by trying to name all of the Miltons in her family. There are near-countless men with the same name, as "to have but a few male names in use was a tactic held over from the olden ways," in order to cause confusion for the authorities and make it difficult for them to keep official records on the Dollys. Boys named Jessup, Arthur, Haslam, or Milton, Ree notes, are destined for a certain kind of life: a life of crime, a life lived along the "beaten Dolly path" of cyclical violence.

After a long time, Merab comes out from the house once again, this time with a cup of soup for Ree. She tells her to drink it and be on her way. Merab tells Ree that Thump Milton knows she is here, and that he "knows what [she] want[s] to ask and don't want to hear it." She tells Ree to leave, and to not come back. Ree hands Merab her soup cup and then, indignant, shouts loudly toward the house—she accuses Thump Milton of not counting blood "for diddly" and "hope[s] he has a long life full of nothin' but hiccups'n the runs." Merab hurls the cup at Ree's head; it misses and smashes against the side of the chicken coop. "Just don't," Merab says, and she points at the broken cup.

CHAPTER 12

Ree walks home along the railroad tracks, considering the ruins of old Dolly homes all around her. There was once an "old bitter reckoning" between the Hawkfall clans and the Rathlin Valley clans, and Ree thinks that "like most fights that never finished, it had to've started with a lie."

In the face of a dead end, Ree clings desperately to her blood ties with the Thump clan. Merab seems moved to action by the mention of blood, though she knows that her husband will not be as easily swayed.



Merab ultimately values silence over allegiance to relatives, but doesn't account for Ree's stubbornness and reluctance to accept her and her husband's decision.



Ree's anxiety over reaching a dead end in the search for her father causes her to spin inward and think obsessively about the inescapable traditions that bind her family to a culture of secrecy, debts, and violence.



Merab knows she cannot give Ree what she needs—an audience with Thump—and seems initially in this passage to be trying to help Ree act on behalf of her own best interest. Ree, however, is so disappointed by Thump for what she sees as a betrayal of the codes by which both their clans survive (loyalty to blood relations, assistance in desperate times, retaliation against enemies) that she pushes Merab to physical violence.



Ree, though disappointed by the notable absence of answers that greeted her in Hawkfall, is at least willing to acknowledge that the bitterness between her family's clan and the Rathlin Valley clans is beyond her influence—at least for now.



Ree finds shelter inside a cave. She starts a fire and urinates near the entrance to keep animals away. Ree thinks of how during the schism between clans, the Dollys lived in caves after fleeing from Hawkfall, and eventually developed a “snarling tribal anger.”

Ree falls asleep, thinking of what might have become of Jessup. She wonders if he is dead and buried, or, if he’s dead, if he was buried at all.

Ree’s survival skills are on display in this chapter. She attributes these skills to ancient instincts, passed down from her willful and hardy ancestors.



Ree’s father’s whereabouts are never far from her mind; she hopes that he is, even perhaps in death, cared for.



CHAPTER 13

Ree continues her walk home; all the while, ice and snow melt all around her. Ree pauses on a bridge that delivers her passage across a frozen creek and looks down over the edge of it, trying to see beneath the ice. She realizes that her “eyes [are unconsciously] search[ing] for a body.” Ree falls to her knees and cries.

Ree reckons with the fact that her father’s death is an increasingly likely possibility. Her realization that the expectation of violence is so ingrained in her is devastating and, in a way, shameful to her.



CHAPTER 14

Ree arrives home and falls asleep. When she wakes, it is late afternoon, and her brothers are hungry. On the stove there is a pot full of “basketti,” a tomato soup-and-noodle concoction that her brothers cooked when she didn’t return home the day before. Ree decides to teach her Sonny and Harold how to cook potatoes, but before she can get started, Blond Milton flies into the house in a rage, telling Ree that “there’s people goin’ round sayin’ you best shut up...people you oughta listen to.” He beckons Ree outside, and tells her to get into his truck, saying that he has something to show her. Ree leaves her brothers, shouting instructions for cooking the potatoes.

In Ree’s absence, her brothers have attempted to provide for themselves and for Connie, but have shown that their skills in this department are still greatly lacking. Ree hustles to teach the boys a new skill—cooking potatoes, a hearty food that might sustain them in her absence, should she leave again. Blond Milton’s angry appearance startles Ree, but she humors him, as she’s aware that he might have answers to Jessup’s whereabouts.



Blond Milton drives Ree far out into the mountains. They eventually reach a burned-out house with a blown-open roof. Blond Milton tells Ree that the house is the last place “[he] or anybody” has seen Jessup. Ree protests, telling Blond Milton that her father was known for never blowing up labs or cooking bad batches of **crank**. Milton insists that accidents happen.

The devastated shell of the meth lab is the most striking visual we have, thus far, of the extreme violence and decay that can seize upon parts of this community quite suddenly. We are finally able to get a sense of the immediacy and omnipresence of such destruction.



Ree gets out of the car and goes up to the house to take a look, though Milton tries to discourage her, warning that the fumes and debris are toxic. Inside the wreckage of the house, Ree finds that there are weeds growing chin-high out of the holes in the floorboards. Ree walks back to the truck, and she and Blond Milton drive in silence back to Rathlin Valley.

Ree’s discovery of the weeds growing inside the meth lab signal to her—and to the reader—that this house has been abandoned for a while, and that Blond Milton is deliberately attempting to mislead and silence Ree.



When they arrive at the house, Blond Milton offers to take Sonny—his biological son—off of her hands, and raise him as his own. Ree refuses. She tells Blond Milton to “go to hell,” and that she would rather raise her brothers in a cave than send either of them to live with Blond Milton. Ree tells him that she knows the blown **meth** lab was a distraction, meant to shut her up and throw her off the trail of her father’s disappearance, and she goes inside the house.

Blond Milton, though Sonny’s biological father, is, in Ree’s eyes, deeply unfit to care for him. So enraged is Ree by this suggestion that she reveals to Blond Milton that she knows he was attempting to deceive her, and that she will continue her quest for answers.



CHAPTER 15

Ree storms into the house and goes straight to her bedroom closet. She takes out two shotguns and several boxes of shells, dropping the boxes in the pocket of her coat. She calls for Sonny and Harold to follow her out to the front porch, where she begins to load up the guns. She tells her brothers that it’s time that they learned how to properly shoot a gun, and instructs them to set up some tin-cans out on a nearby hill for target practice. Her brothers excitedly do so.

If Harold and Sonny’s “basketti” concoction wasn’t enough to push Ree to train them more diligently in survival skills, Blond Milton’s deception and subsequent offer—or threat—of guardianship definitely was. Ree literally arms the boys, hopeful that they’ll be able to protect themselves should the need arise.



Sonny and Harold love learning how to shoot, and once Ree is satisfied with their progress, she calls the lesson to an end. Sonny then sees a figure approaching, and Ree readies a shotgun. Once the figure draws closer, Ree realizes it is Gail and her baby. Ree laughs and embraces Gail, telling her she “knew she wouldn’t eat shit [from her husband] for long.”

Ree is so prepared for violence that any visitor is seen as a potential intruder or assailant. Gail’s arrival is a relief on several levels, and it proves to Ree that her best friend is just as resilient as she hoped—a sign of potential for independence and female empowerment, however small.



CHAPTER 16

Gail tells Ree that her husband has been cheating on her; he has been visiting his high school sweetheart, she says, at least twice a week. “It’s her he wants. I’m just what he’s got,” Gail says. She then asks Ree if she still needs to get down to Reid’s Gap; Ree says that she does. Gail pulls a key ring out of her pocket, and tells Ree that she’s taken her in-laws’ truck.

Gail and Floyd’s marriage perpetuates a cycle of deception and disloyalty; if unrepaired, it will lead to bad blood and potential violence between their families. Gail’s turn toward independence excites Ree, though, and gives her hope that Gail’s fate is not set in stone.



Gail and Ree, with baby Ned in tow, begin their drive to Reid’s Gap. Gail tells Ree that she asked her father if he knew where Ree’s father was, and that he wouldn’t answer her.

Though not a part of the Dolly clan proper, it’s clear that Gail’s family has some sort of knowledge as to Jessup’s disappearance.



As Gail drives, Ree reminisces about how she and Gail used to practice kissing with each other when they were younger, and how the first time Ree kissed a boy, he paled in comparison to Gail. The girls approach Reid’s Gap, and Ree directs Gail to April’s house.

In the face of male incompetence at each and every turn, Gail and Ree have had to depend on each other all their lives for strength, companionship, and education.



April is glad to see Ree. Ree tells April that she is looking for her father, and April tells Ree that though she “quit keepin’ company” with Jessup “a good while ago,” she “might know a thing or two” as to his whereabouts. She reveals to Ree that a few weeks back, she ran into Jessup at a bar—“he was with three fellas who looked a little rough,” she says, and notes that “they didn’t look to be havin’ no fun, nor wantin’ to.” April got a bad feeling, she says, when Jessup looked right at her but pretended not to recognize her—she thinks that Jessup was protecting her by acting as if he didn’t know her, and April has not been able to stop wondering what exactly he was trying to protect her from.

Though April contributed to the destruction of Ree’s parents’ marriage—and her mother’s sanity—Ree still feels a tenderness toward her, and April’s ability to give Ree information about her father’s whereabouts is a saving grace after so many dead ends. Ree, Gail, and April share the bond of womanhood in a male-dominated society, and April’s intuition as to Jessup’s endangerment shows that she cares for him still. The ominous nature of her observations, though, is worrisome, and spurs Ree on.



CHAPTER 17

On the drive back to Rathlin Valley, Ree and Gail are held up at the Twin Forks River by a farmer and his wife—a rockslide has damaged their hog pen, and fifty or so hogs have escaped through the gap in the pen onto the road. While the farmers corral their herd, Gail nurses Ned. Ree gets out of the truck to go help the farmers, and as she is assisting them, she hears the sound of a familiar motor. She looks over her shoulder and sees Jessup’s Capri coming down the road. Ree attempts to wave the car down, but whoever is driving makes a U-turn and heads in the opposite direction.

Rural life impedes on Ree’s journey here literally as well as metaphorically. Yet Ree’s goodness and her understanding of both duty and the interconnectedness of her community inspires her to help her neighbors. When Ree spots her father’s car so close to April’s house, she is full of hope—but when the car ominously turns away, Ree is distressed and confused.



Ree runs back to the truck, where Gail is changing Ned. Ree tells Gail that she saw her father’s car, and that they need to follow it. Gail tries to chase the car’s tail lights, but is unable to go fast enough to keep up. The truck spins out, and Gail suggests they abandon the chase and head home. Ree agrees, deciding that whoever was driving couldn’t have been her father: “Why would he be runnin’,” she asks, “if he saw me wavin’?”

Gail’s motherly duties are interrupted; this is a metaphor for how violence and mayhem permeate every aspect of this society, and how cyclical abandonment of everyday responsibilities in the face of urgent, unpredictable ones creates a culture of instability and, often, danger. The fact that someone else is probably driving Jessup’s car and doesn’t want Ree to see them is not a good sign.



CHAPTER 18

Ree, back at home, falls asleep while listening to one of her **nature tapes**. She is awakened by the sound of the knock at the front door. Ree goes to answer it, and finds Gail on the porch. Gail’s husband, angry with her for staying out so late at night, has refused to allow her to come home at all; he’s kept Ned at their trailer and sent Gail out into the night. Ree welcomes Gail inside, and the girls sit together by the fire.

After a stressful night, Ree is briefly transported elsewhere with the help of her tapes; she is brought back to harsh reality, though, by Gail’s reappearance. Gail’s husband’s rejection of her independent behavior speaks to the cyclical subjugation of individuals’ independent will—especially women’s independent will.



CHAPTER 19

Ree, Harold, and Sonny shoot at squirrels in the woods. After they've gotten three, Ree tells the boys to collect the squirrels and break the necks of the ones not yet dead. Ree asks the boys want the squirrels fried or stewed; they excitedly proclaim that they want to eat them fried. Ree agrees to cook the squirrels if the boys clean them.

Back at home, Gail emerges from the house, a cup of coffee in her hands. She watches while Ree tries to teach Sonny and Harold to skin and clean the squirrels, but the boys are squeamish. Ree tells her brothers that there is "a whole bunch of stuff you're goin' to have to get over bein' scared of." Gail and Ree encourage the boys to be brave, and soon both of them take to the task with ease and joy.

Ree is continuing her brothers' education in the art of survival. Here, we see that the prospect of eating meat of any kind is a luxury, and witness Ree's increasing desperation to instill in her brothers the capability to provide for themselves and their mother.



Gail and Ree already have been forced into wisdom and maturity beyond their years, as well as their roles as caretakers and providers. They hope to pass this knowledge down to the boys, and instill in them the necessity of being brave.



CHAPTER 20

After dinner, full and happy, Ree relaxes on the couch. She falls asleep and has strange, unsettling dreams, though, and when she awakens, Uncle Teardrop is standing over her. He tells her that the authorities found Jessup's car; it was set on fire and "burnt down to nothin'," though Jessup was not in the car at the time of its destruction.

Teardrop gives Ree money, and advises her to sell off the timber acres "while [she] can." he tells her that as soon as the land is repossessed, the trees will be the first thing to go, and that Ree might as well have the money from the sale of the land to herself. Teardrop offers Ree **crank**, asking if she has "the taste" for it yet. Ree refuses, and Teardrop leaves, remembering aloud how "the floor [of Ree's house] used to get to jumpin' from all the dancing. Everybody dancin' around, stoned out of their minds—and it always was the happy kind of stoned back then."

Teardrop's arrival with another piece of information is both welcome and foreboding. The violent destruction of Jessup's car signals that whoever was driving it by Reid's Gap is aware that Ree is onto them and is willing to do anything to avoid being discovered.



Teardrop tells Ree to betray the inheritance of the timberwoods for the sake of being able to live and provide. Teardrop's offering of practical wisdom, though, is mitigated by the reminder of his nonstop drug use. His longing for a time that is not only gone by, but impossible to return to, illustrates that he does care for Ree and her family, though, and that he's spurred by hope for happiness.



CHAPTER 21

Ree dresses Connie in a hat and a coat and leads her outside. They walk along a trail, and Ree remembers a time before her mother was ill, when they used to take such walks often. After a while, Ree and her mother sit on a tree stump for a rest. Ree pleads with her mother to help her decide what to do, but her mother is unresponsive. Ree pulls her mother to her feet, and they start the walk back to the house.

Ree, forced to assume Connie's role in the family, turns now to her for guidance—but Connie is, as usual, unable to provide for Ree. This is another harsh reminder that Ree is almost entirely alone, and that no adult is going to swoop in and make things easier for her.



CHAPTER 22

After dark, Floyd arrives at the house with Ned. Gail nurses Ned while Floyd pleads with her to come home. Gail tells him that things have to change, and Floyd agrees. She tells him that he needs to stop seeing Heather, but at that Floyd says nothing. He lights a cigarette and goes outside. He returns after a moment with Ned's diaper bag, drops it inside the house, and leaves. Ree reassures Gail that Floyd will come back, and Gail asks Ree if she noticed that "at least" Floyd didn't try to lie to her "this time."

Floyd attempts to restore his family to normalcy, but is unwilling to make the sacrifice that his wife demands in order to fulfill his own desire. He leaves Gail essentially on her own, unable to swallow his own pride and admit any wrongdoing.



CHAPTER 23

At the supermarket in town, Ree pushes a broken shopping cart through the aisles—Ned sits in the basket, and Gail helps with the shopping. While Ree picks out groceries, she wonders aloud to Gail what her father might have done. She says she "can't see [Jessup] squealin."

Even in the middle of banal, everyday tasks, Ree is unable to focus; she is consumed by the need to know her father's fate, and perturbed by the secrecy surrounding what he might have done, and how he might have paid for it.



Upon returning to the house, Ree sees a white car parked nearby; Blond Milton and another Dolly man are talking with a stranger. Ree approaches, and asks the stranger what he wants. He introduces himself as Mike Satterfield, and explains that he holds the bond on Jessup, who is now being classified as "a runner." Ree insists that her father didn't show in court because he must be dead. Jessup being dead, Mike says, would be "no good for nobody." Mike tells Ree that something has "felt a little funny from the giddy-up," and that the house and land didn't nearly cover all of Jessup's bond. He explains that a man came by his office one night, and left a sack of money to cover the rest of the bond. "It seemed," he says, "like somebody needed him sprung in a hurry." Mike tells Ree that the man who left the money did not give a name—the cash is "all he recall[s]."

The mystery of Jessup's disappearance deepens with the addition of Mike Satterfield's revelation of the fact that Jessup was hurriedly sprung from jail by a "stranger." Whether Mike was bribed with cash and now is withholding that individual's identity willingly or, through his own ignorance, truly doesn't know the stranger's identity, it's clear that more is at play in Jessup's disappearance than was originally assumed.



Mike tells Ree that she and her family have about thirty days left on their property before it's repossessed. Ree panics, and lunges at Mike, begging him to tell her that there's something she can do. Mike tells her there's nothing, and begins to walk away. After a few steps, he turns to face her; "nothin'," he says, "unless you can prove he's dead." Mike leaves, and Ree turns around to see Gail standing in the open doorway. "Don't you dare go back there," Gail tells Ree. They both watch Mike's car pull away. "How else is it goin' to happen?" Ree asks Gail.

The imminent loss of her home and property frightens Ree into violence and desperation. The need to prove that Jessup is dead overpowers, in this moment, any remaining emotional impact that the fact of his death might have had; the need to uncover the truth for her own sake, and for that of her brothers, is of paramount importance now.



CHAPTER 24

Ree, back in Hawkfall, climbs the hill to Thump Milton's house once again. She wears **her grandmother's coat**, but notes that it feels "heavy in the turning weather." Nevertheless, she keeps herself wrapped in it.

Ree approaches the house. Merab looks out the door, then emerges from the house holding a steaming mug. Two women follow her out of the house, and Ree notes that the three look to be relatives. Ree reaches for the cup, "and the world flush[s] upside down." The women begin to beat Ree to the ground and, once she is down, kick her with their heavy boots. Ree is kicked into silence, "sunk to a moaning place."

The weight of her duty to her family is heavy on Ree's shoulders. Returning to Hawkfall, she knows, will be fraught and dangerous, but she presses on anyway.



The Thump women don't even offer Ree an opportunity to explain herself—instead they resort immediately to an almost methodical violence, having warned her previously that her return or her continued investigation would be most unwelcome, and so simply acting as they feel they must. It's also worth noting that this central act of violence is perpetrated entirely by women against a woman—speaking again to the power of women in this society that is on the surface very patriarchal, but also showing how that power is not always a positive or supportive one.



CHAPTER 25

Ree regains consciousness. She is in extreme pain; she can taste blood in her mouth; she can feel that she has soiled herself and is missing two teeth. Two women stand over her, talking about how she must be "crazy" to have come to Thump Milton's. Ree sits up, insisting that she isn't crazy. Her teeth are on the ground beside her, and she places them in the pocket of **her grandmother's coat**. Merab approaches Ree calmly, telling her that she was "warned," and asking why she wouldn't listen. "I can't just listen," Ree says. She realizes that she is being kept in a barn; when she surveys her surroundings, she can see several other figures—men—standing by the door.

Megan crouches next to Ree and Merab and asks: "Whatever are we to do about you, baby girl?" Ree suggests that Megan kills her. Megan tells her that idea's been said already. "Help me," Ree says. "Ain't nobody said that idea yet." The crowd at the door parts, and Ree can tell that Thump Milton has entered the barn. He approaches Ree and grabs her chin, "inspecting the damage." He tells Ree that if she's got something to say, she should say it now. Ree pleads with Thump Milton; she begs for his help in proving that her father is dead, for the sake of her brothers and her mother. Thump Milton does not answer her, but stands and leaves the barn.

Ree lies down, sick and exhausted, covered in her own blood and excrement. She can hear the men by the door talking; a truck is pulling up, and it is Teardrop's. One of the men goes to get a gun—"I ain't standin' here naked when [he] walks in and sees [his niece] beat silly."

Ree's total decimation in the face of such extreme violence is difficult to watch. The acts perpetrated against her were designed to inspire shame and revulsion, and the insistence that she's "crazy" designed to discredit and even further undermine her search for truth. Even in her weakened state, though, Ree insists that she will not give up, and by placing her teeth in her grandmother's coat, she shows through visual metaphor that she still is prepared to attend to her familial duties.



Ree continues to beg for help, unable to understand why it's continually been denied to her. Thump Milton's long-awaited arrival then seems to signal that a point of deliverance has come at last; she has finally gotten to the man who might be able to answer her questions and solve her problems, once and for all. His silence, though, confirms that even after being subjected to extreme violence, Ree is still not, in his view, worthy of the information she so desperately desires.



Teardrop's arrival inspires fear even in Thump's men—however violent and terrifying these people are, they have a match in Ree's fearsome "savior."



Teardrop enters the barn and asks who was responsible for beating Ree. Merab insists that no man touched her; that she herself and her sisters are responsible for Ree's condition. Thump Milton returns, and tells Teardrop to explain himself. Teardrop insists that he never asked after Jessup or went looking for him, and that though "what Jessup [did] was against [their] ways," Ree should not be held responsible. He tells Thump Milton that he has come to collect Ree and take her home. Thump Milton asks Teardrop if he's "willin' to stand for [Ree.]" Teardrop says that he is. "She's now yours to answer for," Thump tells Teardrop, and instructs his men to put Ree in Teardrop's truck.

Teardrop implies that if Ree had been beaten by men, he'd have to—and be able to— physically retaliate; because Merab and her sisters delivered the beating, though, he cannot. Thump's reappearance and his conversation with Teardrop reveal that Ree is really the only one in the dark as to Jessup's transgressions and his resulting fate. Teardrop assumes responsibility for Ree here, a tremendous act that holds a hallowed weight in this community.



CHAPTER 26

On the drive home, Teardrop gives Ree a shotgun to hold "for if they come." He pulls a baby-bottle of **crank** from the glove box and snorts from it. He tells Ree that she "owns" him now—if she does anything wrong, Teardrop will have to answer for her. He explains that her father is dead because he "turned snitch." Jessup couldn't handle the blow of another busted lab, and so began talking to Sheriff Baskin, but refused to give up any Dollys, or anybody from Rathlin Valley. Teardrop tells Ree that even if she finds out, she should never tell Teardrop who killed Jessup—"knowin' that," he says, "[would] just mean [I'd] be toes-up myself purty soon."

Ree is Teardrop's responsibility now. He is sure to remind her of the gravity of the situation, and, as he doesn't want her getting in any more trouble now that he must "answer" for her, he reveals to her the fact that Jessup snitched and gave up several people to the sheriff's department. Teardrop knows that his rationality can only carry him so far, and warns Ree to never reveal to him who killed Jessup, lest his anger (and perhaps a sense of familial duty for revenge) force him to hunt that person down and wind up in trouble himself.



CHAPTER 27

Back at home, Gail helps Ree to clean herself. Ree is in tremendous pain, and she soaks in the bathtub, unable to focus on anything but her hurt.

Gail cares for Ree tenderly, in the absence of anyone else who might be able to.



CHAPTER 28

The women of Rathlin Valley pay Ree a series of visits. They fuss over her injuries and talk badly about the Thump women, remarking that "there's never no call to do a girl like that." Sonya gives Gail some pain pills for her to feed to Ree, instructing her to start with two and then "build from there to whatever number lets her rest."

The women of Rathlin Valley take gentle care of Ree in a stark contrast to the Hawkfall women, who inflicted such physical and psychological damage upon her. The community comes together and provides for Ree, illustrating their duty to one another in times of need.



CHAPTER 29

Victoria visits Ree, who is trying, through a sleepy haze, to figure out how she will move all of her family's furniture out of the home and into a cave, where she, her mother, and her brothers can make a new home—just as their ancestors once did. Victoria leaves, and then Harold and Sonny come to comfort Ree. They ask her questions about her assailants, but Ree tells them to let her sleep. In the midst of terrible dreams, Gail offers Ree some more pills. When Ree gets up to go to the bathroom, she sees Uncle Teardrop sitting on the couch, a rifle propped up against the arm.

Teardrop tells Ree that she took her beating as well as a man, but that he's not "big on trust" and wants to keep an eye on her. Ree tells Teardrop that she feels "shamed" that Jessup turned snitch. Teardrop tells Ree that Jessup loved her and her brothers, and "that's where he went weak."

Ree asks Teardrop if their family will be forever shunned from now on. He tells her that "The Dollys around here can't be seen to coddle a snitch's family—that's always been our way." But, he says, "that shunning can change, some. Over time." Teardrop tells Ree that people have noticed how strong she is. Ree tells Teardrop that he has always scared her. "That's 'cause you're smart," he says. Ree goes back to bed and falls into a deep sleep.

Ree retreats into her mind, so overwhelmed by pain, shame, and devastation over her father's betrayal. The realization that, through all of this, Teardrop has been watching over her, comes as a surprise—but also as an affirmation of the values of familial duty and care.



Even though Jessup committed what is seen as a cardinal sin within their community, Teardrop is able to comfort Ree with the fact that he did it, at least in part, to help protect his own wife and children.



The fate of being shunned is a terrifying prospect in Ree's view. In hard times, she is dependent on care and supplies from her relatives, and doesn't know how she'll survive without it. Luckily, Teardrop reassures Ree that she has made her mark on the community; her father's sins, perhaps, will not be considered her burden to bear.



CHAPTER 30

Ree eats breakfast and sends her brothers off to school. Harold offers to fight a couple of boys from Hawkfall who are in his grade, but Ree tells him not to. Ree sits in her mother's rocker and dozes—she briefly has a frightful vision of herself turning into her mother, lost to the world and "crazy." Gail, after washing up the breakfast dishes, tells Ree that there is somewhere she wants to take her. Before they leave, Ree gets a shotgun out of her bedroom to bring along.

On the way out to the truck, Ree and Gail see some Dolly women off in the distance talking hushedly with some Hawkfall women. Gail notes that it "looks like Sonya's tellin' 'em shit—looks to me like Sonya's took up for you."

While driving, Gail asks Ree what her plans are. Ree tells Gail that she will send Sonny to live with Sonya and Blond Milton, and that she "guesses" she'll "carry Mom to the [hospital and] leave her on the steps." As for Harold, she plans to "beg Victoria'n Teardrop to take [him] in."

In the aftermath of her attack Ree is both more defensive and more wary of trouble. She's never encouraged Harold's fighting, but she's even more careful now to warn him against it. At the same time, she's fearful for her own personal safety, making sure to arm herself when leaving her house for the first time since her assault.



With tensions between the women of Rathlin Valley and Hawkfall at a high, it's becoming clearer to Ree that women influence more of their community than she'd previously known.



Ree's desperation shines through here, as her lessened ability to care for her family in her weakened state has caused her to question whether she'll be able to care at all for them once their land is gone.



Gail and Ree arrive at Bucket Spring—a freezing lake that Gail hopes will help to soothe and heal Ree's wounds. The girls build a fire, strip, and then take turns swimming. Gail tells Ree that she plans on returning home to Floyd, for Ned's sake; plus, she says, she doesn't want to be in the middle of Ree's troubles. Ree assures Gail that the Thumps are done with her, but Gail insists Ree "can't know what's gonna happen." The girls get dressed and extinguish their fire, and Ree asks Gail if Floyd and his father might want to buy the timberwoods. "If we got to sell," Ree says, "I'd rather it be to you."

Gail decides that the cyclical disappointment she faces in her husband's home is, though painful, ultimately safer for herself and her child than the threat of physical violence she faces as a guest of Ree's. When Ree offers the timberwoods to Gail, she demonstrates an act of pure friendship, and a chance for each of them to prosper; Ree needs the money, and Gail needs a stake in something other than her loveless marriage.



CHAPTER 31

At home, Ree takes two kinds of pills and spends the day in bed. Harold and Sonny return home from school and announce that they have "more snow days." Ree watches as snow piles on the windowsill, then takes another pill and waits for sleep to come.

Winter lingers outside while Ree convalesces. With every passing day, Ree's wounds heal, but the revocation of her home and land draws closer and closer.



CHAPTER 32

In the middle of the night, Teardrop comes for Ree and wraps her in her **grandmother's coat**. "Fuck this waitin' shit," he says. "Let's go out'n poke 'em where they live." Teardrop helps Ree into his truck and together they drive off. Teardrop is high on **crank** and agitated; he's tired, he says, of waiting around for something to happen. Ree takes a few drinks of whiskey and falls asleep, and when she opens her eyes again, she and Teardrop have arrived at a house that's unfamiliar to Ree. While Teardrop talks on the porch with some men, a couple of Dolly women approach Ree. One of them tells her that the Thump women "ganged" her in the same "yellow-bellied way" years before.

Teardrop, shielding Ree symbolically in her grandmother's coat, whisks her off into the night to take care of unfinished business. While seeking a way to get to the Thump clan, Ree realizes that word of her assault at their hands has spread, and that she is not the Thump women's only victim—nor is she the only one still angry.



Teardrop drives Ree around back roads, lamenting that he is too high to sleep, and that Victoria has given away all of his downers to Ree. Eventually, a siren sounds behind them, and Baskin pulls Teardrop over. The two of them nearly get into an altercation—Teardrop demands to know "who [Baskin] told about Jessup." Baskin pulls a gun on Teardrop, who shows Baskin his own rifle, then calmly drives away.

Teardrop's drug use frightens and disturbs Ree—it makes him reckless and fierce, and this behavior comes to a head in a run-in with Baskin, a reviled law enforcement figure whose involvement in Jessup's disappearance may or may not have been significant. Clearly the criminal underworld is just as powerful as the law enforcement in this community.



CHAPTER 33

The next morning, Ree, hungover and jittery, cleans out one of the hall closets. She shows her Harold and Sonny old photographs of their mother. Ree cleans out closets and crawl spaces, and instructs her brothers to take the things she throws out to the trash barrel and start a fire. From across the yard, Ree can see Sonya watching as the fire burns.

Ree is preparing to move out of her house, as she feels like her fate is sealed, and that soon she'll have no choice but to abandon her ancestral home. The letting-go process is a violent one for Ree, and a lonesome one.



CHAPTER 34

In the middle of the night, three fists knock at the door. Ree looks out the window and sees three women on the porch. She fetches her shotgun and opens the door. Merab and her sisters are out on the porch—they tell Ree to come with them, and that they are going to “fix [her] problem.” Ree tells Merab that she’d have to be crazy to go with them. “We’ll carry you to your **daddy’s bones**, child,” says Merab. One of the other women tells Ree that, if she refuses them now, they will not return with this offer again. “We need to put a stop to all this upset talk about us we’ve been havin’ to hear,” Merab says.

Ree hears her brothers come to the door behind her. She tells them to stay inside the house, and leaves the shotgun for them, at Merab’s orders. The women bring Ree to their car, place a burlap sack over her head, and start to drive.

When they arrive at their destination, Merab tells Ree that once the burlap sack is off her head, she should not try to memorize the place they’ve taken her in order to ever come back. Merab pulls the sack off of Ree’s head and leads her to an icy pond. Merab gives Ree an axe, and tells her she will need it to open the ice—Jessup, Merab says, “ain’t deep.” Ree walks out onto the ice and hacks at the surface of the pond; once she’s opened it up, she takes off **her grandmother’s coat** and plunges her hands into the water. Soon, she feels her father’s body.

Merab hands Ree a chain saw—“How else you goin’ to get his hands,” she asks. Ree refuses to operate the saw, so Merab takes control of it, sawing off **Jessup’s hands** while Ree protests, weeps, and vomits. After sawing off both hands, the Thump women walk Ree back to the car, strip her of her wet, freezing clothes, and wrap her in her **grandmother’s coat**.

CHAPTER 35

The next day, Baskin is called to come for **Jessup’s hands**. When he asks how Ree obtained the hands, she tells him that someone “flung em up on the porch” the night before. Baskin tells Ree that, the other night, he didn’t shoot at Teardrop only because Ree was with him in the car. Ree tells Baskin that it looked to her like Teardrop “backed [him] down.” Baskin stomps off the porch, and screams, without looking back at Ree, “Sometimes I get so fuckin’ sick of you goddamn people.”

The Thump women, perturbed by the “upset talk” that’s been following them around since their vicious assault on Ree, offer to repay her for the attack—and, presumably, put an end to the gossip about it—by bringing her to her father’s corpse. However, the fact that the offer is “one time only,” so to speak, highlights the imbalance of power that remains between the Dollys and the Thumps.



Ree does not want her brothers in harm’s way, and she is willing to forgo her own safety to ensure theirs. The Thump women show Ree that they can still control her physically through the use of the burlap sack.



Shielded by her grandmother’s coat, Ree makes her way out onto the ice to begin the work laid out for her; however, it’s more violent and grisly than she could have ever imagined, and as she removes her grandmother’s coat in order to better attend to the task at hand, she symbolically breaks the cycle of secrecy and violence in her family while still, in a way, succumbing to its effects in one final test.



The novel’s climax is a nightmarishly violent “exhumation” of the secrets Ree has been confronted with throughout the book. Once Ree is finished with the task of collecting her father’s severed hands, necessary to prove his death to the authorities, the Thump women wrap Ree in her grandmother’s coat, symbolizing that her duty to her family has been fulfilled.



Ree is still unable to be honest with Baskin—he’s untrustworthy now more than ever, and he shows his hand by shirking his professional demeanor for a pained cry. Baskin sees himself as better than the Dollys, though he perhaps realizes, as a result of his encounter with Teardrop, that he could find himself at their mercy at any time.



When Ree's brothers arrive home from school, she tells them that their father is dead and gone for good. Both boys tell Ree that they "already pretty much knew."

The boys, too, have been changed by the events of the novel. They seem more mature now, and inured to the concept of their father's death.



The following day, Ree cleans out her father's shed. She finds a pair of his old boxing gloves, and, when Sonny and Harold come home from school, she gives them the gloves and teaches them how to fight.

Ree seems to still be preparing to be evicted from her home, even though she's given evidence of her father's death to Baskin..



A while later Teardrop arrives at the house, and Ree thinks that he looks tired and unshaven. He watches while the boys fight. Teardrop tells Ree that if she needs money, he can help her earn some. Ree tells Teardrop that she will never touch **crank**. "There's other stuff to do, too, if you'll do it," Teardrop says.

Teardrop wants to continue to help Ree; his offers of work and money, though, seem to come with strings attached. Ree's staunch refusal to get involved with drugs, even after all she's been through, speaks to her unmovable stubbornness and resilient character.



Headlights then approach on the road to the house; it is Mike Satterfield, and he approaches the house with a plastic sack in hand. He hands Ree the sack, telling her it "looks like [she] earned this with blood." The sack is full of cash, the remainder of Jessup's bond, posted by the stranger with no name. Satterfield tells Ree that though she's not old enough to legally work for him, she'd "be like gold" as a bond collector because of her connection to so many Dollys.

Satterfield attempts to capitalize on Ree's wiliness as well as her connections to the large network of the Ozark underworld. His offer of work, like Teardrop's, is perhaps meant at least partly in good faith, but similarly seeks to pull Ree into a dangerous line of work—though when it comes down to it, it doesn't seem like there will be much else available to her.



Mike leaves, and Teardrop tells Ree that he now knows who killed Jessup. Ree embraces Teardrop, and then he leaves. Ree sits down on the top step of the porch. Sonny and Harold come to sit by her, and ask her if the money means she will leave them. She assures them she will not. Sonny asks what they'll do with the money, and what the first thing they'll buy will be. Ree tells him: "Wheels."

Teardrop's realization is quiet and mysterious, and he leaves with hardly a word—to be alone or to exact revenge, we can't be sure. Sonny and Harold cling to Ree, hoping that she will not flee their lives together at the first opportunity. Ree, however, is bound more than ever to her family, and promises to stay with them and hopefully make for them a better future by getting them a car—which would mean a greater possibility for independence and upward mobility.





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