

# **Flat Out Love Study Guide**

## **Flat Out Love by Jessica Park**

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## Plot Summary

Flat-out Love by Jessica Park is the story of Julie Seagle and her first trip into the real world. Julie leaves Ohio to attend her freshman year at Whitney College in Boston. When she arrives, she learns that her new apartment is actually a burrito restaurant. Julie and her mother have been scammed. Julie stands on the sidewalk with her luggage and stares at the building. Then, she calls her mother and tells her the news. Her mother is upset over the scam, but she is more worried about her daughter. When Mrs. Seagle receives no remedy to the situation when she calls Whitney College, she makes a second call to Erin Watkins, her old college roommate. Erin agrees to let Julie stay with her and her family until Julie is able to find a place to live. While Julie feels strange about the arrangement, she really has no choice.

Julie meets Matt, the Watkins' middle child. Matt picks Julie up in an old Volvo and apologizes for the lack of air conditioning. Julie arrives at the Watkins' house and is greeted with open arms by Erin and Matt's younger sister, Celeste. Matt had warned Julie that Celeste is "interesting."

Julie quickly learns that Celeste, a thirteen year old girl, speaks like a Victorian girl, thinks like a college professor, and is attached to a large cardboard cutout of her older brother Finn. Finn is off traveling and having his likeness, "Flat Finn," in the house makes Celeste feel more secure. Celeste has an anxiety disorder and has a great deal of difficulty coping with anything that is outside her usual routine. Julie hopes to help Celeste become a "normal" teenager, especially after she and Matt are informed that unless Celeste learns some social skills she will be kicked out of private school.

Julie learns quickly that Erin and Roger, the parents, are extremely busy people and rarely spend time at home. This means that Matt has the burden of caring for Celeste, making her meals, and taking her to and from school. Julie thinks it is strange that Matt is acting more like a parent than a sibling on top of his demanding studies at MIT.

Julie befriends Finn, the oldest child, through Facebook. Finn shares pictures of his travels around the world and carries on long conversations with Julie. Julie hopes to learn about Celeste's problems so that she might be able to help the girl. Along the way, Julie falls in love with Finn.

Matt resents Julie's prying into the family life. The two have several arguments about it. The situation explodes when Celeste has a meltdown at a sleepover. Once again, Matt tells Julie to butt out that she does not know what is best for Celeste.

Through conversations with Finn and Matt, Julie begins to understand what is at the core of the family's many problems. Matt finally admits that Finn is dead and he has been posing as Finn on Facebook and sending Celeste gifts and letters from Finn. Celeste is aware that Finn is dead because she witnessed the car accident in which he was killed. Flat Finn and the ruse that Finn is traveling is Celeste's way of coping.



Julie becomes furious with Matt for lying to her and pretending to be Finn. Julie moves out of the house.

Celeste and Julie continue to be friends. Julie is pleased at Celeste's progress. Celeste announces that she is ready to give up Flat Finn and she throws a going away party. Julie is nervous about going to the house and seeing Matt. Roger tells Julie that Matt may have screwed up but that his heart was in the right place. Julie realizes that it was Matt she was in love with all along.

Celeste, Julie, and Matt take Flat Finn on his final journey – skydiving. Celeste believes that Finn would approve.



# Part One: Chapters 1-6

## Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 1, Julie has arrived in Boston, prepared to begin her career as a college freshman. She immediately realizes that her apartment is a burrito restaurant. She and her mother have been scammed. Julie stands on the sidewalk with her luggage and stares at the building. Then, she calls her mother and tells her the news. In turn, Julie's mother calls Whitney College but receives no help. She makes a second call to Erin Watkins, her old college roommate. They have not seen or talked to each other in years.

Meanwhile, Julie's updates her Facebook status.

"Julie Seagle Boston, Day 1: Refuse to refer to city as Beantown as would sound too touristy. Still, am full resident now despite not having actual residence." (Chap. 1, p. 8)

Julie's mother calls back to tell her daughter that Erin has agreed to take Julie in until she can find a place. Matt, Erin's son, is already on his way to pick Julie up at the burrito restaurant.

Matt arrives in a blue Volvo. He introduces himself to Julie and apologizes for the lack of air conditioning. The Watkins live nearby. Just as they arrive at the house, Matt warns Julie about his little sister Celeste, saying she is "interesting." Julie says she likes interesting people.

In Chapter 2, Julie arrives at her temporary home. She meets Erin, her mother's college roommate. Erin shows Julie to her room while Matt complains in the background that he needs to speak to his mother.

Julie's room had once been inhabited by a boy. The room is decidedly male, but it doesn't bother Julie. Julie thinks it is nice to be in new surroundings. Perhaps, people in her new life will be better able to understand her.

Julie settles in and updates her friends telling them she is now in safe haven. Julie speaks to Matt and gets to know a little about him and the family.

In Chapter 3, Julie sees the first sign of Celeste's quirky behavior during dinner. Celeste insists that a place be set at the table for Flat Finn, a large cardboard cutout of her older brother who is off traveling in parts unknown. Celeste speaks to Flat Finn as if he was a real person. No one seems to think this is odd behavior; or, if the family does, it is not mentioned.

Julie notices that the entire family is extremely intelligent and never seems to stop talking. Celeste tells Julie about Finn's travels. Roger fills Julie in on his latest research project studying shrimp culture.



At the beginning of Chapter 4, Julie and Celeste are sitting on the couch in the living room and study Julie's course catalog. Celeste helps Julie to pick out the courses she will take. Celeste seems to be very knowledgeable on the subject, having helped Finn with his choices when he attended Brandeis.

Celeste asks Julie to show her some pictures from back home. Julie shows Celeste many photos, including the ones taken at her going away party. Celeste says Flat Finn would also enjoy looking at the photos. Celeste tells Julie which pictures Flat Finn wants to see.

After Celeste has gone to bed, Julie asks Matt about Flat Finn. Matt becomes upset and refuses to discuss the matter with her. After he calms down, he offers to take Julie apartment hunting the next day.

In Chapter 5, Julie and Matt trudge around Boston with a realtor looking at apartments. Julie dislikes the realtor who has, thus far, shown her substandard living arrangements.

"Well, this is obviously the apartment I was meant to have. No wonder the one in Jamaica Plain didn't work out. It was a sign from God that I needed to find this gem. The cockroaches are a nice bonus. I've always wanted to live with animals. And I can make extra money working as a hooker." Chap. 5, p. 31

Matt plays along with Julie's sarcasm which is not appreciated by the realtor. Julie decides to give up and to scour Harvard Square for flyers advertising for roommates.

Matt experiences first hand Julie's irrational fear of escalators when she steps on by mistake and is forced to ride it to the top. Julie collapses and has a panic attack. She is embarrassed but makes it clear that there will be no escalators in her future.

Julie learns that Matt takes Celeste to and from school every day, cooks breakfast and packs her lunch, as well as staying home with her in the evening. All of this is on top of his schoolwork. Julie is puzzled by the amount of attention paid to a teenager.

In Chapter 6, Julie tries to contact potential roommates but has no success. She continues to enjoy the conversations around the dinner table. Julie finds it strange that both Erin and Roger often return to work after dinner, leaving Matt to watch over Celeste.

Julie receives an email from her father, suggesting a three week vacation at Christmas. Julie is thrilled.

Julie logs on to Facebook and communicates with Finn. Julie quickly learns that Finn has a great sense of humor. She trades jokes online with Finn and Matt. Julie asks Finn how to get rid of the monsters in his room. Finn suggests singing anything from 2000-2006 because the monsters hate it. That night Julie can't sleep. She ends up singing and soon falls asleep.



## Analysis

Julie Seagle is a teenager on her own for the first time. Julie is not an average teen, meaning that she doesn't live for celebrity magazines, make-up, and boys. Instead, Julie is an intellectual who craves new experiences and the opportunity to be open about her love of literature and other academic pursuits. She does not like hiding her geeky self from her friends.

Julie's beginnings in Boston seem to denote a tragedy in the making; yet, it is really a blessing in disguise. Julie is surprised that her mother would reach out to her old college roommate whom she hasn't seen in many years. Julie will come to learn about the bonds that are formed in college and at such an age.

It does not take long for Julie to learn that the Watkins family is very unusual. Celeste certainly has psychological issues, but it is unclear what has caused them or if there is a possible solution. Julie inserts herself into the family very quickly and often questions Matt about Celeste's behavior. Julie is taken aback when Matt tells her to mind her own business.

Julie's interactions with Finn quickly turn into an obsession which foreshadows a potential relationship.

### Discussion Question 1

How did Julie come to be stranded in Jamaica Plain on her first day in Boston?

### Discussion Question 2

How does Julie attempt to deal with being so upset over not having a place to live?

### Discussion Question 3

What did Matt mean when he said Celeste is "interesting?"

## Vocabulary

airy, flinched, secure, specifically, glamorous, envisioned, crammed, scammed, non-existent, agitating, sniffed, excruciating, morose, touristy, radiated, sauna, delve, progressively, preferable, cultivate, ethnic, alumni, alternative



# Part One: Chapters 7-12

## Summary

In Chapter 7, Julie goes through orientation at school. She meets two students – Dana and Jamie – who seem to be normal people. After Julie returns home she receives a call from Matt asking her to pick up Celeste at school. Julie had learned that Matt takes Celeste to and from school every day. Matt reminds Julie to take Flat Finn along for the ride.

Julie makes her way to Celeste's school. Surprisingly, Celeste is fine with the fact that it is Julie, not Matt, that has arrived at school. On the way home Julie suggests stopping at the grocery store. Celeste says she never goes into stores and is vehemently against the plan. She changes her mind when she sees that Flat Finn is going to go, too. Celeste gives in and goes shopping with Julie.

In Chapter 8, Julie continues her conversations with Finn. Julie tells Finn that his mother has offered to let her stay at the house throughout the school year. It makes sense because Julie helps out with Celeste and it will also save Julie money on rent. Julie teases Finn that she is going to redecorate his room.

In Chapter 9, Celeste helps Julie unpack the rest of her belongings. Celeste reluctantly allows her fingernails to be painted. Julie tells her she can use the polish whenever she likes. Celeste isn't sure that Flat Finn approves but finally convinces him that it's okay.

Julie continues to get advice from Finn about Celeste.

Julie attends her first school party. She has a good time and returns home late, worried that she may have kept the car too long. Matt explains that his parents don't use their car so it isn't a problem.

Julie goes to her room and tries to find Finn online.

In Chapter 10, Julie continues to help Celeste change her appearance. Julie pulls Celeste's hair up in a clip and adds a scarf to her wardrobe. Celeste is nervous.

Julie starts school. She is surprisingly not nervous on her first day; she is excited. She and Dana have some classes together which is nice for them. Julie manages to find her way around the campus without getting lost. She does run late and worries that Celeste may be upset when she arrives. When Julie finds Celeste, she is happily listening to her MP3 player.

On the way home Julie suggests stopping at a coffee shop. Celeste objects as usual but Julie convinces her by saying Flat Finn also wants to go. Julie takes Celeste and Flat Finn into the store.





In Chapter 11, Julie takes Flat Finn and Celeste into Java Genius. She orders a coffee for herself and smoothies for Celeste and Flat Finn. Julie tries to explain that Flat Finn is part of a psych experiment. Seth, the barista, smiles and says he sees much stranger things in Cambridge.

Seth joins Julie, Celeste and Flat Finn at their table. Seth and Julie flirt while Celeste grills Seth about his life and intentions toward Julie. Seth and Julie make a date for Friday night.

In Chapter 12, Julie prepares for her evening with Seth. She kills time hanging out in Matt's room. Julie thinks it is strange that this is her first formal date. Seth arrives after getting lost.

## Analysis

Julie settles into school and into the Watkins' household as if she has been there for years. She is still intrigued by her upcoming classes and pleased to have met Dana and Jamie.

Julie is a fixer. Immediately upon entering the Watkins' house, she begins to see how she can change things about Matt and Celeste for the better. Julie often asks the advice of Finn with whom she is developing a fast friendship. Julie thinks Matt needs to have a life outside home and school. Celeste has many issues, one of which is acting like an adult with a nervous disorder. Celeste also has no friends and is shunned by the other kids in her class.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Julie convince Celeste to go shopping for the first time?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Julie do to save Celeste from being embarrassed at the coffee shop?

## Discussion Question 3

What is Julie's impression of Matt's geeky behavior?

## Vocabulary

espresso, distract, colleagues, frequent, formal, meaningless, incomprehensible, touch pad, lame, aspects, options, flatter, swivel, conveys, geek, groaned, unappealing, font



## Part Two: Chapters 13-17

### Summary

Part Two of the book begins with Chapter 13 as Julie is preparing to go home to Ohio for Thanksgiving. She almost wishes she was staying in Boston since she has so much work to do. Erin eases her load by giving her access to research materials at Harvard. Julie asks Erin about Finn as a student.

Julie refuses a ride to the airport. On her way she stops to see Dr. Cooley, her psych professor. Julie tells Dr. Cooley about the Watkins family and wants to get his opinion. Dr. Cooley says it is difficult to give an opinion but wants to hear more about the family, albeit in a hypothetical way. Julie explains about Erin, Matt, and Celeste. Dr. Cooley asks about Roger's role in the family. Julie asks for confirmation that there is something wrong in the house. Dr. Cooley says that most likely there is.

Dr. Cooley also points out that Julie is a "fixer," but she may not be able to fix this situation. He tells Julie to tread lightly.

When Julie arrives home for Thanksgiving, she is not excited about the feast like she has been in other years. In fact, for the first time, Julie has no interest in wearing her traditional Pilgrim hat. Julie dreads the family conversation which seems childish and boorish. Julie gets into an argument with her Uncle Pete about a class she is taking regarding the infrastructure of poverty. Julie storms off to her room. She spends the majority of her time at home ignoring her friends and working on her studies.

Julie finds herself missing Boston and the Watkins family more than she ever expected. She misses her outings with Celeste and time with Matt. Julie contacts Finn on Facebook and the two have a long chat exchanging pictures and stories about their lives.

Julie sits in the living room at the Watkins' house enjoying the fact that classes have been canceled due to weather and she gets to stay inside snuggled inside a blanket. Julie attempts to get Matt's attention several times, but he never looks up from his computer. She finally emails him and asks if he wants to build a snowman. They exchange several emails before deciding to go out into the snow.

Since Roger is still on his trip and Erin is at work, Matt is scheduled to attend a meeting at Celeste's school. Mr. Alberta, the guidance counselor, has important matters to discuss. Julie insists on attending with Matt.

Julie instantly develops a dislike for Mr. Alberta who has nothing but negative comments to make about Celeste. While it is true that Celeste is an excellent student, she has poor social skills. Mr. Alberta tells Julie and Matt that for that reason the school has decided Celeste would do better elsewhere. Julie argues the point more than Matt. Eventually, she gets Mr. Alberta to give Celeste six months to improve her social skills.



On the way home Matt and Julie have an argument. Once again, Julie pushes Matt to talk about Celeste's problems. Once again, Matt tells Julie to butt out.

In Chapter 17, Julie gets home and immediately tries to reach Finn. Finn finally gives in about telling Julie the basics of what has happened in the house. Finn's mother went through a time of serious depression. It left her unable to function. While his Dad was dealing with his mother's depression and Matt was just being Matt, Celeste became very attached to Finn.

After hearing the story, Julie relays her plans for Celeste to Finn. Finn supports Julie but tells her to be careful. Then, she tells her plan to Matt, who is less supportive. Matt finally gives in and takes Julie to the hardware store to get supplies.

## Analysis

Julie becomes so involved in the lives of the Watkins family that her old life seems to pale in comparison. She can no longer stand several members of her family whom she now sees as being boorish. Kate realizes that Julie is growing up and is pleased when she gets to share a midnight snack with Julie who insists on wearing the Pilgrim hat.

Julie continues to pry into the family's history, a place where she is clearly not welcome. Julie insists that she is merely trying to help Celeste. In some ways, that is true. Julie is a fixer, as Dr. Cooley described. She believes that she can fix Celeste and Matt, whom she sees as being an anti-social geek. Julie does not realize that she could be causing harm and self-esteem issues by pointing out flaws.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Julie so angry with Mr. Alberta?

## Discussion Question 2

How would you describe Julie's relationship with Finn?

## Discussion Question 3

What caused Erin to be absent from the family?

## Vocabulary

duffel, looped, indicator, navigating, hassle, condense, itinerary, whirlwind, outfits, hauling, calculus, poised, tweed, cardigan, streamlined, infringe, validity, partial, retell, bewitched, semester, dramatic, adequate



## Part Two: Chapters 18-23

### Summary

In Chapter 18, Julie makes her first suggestion to Celeste regarding Flat Finn. Julie suggests adding hinges so that Flat Finn can sit down. Celeste is hesitant but then finally agrees. Once the hinges are attached, Celeste is quite pleased with the change.

Celeste asks Matt to make lunch. Matt agrees. Julie is exasperated because part of her plan is to make Celeste fend for herself.

Julie makes a date with Seth. Celeste comes to Julie's room to paint her fingernails. Matt also stops by Julie's room, only to catch her smelling Finn's t-shirt. Julie is horrified at being caught.

Matt tells Celeste that a package came for her from Finn. It is a beautiful turquoise and silver barrette. Celeste reacts much as a child would with a new toy. Julie worries that Celeste will not change enough to be allowed to stay in school.

Julie checks in with Finn before going on her date with Seth. Julie wonders what Finn would think if he knew she had a boyfriend. Julie wonders if he would care.

Julie goes to Seth's apartment. For the first time, she chooses to take the elevator. On the way to Seth's floor, the elevator stops. Julie is stuck. She begins to panic immediately. Seth comes out and tells Julie to keep calm. Seth informs the fire department of the problem. He sings to Julie to keep her calm while she waits. Julie logs onto Facebook and finds Finn. She tells Finn what has happened. Finn tells Julie a story about skydiving to keep her distracted. The story completely envelops Julie. When she finally gets out of the elevator, she tells Seth that she can no longer see him. There is someone else in her life.

Julie gets home and calls Dana. She tells Dana about breaking up with Seth. Dana thinks it is strange that Julie has met someone online. She thinks it is less strange when she learns it is Finn. Dana asks to be set up with Matt.

Julie goes into the house and speaks with Erin. Erin seems to be somewhat puzzled that Finn has sent a present to Celeste. Julie questions Erin about her relationships with her children. While she loves them all, it is clear that she has a special place in her life for Finn. Before Julie goes to bed she tells Finn that she is falling for him. Finn returns the sentiment.

In Chapter 21, it is shortly before Christmas. Julie receives a note from her father's secretary. Her father needs to cancel his trip. Julie wipes tears from her eyes as the note goes on to say that he will be in Boston for New Year's Eve. He has reservations at 9:00 for her to have dinner with him then. He tells her to let him know if she needs money to get home.



Julie attempts to rationalize her father's cancellation, convincing herself that it was not a real vacation for him. It would be a working trip. If a merger or some other important business trip came up he would have to attend to it immediately. Julie settles for having dinner with her father on New Year's Eve in one of the classiest restaurants in Boston.

Julie wonders what she will do with her holiday vacation. Her mother planned to go on a cruise. Julie refuses to spoil it for her. She feels that staying with the Watkins would be intrusive.

Julie maintains the charade of going on holiday. She has a long conversation with Finn during which she tells him about her family traditions, particularly lighting the Christmas tree with real candles.

Julie goes downstairs and finds Matt decorating the tree just as she had described to Finn. Matt says Finn told him to follow instructions because it would make Julie happy. Julie convinces Finn to lie under the tree with her, close his eyes, and make a wish. While they lie there, they talk about many different things. Since Julie had plans to go away, Matt gives her an early gift. It is a Dunkin' Donuts gift card. Julie screams with delight and gives Matt his present.

In Chapter 22, Julie goes to the restaurant to meet her father. She has spent the week alone at Dana's apartment. It is a welcome event to have dinner with her father, even though it isn't the three week vacation she had planned. Julie keeps an eye on the time and anxiously waits for her father. The night drags on, but Julie's father does not arrive. Julie finally calls his secretary and learns that her father isn't in Boston. He had made other plans and never thought to call Julie. Julie is angry and hurt. She drinks champagne and orders six lobster dinners which are charged to her father.

Julie goes back to Dana's apartment and gets drunk on champagne. She talks to Finn for a while and then calls Matt. She rambles drunkenly, which she will most likely regret.

Julie wakes up with the worst hangover imaginable. She thinks about the night before and her anger with her father returns. There is no excuse for his behavior, forgetting about her and leaving her in the restaurant.

Julie watches on TV as people prepare for the polar plunge. She remembers talking about it the night before. On a whim, Julie decides to participate. However, when she runs into the water, Julie freezes and must be pulled out. Matt and Celeste are in the crowd. Matt is angry over Julie's antics and rushes to get her home and warm.

Julie and Matt talk about Roger and Erin leaving Matt and Celeste while they go away for a few days. Julie thinks this is almost as wrong as her father forgetting about her on New Year's Eve.



## Analysis

Julie's world seems to be perfect for a while. She has a blossoming relationship with Finn, a new boyfriend, a good experience at school, and her time at the Watkins' house. Things begin to fall apart when Finn announces he will not be home for Christmas. Julie's father cancels their vacation and then stands her up on New Year's Eve. Julie shows definite signs of having a meltdown when she attends the polar plunge and nearly gets hypothermia.

The one thing that is a constant in Julie's life is Matt. Julie admits to Matt that she loves him in a friend kind of way. It is becoming obvious that Matt has feelings for Julie and is jealous of her obsession with Finn. Julie is oblivious to Matt's feelings.

Celeste makes small steps toward becoming a more normal teenager which pleases Julie.

Erin and Roger remain detached from their family.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Julie refrain from telling Finn she has a boyfriend?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Erin seem to love Finn more than her other children?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Matt reluctant to date Dana?

## Vocabulary

fond, ruthless, assessments, skydiving, inhaled, weathered, whipped, coffeehouse, uncontrollably, syndrome, bulging, beaming, scrambled, postage, perforated, barrette, peeked



## Part Three: Chapters 24-31

### Summary

Part Three of the book begins with Chapter 24. It is April and the sun is shining. Roger, Matt, Julie, and Celeste sit on the porch drinking lemonade. Matt teases Celeste about becoming a teenager, dressing in dreadful clothes, and reading teen magazines. Matt says smart girls don't need all of that stuff. Celeste says she would like to be known for something other than being smart.

Matt attempts to hide a party invitation from Celeste. Julie insists that Celeste should go to the party. Matt says Celeste should not go because it would be too much for her. Julie says Celeste will be fine. Now that Flat Finn has hinges, he can easily fit into Celeste's bag. Celeste insists on going to the party.

Julie finally convinces Matt to go out on a date with Dana. When Julie and Finn have a long conversation, Julie is thrilled to learn that Finn feels the same way about her as she does about him.

In Chapter 25, Julie and Matt chat about the things Celeste and her friends might be doing at midnight. Julie quizzes Matt on his date with Dana. Matt seems to be nonchalant about the date; but, it is clear that it was not a smashing success. Julie calls Dana for details.

The evening is interrupted when the chaperone calls to say that Celeste is having a meltdown. Matt rushes off to get Celeste, and Julie tries to reach Finn. Matt returns home with Celeste in her arms. The girl is sobbing uncontrollably. Julie's heart breaks.

Celeste continues to sob in her room. Matt finally exits and tells Julie that Celeste wants to speak to her. Matt is furious with Julie for getting Celeste excited about the party.

Celeste apologizes to Julie for not making it through the night. At least the girl's mother saved face for Celeste by saying she had a stomach bug.

Julie goes downstairs to talk to Matt who is still fuming. He tells Julie that she thought she could just show up at their house and run things her way. Julie continues to press about Flat Finn and Celeste. Matt and Julie get into a heated argument. Matt says he is tired of Julie trying to "fix" him and everyone else. According to Matt, Julie needs to focus on her own life including the fact that she has fallen for someone she has never met plus all of the issues with her father.

Julie can't sleep that night. Eventually, she goes to Matt's room to talk to him. Julie sits on his bed and they talk, each apologizing. Julie curls up in Matt's bed to get warm. She kisses Matt. Julie falls asleep in Matt's arms.



When Julie wakes up and realizes that she is in Matt's bed, she panics. She is worried that Celeste might find out. Matt comes into the room and says that Celeste is cooking breakfast. Matt had told Celeste that Julie went for a run. Julie quickly showers and goes downstairs for breakfast.

Julie and Matt sit at the table and begin to eat breakfast. Each feels uncomfortable and awkward about the events from the night before. When Celeste sits down to have breakfast, she scolds both for being so mean to each other. She announces that there will be some changes. Celeste is growing up and she feels that she must take responsibility for her own life. There will be much less coddling. She has also decided that she is ready to give up Flat Finn.

Matt says these are good things. He also suggests that by the time summer comes Julie will most likely have her own apartment so she won't be around as much.

In Chapter 28, Julie, Erin, Celeste, and Celeste's friend Rachel go to a spa for manicures and pedicures. Erin is surprised at Celeste's new behaviors but pleased as well.

Julie sends a long note to Finn explaining recent events, including Celeste's transformation. She also says she has not seen much of Matt lately.

In Chapter 29, Matt remains distant from Julie when she tries to talk to him. It is a nice day and Julie decides to walk to the T instead of taking the car. After her usual meet with Dana, Julie stops at a small shop to find a gift for Celeste. She spots the same turquoise barrette that Celeste had received from Finn. Julie learns that the jewelry is made locally and is only sold in the region. Julie begins to piece things together.

Julie goes home and writes a long letter to Finn. She tells him that she has figured things out and that she must say goodbye to him. It is hard for Julie, but she now knows the truth.

Julie confronts Matt, who finally confesses to Julie that he has been posing as Finn. Julie becomes furious with Matt and wonders how he could keep leading her on all that time. Matt explains that he had tried to tell her, but he was in too deep. Matt also admits that the real Finn is dead. Julie realized that Celeste had Flat Finn because Matt and Celeste's brother Finn was dead.

Matt tells Julie how Finn died during a car accident two years before. Celeste was walking by the river and saw the entire accident. Celeste and Erin both had breakdowns. Pretending Finn was still alive and creating Flat Finn were ways Celeste chose to cope. The family simply played along because nothing else seemed to work. Celeste knew that Finn was dead, but she needed something to hold onto in his place.

Matt pleads with Julie to realize that everything she felt for Finn she could feel for him. Julie says she could never love him after he caused her so much pain.





In Chapter 30, Matt receives a call from the school saying that Celeste has disappeared. Rachel was in class so Matt and Julie knew she wasn't skipping out. Matt tells Julie that it is Finn's birthday. She already knew that. Roger and Erin come home to look for Celeste. Julie tells Matt she knows where Celeste will be. Julie finds Celeste sitting on a bench by the Charles River, at the place where Finn died. Julie leaves Celeste with Matt and goes home.

When Erin and Roger come home they are relieved that Julie had found Celeste. Erin talks about the accident and blames herself for Finn's death. Erin says she has not been a good mother and that she does not know how to be one. Erin clings to Julie and cries.

In Chapter 31, it is August. Julie hasn't seen Matt since Finn's birthday. She had been living with Dana and made Celeste promise that Matt would not bring her to the coffee shop for their usual Monday afternoon get together. On this particular Monday it is Roger that arrives with Celeste. Celeste is excited to tell Julie about their family vacation. The family has been undergoing individual and group therapy which seems to be helping.

Celeste's big news is that she is throwing a going away party for Flat Finn. Flat Finn will live in the attic in case Celeste should need him again. For now, she will try to go it alone. Julie is hesitant about seeing Matt. Roger tells Julie that while Matt may not be suave, his heart is in the right place.

Julie feels better than she has in weeks.

In the final chapter, Julie arrives at the house filled with nerves. She speaks with Celeste, Erin, and Roger before seeing Matt in the back yard. Julie calls out Matt's name and then runs to him, flinging herself into his arms. Julie kisses Matt and says how much she has missed him. It was Matt she had fallen in love with, not Finn. Matt has a hard time keeping up with Julie's outpouring of love.

Julie tells Matt that their reunion will have to wait because they have some place to be.

Julie and Celeste take Matt and Flat Finn on a two hour drive. When Matt is finally allowed to remove his blindfold, he sees they are at an airfield. Julie had arranged to take Flat Finn with them on a skydiving jump. Matt is stunned. Celeste says Flat Finn wants it this way. It is time to jump.

## Analysis

All the while Julie is trying to fix everyone, she is unaware that it is she who is growing and healing. Her plans for Celeste have worked, turning Celeste into a normal teenager while not sacrificing those qualities that make Celeste who she is as a person.

Julie is crushed when she learns that Matt had been posing as Finn from the first moment they met. Matt tries to explain why he did it; but, his explanation is not good



enough for Julie who feels betrayed and angry. Matt also says he loves Julie. Julie replies that she cannot love him. Julie is unaware that she is speaking out of anger and not from her heart.

It is extremely difficult for Matt to tell Julie about Finn, but it sheds a great deal of light on the situation. The entire family has been enabling Celeste's behavior because they did not know what else to do to help her cope with Finn's death. Erin has felt so guilty since the accident that she cannot bear to be at home or to be a proper mother to her children. Erin finally breaks down with Julie.

It is Roger who convinces Julie to give Matt another chance. Julie knows Roger is right.

Taking Flat Finn on a skydiving trip seems to be the most appropriate way to celebrate his life and to begin a new one for Julie, Matt, and Celeste.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What causes Matt to finally divulge the family secret to Julie?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is Roger's opinion of Celeste's new behaviors?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is discussed in the speech Celeste delivers to Julie and Matt?

## **Vocabulary**

buggy, prototype, cerebral, subsystem, bladder, inappropriate, semblance, wicker, lounging, peered, accordion-like, invested, decidedly, bounded, jowls, wretched, despairingly, dreadful

# Characters

## Julie Seagle

Julie Seagle is a nineteen year old girl from Ohio. Julie moves to Boston to attend Whitney College where she hopes to finally be able to embrace academics without being chastised by her friends. Julie is the child of parents who divorced when she was five years old. Julie grew up with her mother and only sees her father once or twice a year. Julie learns the hard truth that her father does not care about her.

Julie is a “fixer” by nature. If she sees something wrong in someone, she feels the need to take steps to fix that person. Moving into the Watkins’ house gives Julie ample opportunity to exercise that quality. Julie works hard to change Celeste from a backward, immature girl with psychological issues into a “normal” teenager. Julie also attempts to fix Matt, whom she views as a hopeless geek.

Julie thrives in Boston and begins to find her true self, even though it often causes pain and sleepless nights.

## Matt Watkins

Matt Watkins is the twenty-one year old middle child of Erin and Roger Watkins. Matt is a devoted student at MIT and is also the caregiver of his younger sister, Celeste. After Matt’s brother Finn died, Matt and Celeste’s parents were devastated. So, Matt parented his young sister. Throughout the story Matt is falling in love with Julie. However, he is posing as Finn. Through his relationship with Julie, Matt learns that there is more to life than chores and responsibilities. He is ready to embrace life in its entirety.

## Finn Watkins

Finn Watkins is the oldest child of Roger and Erin. He is the brother of Matt and Celeste. Finn died in a tragic car accident when he was 21 years old.

## Celeste Watkins

Celeste Watkins is the youngest child of Roger and Erin. Celeste has psychological problems stemming from watching her older brother die in a car accident.



## **Erin Watkins**

Erin Watkins is the mother of Finn, Matt, and Celeste. Erin, who holds a law degree, spends all of her time at work so she does not have to face the pain of having lost her oldest son Finn.

## **Roger Watkins**

Roger Watkins is married to Erin. Roger is the father of Finn, Matt, and Celeste. As a researcher, he spends all of his time at work so he does not have to face the death of his oldest son Finn.

## **Seth**

Seth is Julie's boyfriend for a short time.

## **Dana**

Dana is Julie's best friend and roommate.

## **Jamie**

Jamie is one of the first two people Julie meets at school. Jamie is also Dana's off again, on again boyfriend.

## **Kate Seagle**

Kate is Julie's mother and Erin's former college roommate.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Flat Finn

Flat Finn is a large cardboard cut out of a photo of Finn. Finn was Celeste and Matt's older brother that died. After Finn died, Celeste needed something to cling to. Since she missed Finn so desperately, it made sense for her to create a semblance of her brother to soothe her when she was sad.

## Facebook

Facebook is a symbol for communication. Julie, Matt, and "Finn" use it constantly as a way to find new friends and develop relationships.

## Car

Neither Erin or Roger will drive a car since Finn's death. If Erin had not been driving on an icy night during the winter, Finn never would have died.

## College

College is a symbol of Julie's maturity and first steps into the real world outside of Ohio.

## Charles River

The Charles River represents the horror of Finn's death. No one in the family will ever walk or drive by there if at all possible.

## Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree decorated by Matt comforts Julie on her first year away from home.

# Settings

## Boston

Boston is the main setting of the story. Julie leaves Ohio to go to Boston to attend Whitney college. Matt Watkins attends MIT, a very prestigious school. Erin is affiliated with Harvard University.

Julie immediately falls in love with the culture of Boston. She is enthralled by the wide variety of people she sees daily in Cambridge Square. Boston represents everything that Julie's life in Ohio was not. Boston offers an opportunity for Julie to grow into the person she was meant to be.

The story covers an entire year in Boston, from the sweltering hot, humid summer to the icy, frigid temperatures of winter. Julie loves it all.

The Watkins family lives in Boston and takes Julie in as one of their own. The family has an intimate knowledge of the city and shares it with Julie. The only place the family will not go is to the Charles River, which was the site of Finn's death.

## Java Genius

Java Genius is the coffee shop that Julie takes Celeste to for the first time. It is a place where Flat Finn is welcome. Julie also meets Seth at Java Genius.

## Cafe Paradiso

This is the site where Julie and Celeste continue to meet after Julie moves out. It is a spot where Julie and Celeste can sit and talk, while still making Celeste feel comfortable.



# Themes and Motifs

## Coping

There are many forms of coping addressed in *Flat Out Love*, such as coping with death, loss of a parent, loss of youth, and loss of love.

Julie copes with the loss of the ideal of her father who in truth has spent very little time with her over the years. Finally, Julie realizes that her father does not care about her the way she would like him to care. He is too heavily invested in his own life to spend time with her. This also brings an end to a part of Julie's life that she had cherished.

Celeste is the character who has had the most difficult time coping with the loss of Finn. Finn had become Celeste's savior when Erin was incapable of parenting Celeste. When Finn died, Celeste needed something to help her cope with the loss. That's when she created Flat Finn and the illusion that Finn was traveling the world. Matt fed into Celeste's fantasy. In some ways, her fantasy also helped him to cope with the loss of Finn. However, Matt had to become Celeste's parent because their parents could not cope with the loss of their son Finn. Becoming everything to Celeste made it difficult for Matt to cope with life on a daily basis.

## Love

There are many forms of love used throughout the book. The first is the love between parent and child. Kate is upset that Julie is all alone in Boston without a place to stay. Although Julie jokes with Kate, it is clear that she loves her mother very much. Although Erin and Roger do not openly show affection, they love their children.

Sibling love is a very strong component in the book. Matt takes care of and caters to Celeste. In doing so, Matt feels as if he has become Celeste's parent since Finn died because his parents were neither willing nor capable of taking on the responsibility.

Romantic love is a tangled web in the story. Julie believes she has fallen in love with Finn, when she has actually fallen in love with Matt. Julie is ready to throw away what could be a promising relationship because of Matt's deception. Roger reminds Julie to look past Matt's flaws and read what is in his heart.

## Guilt

There is a great deal of guilt present in the way Erin and Roger interact with their children. Erin, a typically stoic and reserved woman, collapses under the guilt of Finn's death, believing that it was her fault he was in the car with her during the accident. Erin does not know how to bear the guilt. As a result, she distances herself from Matt,

Celeste, and Roger. Roger also feels guilt but not to the same degree as Erin. Matt often feels guilt over his resentment for being forced to take care of Celeste.



# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view used in “Flat-out Love” by Jessica Park is third person omniscient. This point of view works well throughout the book as there are several components and underlying factors that would not be revealed otherwise. The story itself is rather complex and only third person omniscient would allow the reader to follow and understand the activities of all of the characters. This is particularly true when it comes to the attachments of Celeste to Flat Finn, the dynamics of the Watkins’ family as a whole, and Julie’s interactions with Finn . It also allows for the reader to follow and understand actions and thoughts of other characters in the book as well as those events of which one single character has no knowledge.

While the first person point of view might have been interesting when coming from the characters in their time of confusion, third person conveys the entire story and not just the subjective opinions of the characters. It also permits the reader to take part in the journey and development of each character in the story.

## Language and Meaning

The language and meaning used throughout “Flat-out Love” by Jessica Park reflects on the times in a number of ways. It is clear that the people in the stories live in the present, as they speak of particular events and fashions as well as actors and music. Park does not use a great deal of slang or any language that would date the work in a negative way. There are many examples of Matt and Celeste using formal language that may not directly relate to the common vernacular but is representative of the highly intellectual surroundings in which they are being raised.

Park is a master of language and is not afraid to exercise her technical and rich vocabulary. There is a marked absence of sex, violence, and vulgarity throughout the stories and it is rare to see any use of profanity. This may be due to the fact that many of this is a young adult book.

It is easy to see the progression of the work, both in structure and language. The language is more formal in the beginning of the collection and becomes looser toward the end. This is particularly true of Celeste who is learning how to speak like a teen rather than a college professor.

## Structure

The work is chronological in nature. It is comprised of 222 pages, broken into 3 sections. The shortest chapter is 3 pages in length; the longest chapter is 12 pages in length; the average number of pages per chapter is 7 pages.

The book is separated into 3 sections. Part One contains chapters 1 through 12. These chapters center on Julie's arrival in Boston and being oriented into the Watkins family. Part Two contains chapters 13-24. These chapters center on Julie's relationships with Finn, Celeste, and Matt. Part Three contains chapters 25-32. These chapters center on the events that occur in August.



## Quotes

Julie Seagle stared straight ahead and promised herself one thing: She would never again rent an apartment via Craigslist. (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Julie learns very quickly how being naive can change one's life when she arrives in Boston to find that she had been scammed. Now she is in a strange city with no place to live.

The truth was that her friends didn't entirely get her. Her mom didn't get her either, although she was certainly proud of how well Julie did in her classes. (Chapter 2 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Julie is eager to expand her horizons after spending the majority of her youth hiding her intelligence and love for learning.

Look, everyone has a few psychological idiosyncrasies, right? (Chapter 3 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This is Julie's first reaction to Celeste, who seems to have some very odd behaviors.

And nobody has suggested that she lose the accessory? I mean, she's kind of old for this sort of thing, don't you think? Not that I can think of a good age for it.

-- Julie (Chapter 4 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Julie begins to ask Matt questions about Celeste and her attachment to Flat Finn. There is clearly some psychological issue attached to the cutout, but Matt refuses to talk about it.

Flat Finn stood poised expectantly in the living room. Julie approached the figure. God, this was messed up (Chapter 7 paragraph 49)

**Importance:** Julie surprises herself by playing along with the Flat Finn arrangement, wondering why the family tolerates this bizarre behavior.

My parents consulted some highly respected shrink who thinks that Flat Finn is a creative response to nerves about starting a new school, missing me. Stuff like that. They were advised to just wait it out and support her. She freaks out if anyone hints Flat Finn might not be the most appropriate companion.

-- Finn (Chapter 8 paragraph 91)

**Importance:** Finn attempts to explain Celeste's behavior away by making it seem only slightly odd and not a larger psychological problem.

Julie stopped herself. This was silly. She couldn't possibly have a crush on someone she'd only exchanged a few messages with, right? Because that would be abnormal.



Insane. Completely not based in reality. (Chapter 8 paragraph 103)

**Importance:** Julie begins to realize that her new obsession with Finn may not be healthy or wise.

Thanks for letting us borrow your display for our theater performance," she said loudly. "We'll return it in good condition!

-- Julie (Chapter 11 paragraph 78)

**Importance:** Julie comes up with an off the cuff lie to explain to Celeste's school friends about why they are having coffee with Flat Finn. Julie knows Celeste is already being ridiculed for being weird and does not want to give the other students more ammunition.

Finn was a very well-rounded student. Rather skilled in everything he tackled. He chose a very classic liberal arts approach to school and so studied everything from anthropology to literature to history. A real creative and dynamic boy, that one. He was deeply involved in political campaigns when he was at Brandeis. Very socially conscious and involved.

-- Erin (Chapter 13 paragraph 29)

**Importance:** Erin gushes over Finn which shows why Matt, the middle child, works so hard to take care of everything in the house including meals and Celeste.

A dysfunctional system like this can't hold up forever. At some point there will be a break.

-- Dr. Cooley (Chapter 13 paragraph 73)

**Importance:** Dr. Cooley confirms Julie's analysis that there is something definitely wrong in the Watkins' house. Unfortunately, Dr. Cooley is unable to give a snap diagnosis without the proper information. Still, Julie seems to be pleased to know that she is on the right track.

Everyone there wore either a pilgrim hat or an Indian hat that had been purchased years ago at the costume shop on Delacorte Avenue. In other years, Julie had found this tradition amusing, but today the absurdity and idiocy had become undeniable. It was undignified. Not to mention the cultural offensiveness factor. (Chapter 14 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote reflects how much Julie has changed already since leaving home to go to school.

Your brother is dead. That's why Celeste has Flat Finn.

-- Julie (Chapter 29 paragraph 72)

**Importance:** Although Julie had suspected for a while that Finn was dead, she finally has confirmation from Matt.