

# **The Financial Lives of the Poets Study Guide**

**The Financial Lives of the Poets by Jess Walter**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: *The Financial Lives of the Poets*. Jess Walter. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

Matt Prior is an unemployed financial journalist. His severance pay from the newspaper he was laid off from is about to run out and he is in danger of losing his house due to not being able to keep up with his mortgage payments. Matt's wife, Lisa, is aware they are in bad financial shape but Matt keeps from her just how dire things are. Matt and Lisa have two elementary school aged boys, Teddy and Franklin, and Matt's dad, who suffers from early onset dementia, also lives with them. Matt had attempted to start a website called poetfolio.com where financial professionals write poetry and other forms of literature. This website was a failure and put Matt deeply in debt. One night while getting milk at a 7/11 Matt meets two stoners named Jamie and Skeet who ask him for a ride to a party. Matt agrees and gets high with them on the drive over. The high gives him a cathartic release from his problem and he cannot stop thinking about how good the weed was.

The next day Matt, unbeknownst to his wife, goes to his financial planner to cash out his retirement in order to make a balloon payment on his mortgage. After returning home, Matt becomes depressed by his wife's sexual flirtations online with her ex-boyfriend and his father's worsening mental state. Longing for the good feeling from the high the night before Matt precipitously decides to go back to 7/11 to find Jamie and Skeet. He cannot find them so he goes to their apartment complex (where the party was) and finds another young man. He asks to buy some weed and decides to spend all the money from his retirement on it.

Matt's plan is to deal drugs to people his age who are in similar financial straits and need a release from their problem. Jamie sets up a meetings with a self-described "drug lawyer," Dave, who provides a service of introducing prospective dealers with his weed supplier. Matt agrees to Dave's terms and awaits a call to meet and see the supplier. In the meantime Matt hatches a plot to expose his wife's potential infidelities by going to her ex-boyfriend's, Chuck, lumber store. He ends up buying \$1,100 worth of lumber for a tree house to be delivered by Chuck to the house, thereby embarrassing and exposing his wife and Chuck. Matt gets the call from Dave and they, along with Jamie, drive an hour to a rural town to meet the drug supplier, Monte.

Monte and Dave surprise Matt by offering him the opportunity to buy the business from them. He does not seriously consider the offer but he does fantasize about how much money he would be able to make. While telling a friend about the offer as well as his plan to sell weed to make enough money to get him back on his feet he is approached by two cops, Randy and Greg, who know that he has marijuana in his bag and threatened charges unless he becomes a criminal informant. Matt accepts and his given a watch which doubles as a record. Then Matt experiences a complete nervous breakdown.



In his highly emotional state Matt desperately hatches a plan to entrap enemies from his past by selling them drugs, recording it, and turning it over to the police. He attempts to do this to Chuck, his former editor who laid him off, and the real estate agent who sold him their house. After all of these attempts fail Matt realizes he cannot do this any more. He decides to let Dave, Jamie, and Monte know he is working with the police and give them a head start before turning himself in. Dave catches wind that Matt is working with the cops. After a heated confrontation, Dave and Monte get away but end up turning themselves into the police. Jamie is revealed to also have been a criminal informant the entire time.

Matt is arrested and sentenced to probation. He and Lisa declare bankruptcy, lose their home, and separate. As time passes Lisa comes clean about Chuck and her and Matt slowly work to rebuild their marriage. Matt works for a small online newspaper and lives in a 2-bedroom apartment with the boys. The story ends with Matt and Lisa still distant but getting closer and Matt realizing his fixation on money and success are what led him to his current state.



# Chapter 1: Another 7/11

## Summary

Chapter 1 is also titled “Another 7/11,” in reference to the way in which the narrator’s mother once misspoke when referencing 9/11. The chapter opens with a middle-aged man named Matt waiting in line to buy milk at a convenience store late at night. In first person, Matt is narrating the events happening around him and relating them to his own life and personal experience. There are a number of young adults in the store who appear to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

As Matt is leaving the store he is offered a hit of marijuana from one of the “bangers” who was in the store. Matt declines but is hit with a wave of nostalgia to his younger days when he enjoyed smoking marijuana and did not have as many responsibilities (such as his wife and two boys). Matt is asked by two of the youths, Skeet and Jamie, for a ride to a party, and Matt surprises himself by saying yes.

While driving Skeet and Jamie, Matt ends up partaking in the marijuana and gradual reveals more about his life to the reader and to Skeet and Jamie. Matt is a financial reporter who has recently been laid off and has six more weeks to find a job before his severance pay expires. He also only has one week to liquidate his retirement fund in order to payoff a \$30,000 balloon payment to the mortgage company or else he may lose his house. Matt begins to panic when he realizes that some upcoming job interviews may require a drug-test. Skeet and Jamie attempt to put Matt at ease by telling him there are ways to beat a drug-test, such as eating pecans, taking pills found online, or using someone else’s urine.

Matt arrives at the party with Skeet and Jamie. After staying a short while they all decide they are hungry and want to get food. They drive to another 7/11 where Matt grabs a frozen burrito and puts it in the microwave. Skeet has a drug-induced meltdown over the the radioactivity of the microwave and begins to scream and falls to the floor in terror. This is the moment Matt, through his intoxicated state, recalls that he is, in fact, an adult who can help. Matt calms Skeet down, purchases his burrito, realizes it is 4:30 a.m. and heads home.

On his drive home Matt is invigorated by his evening. He describes his wife as being “too cute” and hints at suspected infidelity on her part. Upon arriving home Matt walks past his father, who lives with him, asleep on the couch. Matt looks at his house and again becomes depressed with his lot in life. After recounting many of the ways in which his life is in shambles, Matt finds one small glimmer of happiness: “that was one great goddamn burrito” (17).



## Analysis

Early on in the chapter Matt demonstrates that he has become quite adept at justifying the kind of person he is, but lately has become so dejected that he increasingly questions his own self-worth. For example, Matt proudly identifies himself as 'blue' for stereotyping the turban-clad cashier at 7/11 as an Indian neurosurgeon rather than a terrorist (something a 'red' person would not do). Matt then quickly concedes that he has no more proof that the man "was a doctor than some Texas trucker does that he's a bomber" (2). This is the first indication of Matt being in a state of introspective crisis. As the chapter progresses the dynamic becomes increasingly clear.

Throughout the course of the chapter the reader finds out more about Matt's life and current emotional state and level of desperation. Once they are in the car with Matt, Skeet and Jamie ask him how much his car cost. Matt tells them it was not too much, but he immediately lets the reader know that this was not the case. The car is more expensive than he can afford and is indicative of his entire life. "This is my life now: set as far back as it can go" (5). At this point the reader sees Matt as a man with responsibilities (he needs to find a new job, has kids at home, and in a lot of debt) who is finding some ephemeral bliss in shirking his responsibilities to hang out smoking weed with some random young strangers.

For the rest of the chapter actions happening around Matt trigger introspective monologue about his life, which are then interrupted by something happening and thus triggering a new monologue. For example, being at the party around so many young people makes Matt feel "so old, so unemployed, so outdated, dead technology, impotent scrap head, unraveling, unraveling..." (11). This instance shows the reader how deeply unhappy and troubled Matt is. The author includes these introspections to allow the reader to get to know as a character as quickly as possible. Understanding Matt's personality and thought processes is crucial to fully grasping the breadth of the narrative as Matt's thoughts and decisions are the driving force of the plot.

Once Matt decides to break free from his impetuous excursion with Jamie and Skeet he is briefly filled with joy and excitement, "like I'm 16 again" (15). This joy and excitement quickly disappears once he arrives home. The shift in environment for Matt (from extreme youthful joy to the home and family he is responsible for) triggers Matt to share with the reader more information about his life. His wife is unaware they are in danger of losing their house and Matt suspects his wife may be cheating on him. He worries his children will not be able to rely on him for any sort of support: "I may as well be dead for all the help I can be to them" (17). This is when Matt feels unexpected solace: remembering how good the burrito he just ate from 7/11 was. The chapter ends with Matt in a happy place. The enjoyment of one frozen burrito seemingly outweighs the tremendous amount of pressure his life provides. Matt is someone in a tough situation who is able to find reprieve from small acts of rebellion.



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of repetition in the chapter. Matt frequently refers to the milk “costing like \$9.00 a gallon” and referring to 9/11 as 7/11 because of something his mother once said.

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Matt agreed to drive Skeet and Jamie in the first place?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the narrative impact on the reader of revealing aspects of Matt’s life slowly and intermittently, rather than all at once?

## Vocabulary

lilting, ululating, feckless, sidles





## Chapter 2: Giving to Charity

### Summary

In Chapter 2, also titled “Giving to Charity,” the reader finds out more about Matt and his family life, filling in many of the blanks of the snippets of information provided in the previous chapter. Matt is still high from the previous night’s recreational drug use. He did not sleep at all and is musing about the fantastic quality of the marijuana he smoke only a few hours ago. Now the family is awake to start the morning routine.

Matt’s sons, Teddy (age 10) and Franklin (age 8), eat their cereal sloppily at the kitchen table. Matt’s wife, Lisa, traverses the kitchen reminding Matt a man is coming to blow out the sprinklers. Matt acknowledges the growing distance between them, describing their interactions as “pass[ing] like storm fronts” (19). Matt’s father offers to help with the sprinklers at which point Matt reveals to the reader that his father suffers from dementia. Matt relates that his father lost everything when a stripper named Charity he thought he was in love with stole almost all of his possessions and identity, ruining his credit and plunging him into debt. Matt’s dad was so embarrassed he did not tell his family this had happened for months.

Matt has a meeting with a financial planner today where, unbeknownst to Lisa, he will be cashing out his retirement to make a balloon mortgage payment. Matt keeps this from his wife because “Lisa does not do financial crises very well” (22). It is revealed Lisa sees a therapist regularly ever since she had a depressed streak which sparked a shopping binge. She also has been using social networking excessively in mysterious ways, a fact she is not aware Matt has noticed.

Matt drives his boys to their Catholic school, even though neither Matt nor Lisa are Catholic. They attend parochial school because the family lives in an area where the public school is sub par. On the drive Franklin finds Skeet’s hat in the back seat, left from the night before. Matt openly tells Franklin that the hat belongs to Skeet, which means nothing to Franklin. Immediately after the boys get out of the car and walk into school, Matt starts marveling at the pot he had smoked, which he is still feeling the effects of. He fantasizes about being a “baked financial journalist,” investing and profiting off of the marijuana business. His mind begins to wander and he loses his thought process, again conceding that “it is very good pot” (27).

### Analysis

Chapter 2 is bookended by Matt musing about the pot he smoked with Skeet and Jamie. Still under the effects of the marijuana he proceeds through his morning informing the reader about some of his family dynamics. The structure of this chapter is an inverted form of Chapter 1. Chapter 1 features Matt on a spur of the moment adventure with two young criminals, only detailing his home life intermittently. Chapter 2



is Matt in his home moving through his daily routine with thoughts of weed and escape emerging in his mind. The author does this to present Matt as a man existing in two conflicting realities. At this point Matt is acting as if he is able to keep these two worlds distinct and separate, but their interrelation is a driving force in the central conflicts of the book.

This duality of Matt's thoughts shows a torn individual in some state of crisis. Matt's crisis is not overt, as his words and thoughts are not presented in a particularly panicked or desperate way; rather, Matt presents his problems calmly and objectively. Matt's crisis is illuminated by how fond and enthusiastic his words about the pot are. Matt had a momentary escape from his problems with Skeet and Jamie and he is not quite ready to let it go.

The author uses gradual character development to give the reader more and more information about Matt and his family, but leaves enough ambiguity to allow the reader a chance to form his or her own theories. For example, the reader learns Matt's father has dementia. The reader also learns Matt has siblings, leaving room to ponder why Matt's father ended up living with him and not one of the other siblings. Are Matt's siblings in worse financial shape than he is? Is Matt a reluctant leader or scapegoat to his siblings? Questions such as these arise in the reader's mind and leave the reader wanting more information.

The large amount of issues in Matt's life are affecting his ability of addressing problems head on. For example there is the issue of Lisa's mental health and Matt and Lisa's marital health. It is evident Matt is still in love with Lisa based on a brief moment when Lisa puts her hand on his shoulder, but that love is fleeting as the sweet moment is derailed by Lisa smelling Matt's breath and harshly asking what he ate. Matt's concerns about Lisa's well-being, as well as her questionable online habits, seem muted. Matt's inaction displays to the reader the present distance between Matt and Lisa, an aspect which is important in the plot moving forward.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe Matt's relationship with his father. What can be inferred with the information the reader knows up to this point?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Matt and Lisa send their kids to Catholic school even though neither one is Catholic. What does this say about Matt and Lisa's personality?

## **Discussion Question 3**

With what is known about Matt at this point, where do his priorities most strongly lie?

## Vocabulary

métier, weedy, parochial, epoch

# Chapter 3: Social Networking

## Summary

Chapter 3, titled “Social Networking,” provides the reader with more information about Lisa’s depression and social media habits as well as how dire Matt’s financial situation is. Matt reveals that prior to having children, Lisa was a driven career woman in charge of marketing for a doctor’s group that specialized in sports medicine. Upon getting pregnant at age 29, Lisa decided to stay home with the kids, as Matt was making enough money to support them at that time. Once the kids were old enough to go to school, Lisa attempted to find a new job but lacked the confidence and spark she possessed in her youth. She settled for a receptionist job at an optometrist. In her current life Lisa has become obsessed with social media, spending 2-3 hours every night on the computer perfecting and adjusting her various profile pages.

Matt is heading to meet with their financial planner, Richard, under the guise of needing advice but in actuality just wants to cash out all of his remaining retirement funds. Over the course of the meeting it is revealed Matt had made some bad investments and had not properly diversified his portfolio. He also attempted to start a website called “poetfolio.com,” aimed at having individuals who worked in business and finance write poetry. This endeavor was a major financial loss. Matt is also scolded by Richard for being talked into a six-month forbearance on his mortgage, which is causing a \$30,000 balloon payment being due and will most likely result in Matt losing his house. Lisa is aware the situation is bad but Matt is keeping from her exactly how bad things really are.

At the end of the meeting with Richard, Matt mentions that he got high at a 7/11 the night before. Richard’s interest is peaked and he eventually asks if Matt can get him any marijuana. On the drive to Costco after the meeting Matt calls Lisa. They have a humorous exchange about their financial state with Matt underselling how bad things actually are, neglecting to mention they are in real danger of losing the house. The playful exchange reminds Matt what he loves about his wife so much and that even with all the hard time their marriage is still relatively functional. Unfortunately, Matt is currently shaken by something that happened the night before just before his misadventures at 7/11. Matt found an open Facebook chat between Lisa and her high school boyfriend, Chuck, which had been going on for a few weeks. The conversation intimated how unhappy Lisa is and suggested that they have had sexual text message exchanges. This is what prompted Matt to go out for milk and subsequently smoke pot with young criminals. Matt does not reveal to Lisa his knowledge of her conversation with Chuck, deciding to carry on as if nothing is wrong.



## Analysis

Previously, the specifics of how Matt found himself in such a brutal situation, both financially and maritally, were kept vague. Chapter 3 elucidates on both issues in greater detail. The author also places Matt's 7/11 escapades from Chapter 1 into some sort of context, establishing an inciting incident for Matt's behavior. The author very simply explains the very complex financial situation Matt finds himself in. This book was published in the aftermath of the housing crisis on the 2000s, which makes Matt's situation more relatable and understandable. Matt has made a series of decisions that have landed him way over his head, a situation all too common for homeowners of that time. By providing this expositional information in Chapter 3 rather than immediately the author affords the reader an opportunity to form their own opinions and assumptions about the characters and events. The revelation of how Matt ended up in his current situation gives more firm information on the character but still leaves plenty for the reader to ruminate on.

Though his situation is so bad, Matt's language and thought process seem slightly numb to everything that is going on. There is no panic or desperation in his voice. He fully understands where his finances are at, which perhaps provides him with the sense of control he needs to keep him sane. It is not as if he is delusional to not being in danger of losing house or declaring bankruptcy, he simply is taking each thing one step at a time. He has convinced himself that keeping his wife in the dark about the extent of everything is best. Not to go so far as to say he thinks he will fully recover financially, but he at the very least is resigned to the reality of the situation.

Matt's situation with his wife seems to be what has been affected the most. He reveals finding Lisa's chat conversation with Chuck is what prompted him to go out for milk and put him in the headspace to smoke pot with strangers. Matt stated he had not smoked pot for 15 years, so none of his financial issues have driven him to lash out with drugs, but the suggestion of his wife's infidelity caused this reaction. His marriage is very important to him, but he now feels lost as to what to do next.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think Matt has any sort of "end game" for his financial crisis? Describe his current state of mind towards the situation.

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Matt decided to share with Richard that he had smoke pot at a 7/11 the night before?



## Discussion Question 3

Describe Matt's attitude towards his current financial situation. What does this reveal to readers about him?

## Vocabulary

malaise, ensconced, melodramatic



# Chapter 4 : A Brief Political Manifesto

## Summary

Chapter 4 is a short chapter that is written as a poem (separate stanzas with no pattern to how many words per line). Matt is pulling into the Costco parking lot when he notices a woman with four children loading up her car. Matt finds the children cute so he waves just as the mother is bent over to pick up a large container of grape juice. He is taken aback when he notices “in the small of her large back stretched a single strained string, a thin strap of fabric” (44). Matt establishes that while he is not particularly offended by thongs, he wonders when Moms started wearing thongs.

The observation of the thong prompts Matt to launch into a monologue about how he used to fold his mother’s underwear “like a big American flag” (44). Matt next goes on to say that those who “fret about the Fabric of America: gay couples getting married, violent videos, nasty TV, that sort of thing...” would have their anxieties abetted “if there was a little bit more [Fabric] in our mothers’ underpants” (45). Matt closes the diatribe by saying when he eventually runs for office this will be the issue he will run on: “Getting our moms out of thongs and back into hammocks with leg holes the way God intended” (45).

## Analysis

The author uses this chapter to affirm just how good Matt is at distracting himself from his problems. Even though he just came from a depressing meeting with a financial planner and is worried about his wife being unfaithful, Matt is able to concoct a humorous poem about a mom’s thong in the Costco parking lot. The poetry style of the writing is most likely a nod to Matt’s aspiration to be a poet, as also evidences by his aforementioned failed website venture “poetfolio.com.” Matt escapes into his own fantasy world and leaves his problems behind.

Matt’s issue with mom’s wearing thongs also further establishes his traditional mindset. Previously Matt admitted that he actually prefers how his wife is no longer a driven career woman. This hints at Matt holding some old-fashioned/traditional values when it comes to family dynamics and women. His feelings on thongs and how they are not appropriate for mothers to wear reaffirms this part of him. This is a potential internal conflict for Matt as he prescribes women (and specifically Lisa) certain appropriate roles and behaviors, but his financial situation is making him powerless to live this sort of life.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of the chapter’s title, “A Brief Manifesto.”



## Discussion Question 2

Why was this short, non-plot heavy chapter included at this point in the book?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the chapter's poetic formatting? This formatting has come up previously in smaller amounts. What do you think it is hinting at about Matt?

## Vocabulary

cask, aesthetically, fret





# Chapter 5: The Recession hits Stehne's Lumberland

## Summary

The chapter opens with a poetic stanza describing the lumber store Matt is in. He is speaking with Chuck (Lisa's ex-boyfriend whom she has been recently communicating with online). Matt is feigning interest in building his boys a tree house when in actuality he is trying to find out more about Chuck. He has never previously ventured into this lumber store but he decided to go to "confront his enemy" (47). Matt uses the pseudonym "Jamie Skeet" (a reference to the two young criminals he smoke pot with at 7/11).

Upon engaging Chuck in conversation Matt feels emasculated and inferior to Chuck. Matt begins to list the ways in which Chuck is better than him (taller, younger, in better shape, etc). Matt then admits he arrogantly never perceived Chuck as a threat even though he had come up in conversation with Lisa frequently in the past. "I made the classic arrogant white-collar mistake of thinking that because I used my brain to support my family (back when I supported my family) I was superior to some dude who stacks lumber for a living" (48).

Chuck says he has three kids and is divorced, which threatens Matt even more. He realizes Chuck probably has his own place that Lisa could sneak off to if she wanted. Matt clumsily drops hints at how much his family means to mean: "I have two boys that love more than anything. Love my boys AND my wife. Their mother" (49). Chuck inadvertently emasculates Matt even further by pulling out a "How-to build a Tree House" book and describing the treehouse he built for his kids. Matt had promised to build his boys a tree house years ago and it never came to fruition. The chapter ends with another stanza of poetry describing how lost and little Matt feels standing in the aisle at the lumber store.

## Analysis

This chapter creates parallels between Matt's personal and financial lives. As it was established in his meeting with the financial planner, there is very little Matt can do to improve his situation. Matt's finances are a sinking ship inevitably heading for disaster. Here, Matt attempts to confront the disaster of his marriage by seeking out the man who his wife is at the very least having an emotional connection with. Once Matt delves into finding out about Chuck he sees no reprieve in sight. Nothing about his encounter with Chuck makes him feel better. Instead, the visit only elucidates how inadequate Matt is. Matt leaves the lumber store despondent about his marriage just as the meeting with the financial planner left him despondent about his finances.



This chapter also frames Matt as being in the throes of a crisis of masculinity. Matt says he goes to the lumber store to “confront his enemy” (47). He sees the action as a step to taking control of his life, except by using a pseudonym he shows he is too timid to fully commit to his plan. From that point on, Matt’s masculinity is challenged and trampled upon by Chuck. Everything about Chuck, from what he looks like to what he says, makes Matt feel like less of a man, husband, and father. This crisis in masculinity is important to the character because it further shows how his financial and personal lives are equally in shambles.

Stehne's Lumberland serves as a symbol for Matt's insecurities and inadequacies. Whenever Matt enters the lumber store he fixates on all the things Chuck is and he is not. It plays into his insecurities about his marriage as Chuck is a younger more fit version of Matt. It also plays into his insecurities about his career - Matt stands an unemployed, broke journalist while Chuck is a reasonably successful small business owner. The language Matt uses to describe the physical space of Stehne's Lumberland also shows how it serves to demoralize Matt: "It is cold inside this big warehouse store; the ceilings must be thirty feet high" (47). Matt feels small and uncomfortable while he there, cowering in the shadow of the man he is not.

The poetic stanzas at the beginning and end of the chapter show Matt uses poetry as coping mechanism. In his normal dialogue Matt will put himself down, but is frequently in a playful or teasing manner, usually leading to anger which he quickly moves past. Only in his poetry does he admit how sad and depressed he truly is.

“Banded stacks of blond boards

Sit out back of the lumber store

And if you squint they look

A little like leftover cakes.

God, the end of a party

Is always so sad” (46)

The reader now should know to use Matt's poetry as the best window into his personality. Matt's poetry presents him in his truest sense, whereas his words and even thoughts are sometimes inaccurate as he tends to embellish details and lie to himself sometimes. These embellishments and lies are important to Matt's personality and characterization, but his poetry shows his true self.

## Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the threats of Chuck and his impending financial doom.



## Discussion Question 2

Describe Matt's demeanor at the beginning of Chapter 5 and his demeanor at the end of the Chapter 5. How does it change, and why?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think Matt's desired outcome of confronting Chuck was?

## Vocabulary

complacency, balustrades, cuckolders



## Chapter 6: My Stupid Idea

### Summary

Chapter 6 opens with Matt describing the rise and fall of his poetry website in greater detail. Matt had been a business journalist for years but found it to be the driest form of writing. He thought of “poetfolio.com” as a website that presented business and financial news in poetic verse, as well as other more creative forms (short stories, creative essays, memoirs of investors and professionals). Matt read about a heiress who was using a portion of her inheritance to fund creative endeavors, so Matt wrote a proposal and, much to his surprise, was awarded a meager amount of funding. Matt decided to quit his job and focus full-time on “poetfolio.com.” He burned through the grant money quicker than expected, dipped into savings, went into debt, and got cold-feet days before the site was supposed to launch.

After explaining what had happened with his website, the reader finds Matt watching television with his father. He is interrupted by Lisa coming downstairs with bills and bank statements in her arms, which Matt laments as “time for our monthly descent into the finances...” (56). Matt accurately describes how dire their situation is but leaves out how immediate the concern is (he still leaves out they may lose their house as soon as next week). Among the things they need to cut back on (cable, internet, cell phones, etc.) the one thing Lisa cannot come to terms with is sending their boys to public school. Matt recounts an incident when they had first moved to the neighborhood where he was passing the local public school and saw two young students beating up another student mercilessly. When he tried to intervene he was greeted with a “Fuck off, faggot!” from one of the boys. Matt suggests in jest he could convert to Catholicism in order to be eligible for scholarships at the boys current school. Lisa cracks a small smile when their conversation is interrupted by the doorbell.

Dani is Lisa’s “happily divorced friend” (59). Matt perceived Dani as a threat because he is worried she will show Lisa how much happier she could be if she left her husband. Matt knows Dani and Lisa want to chat with Matt out of the room so he goes upstairs to check on his sons, Teddy and Franklin. While asking them to go to bed, Matt worries about how they would do in public school, Franklin in particular. Teddy is large for his age and could most likely take care of himself, “but lisping, tiny, day-dreamy, slow-to-read Franklin? He’ll be some yard-thug’s second grade bitch” (61).

Matt comes downstairs and just before he turns the corner into the kitchen he overhears Dani say “Oh my God, are you gonna do it?” (62). Matt interrupts the conversation, but Dani and Lisa coyly divert attention from Dani’s comment. Matt then sits back with his dad on the couch watching sports. His dad makes the exact same comments about football as he did only moments earlier. Matt has learned to get used to these loops while living with someone suffering from dementia. Once Dani leaves, Lisa goes upstairs and Matt assumes she is chatting with Chuck online and then shifting to sexual text messages on her phone. When he comes upstairs he sees his wife in bed and feels



completely stuck. He knows exactly what is going on but cannot bring himself to do anything about it. This is when Matt abruptly says he needs to go out for milk.

Matt drives the 7/11 he was at the night before in hopes of finding Jamie and Skeet. After an hour he drives to the apartment complex they all went to. He sees Jamie and Skeet's car parked but does not know which apartment to go into. He asks a small black kid passing by if he knows where they are. The kid initially will not engage with Matt, fearing he is a cop, but once Matt identifies himself the kid remembers him as "Dude with the slippers" (66). The kid then asks Matt how much he wants. Matt takes out the \$9,400 check from cashing out his retirement plan from his pocket and says "How about this much?" (67).

## Analysis

Matt's description of his "poetfolio.com" endeavor is meant to provide more context for the reader about how Matt arrived in his current predicament while still explaining the whole situation. The account makes the reader feel Matt was impetuous in quitting his job and starting a website (this quality in Matt has already been established in his other actions, such as smoking weed in Chapter 1 with Jamie and Skeet). The scarcity of details on what went wrong with the website shows the reader that the specific reasons why it was a bad decision is less important than simply knowing Matt made an incredibly bad decision. The author does not give unnecessary details, rather prompting the reader to focus on what in Matt's character drives him to make such poor choices.

Matt's father's repetition due to his dementia serves as a metaphor for the the rest of Matt's life right now. When Matt's father repeats his same comments about football, Matt explains, "these are the loops you learn to live with when you live with someone suffering from dementia" (63). Matt's entire life is stuck in a loop. His monthly descent into finances with his wife, Lisa chats with Chuck on the computer before she moves to the bed for text messaging, Dani coming over to gossip, and so on. Matt is fully aware of all around him because it happens the same way over and over again. He has learned to live with his father's dementia-caused loops, and is "learning to live" with all the other loops. Because his life is routined with these loops, once it is time for bed he finds himself compelled to complete the loop of his day and return to the 7/11 from the previous night.

Matt's attempt to find Skeet and Jamie, as well as Matt's eventual drug purchase begins as desperate coping act but ends up as a way for him to take control of something in a life where he has completely lost control. Matt felt joy and happiness the night before and was possibly looking to recreate that feeling. This act is precipitous in nature, just as was quitting his job to start a website or going to the lumber store to confront Chuck. It is firmly established the reader should be wary of this decision by Matt, as none of his other rash decisions ended particularly well. The only difference with this situation is Matt's passion and enjoyment of the weed the night before may indicate a slightly higher level of investment, whereas poetry or confronting Chuck are more representative of something Matt thinks makes sense to do, rather than a passion.



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss what you think caused Matt to go “all-in” on his website idea.

## Discussion Question 2

What about Matt’s decision to spend all his money on drugs is surprising? What is not surprising about it?

## Discussion Question 3

Outside of what is explicitly mentioned, why does Matt view Dani as a threat to his way of life?

## Vocabulary

quatrain, synaptic, sentry, blithe



# Chapter 7: The Last Day of the Newspaper Business

## Summary

Chapter 7 is a short two-page chapter written in poetic verse. It is a description of a dream Matt had about delivering newspapers on his bike as a child. He delivers a paper to his father's porch. The paper contains "fresh despairs: new Vietnams and Watergates, Mansons and Patty Hearsts, not to mention Andy Capp and Hi and Lois, horoscopes, a Crossword puzzle, box scores - even the obit of my poor mother" (68). Matt's father tells him not to cry as "he folded that paper back up and tucked the only good thing I ever did under his arm, easing back into the warm house of [Matt's] dead childhood to take his morning shit" (69).

## Analysis

Matt's dream illuminates his disdain for his current life and choices and his tendency to look fondly on the past by referring to delivering newspapers and "the only good thing I ever did" (69). The poem contains very colorful and upbeat language to describe how he used to deliver papers: "...the end of papers fell like a snowflake onto the faded wood planks" (68). He delivers his own mother's obituary to his father who tells him "even good things die" (68). His father taking the paper and going inside symbolizes Matt's current struggle. All that he has worked for, all that he was good at (writing for the newspaper as an adult) and been taken inside for a "morning shit."

## Discussion Question 1

Why did the author decide to include this poem at this point in the story?

## Discussion Question 2

What other symbolism can be gleaned from this poem in Chapter 7?

## Discussion Question 3

Is there any significance to Matt's father being the only other figure in the Chapter 7 poem? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

orbit, plank





## Chapter 8: The Last Day of the Newspaper Business, Part II

### Summary

Matt reveals the dream described in the previous chapter is a dream he had around the time he decided to leave the newspaper roughly two years ago, which happened to be right around the time his mother passed away. Matt continues to recount what led him to leave his job. Matt did not particularly dislike his job, and it pains him to admit in his current state that he always felt he was almost too good for his job. "I offer no excuses for this arrogance, and no rationale, either; I simply felt bigger than what I did for a living, like I was slumming, like I deserved more money, more respect and more esteem than any grubby newspaper could offer" (71). Matt describes a "tumor of discontentment" developing within him, driving him to desire more: "...I sat chained to my desk and watched various friends and colleagues slip into phone booths and emerge as dot.com superheroes" (72). This is when he decided to quit and start poetfolio.com.

Matt returned to work at the newspaper a few months back, only to be laid off four weeks later (this is where his dwindling severance pay is coming from). He has returned to his old office once again to visit the HR department in order to cash out his pension. On the elevator ride up he has an awkward encounter with his old boss, only referred to as "M-." Matt describes M- as an overweight despot who was the constant target of ridicule from Matt while he worked at the newspaper. As much as Matt dislikes M-, Matt concedes that the layoffs and cutbacks their newspaper experienced were not M-'s fault but, rather, symptomatic of the newspaper business as a whole. New technologies and mediums have long threatened print journalism and Matt's former employer is one of the many victims of that threat.

Matt arrives at the HR department and sits down with Amber Philips, described as having "that slightly-slutty business look just this side of inappropriate" (80). Matt has always fantasized Amber had something of a crush on him, even though he logically knew this not to be true. During a flirty interaction, Matt cashes out the paltry \$2,600 from his pension and tells Amber he is currently high.

Matt, to the reader, explains the night before he ended up meeting up with Jamie who said he could not sell the almost \$10,000 worth of pot Matt was looking for, as it would take a few days to get it all together. In the meantime, Matt bought \$300 worth of drugs while Jamie talked to his people about the larger sale. Before coming to his old office, Matt had stopped by Richard's office, the financial planner, and sold him half of his drug stash for \$300, putting him in the black. He smoked with Richard for a brief bit before heading to meet with Amber.



Amber tells Matt her normal drug dealer moved away and she has been having trouble finding a supply. Matt sells her \$200 worth and then leaves to meet his former co-worker, Ike, for lunch. Ike is in disbelief that Matt is becoming a drug dealer. Matt decrees he is only going to do it to make enough for the boys tuition and a few house payments. By that point he assumes he will have found a job and will stop dealing.

During lunch Matt's receives a call from Jamie who says his supplier wants to meet Matt before making the large deal. Matt and Jamie plan to meet at 7/11 at 10 p.m. to head over to the supplier's place. Ike and Matt are giddy with excitement over that fact that Matt is now a drug dealer. Ike then leans in and asks Matt if he thinks he will also be able to get some cocaine.

## Analysis

Based on Matt's recount of the circumstances surrounding him leaving his job two years ago, the author wants the reader to know Matt is not delusional that he made the right decision. Matt is fully aware that leaving his job to start a website was not a good idea. Matt shows immense regret that his pride and entitlement clouded his judgments and caused him to make such a poor decision. Matt admits that even had he stayed at his job there is a good chance he would have been laid off, but at least he would still have some sort of professional momentum in finding a new job.

Even though Matt shows regret over his attitude towards his former job, becoming a drug dealers shows he has not truly learned his lesson. Matt's arrogance that led him to leave his job two years ago has reemerged in Matt assuming he can avoid financial ruin by being a drug dealer. This is a time where many people have hit hard time, and Matt thinks, just like his old job, that his is better than it. He is confident he can beat the system. His plan of only dealing for a little while - until he gets back on his feet - has the same amount of logic as his plan to leave his job to start a poetry website. Matt is repeating his same mistakes, caught in an endless loop like the ones discussed in Chapter 6.

The author frames Matt's increasing adventures into the drug world as childish and ill-advised because he wants the reader to feel a sense of dread as Matt continues. The author does this by having Matt reveal he only has a vague outline of a plan. He knows he can sell drugs to Richard and Amber, maybe Ike and some other friends, but the amount of foresight needed to sell \$10,000 worth of marijuana is far beyond Matt's reach. Matt recklessly overcharges Richard, not thinking of any consequences of that and charges Amber less for the same amount of drugs. This flippant disregard for his customer could end up posing an issue.

The other event that points to Matt not being ready or equipped to enter the drug trade is the giddy, child-like exchange between Ike and Matt after Matt receives a call from Jamie. Matt and Ike say, "Your/I'm a drug dealer! Holy shit!" repeatedly to each other (89). They cannot contain their excitement. Matt has just agreed to meet a 20-year-old kid at 7/11 to be taken to a drug supplier, which should be a scary and unsafe



proposition. Matt is fueled by the thrill of fantasy rather than the competence of a plan. Vestiges of his old fantasies are seen by the reader frequently and often (such as leaving his job, harboring that Amber is attracted to him, and confronting Chuck at the lumber store). Matt always ends up logically seeing the error of his ways, but that does not seem to stop him from repeating the same mistakes.

Overlooking his ineptitude at entering the drug world highlights the theme of a crisis in modernity occurring throughout the book. Just as Matt was previously convinced he could make investments how he saw fit and afford a house out of his price range, he thinks as a modern man he is well equipped to do anything he wants even though he is clearly not. Overestimating his financial/professional prowess landed him in his current situation just as overestimating his ability in the drug business could lead to disaster.

Matt's description of his former employer's hard times in the context of the larger collapse of the economy provides temporal context for the reader. This book takes place around 2008 (based on Matt saying he left his company in 2006 and that two years have passed), right around the time of the housing collapse the economic downturn. The author wants to make sure the reader understands what was happening with the economy at that time. Many people were losing their jobs and many companies were forced to downsize or fold completely. Without this crucial context, much of the narrative would be under appreciated and misinterpreted.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Ike is so supportive of Matt's plan to deal drugs?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think Matt is acting rationally at this point? Is he acting this way because of his home life?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe the economic climate of 2008. Why is it so crucial to know about the economy of 2008 in order to fully understanding the narrative of this story?

## Vocabulary

euphoria, libelous, sycophant, bloviate



# Chapter 9: Twenty-Four-Hour News, A Haiku

## Summary

Matt describes his daily routine with his father now that he is out of work. They sit all day with cups of coffee and flip through the channels watching experts talk about the crises in housing and finance. “We can’t turn away; it is financial porno” (90). They also watch to “ogle the twenty four hour news babes” (90). Matt’s father makes very crass remarks about the women while Matt’s comments are much more tame. Matt’s father begins repeating himself due to his dementia and Matt laments that the dementia is just as frustrating, if not more frustrating, for his father. The reader finds out Matt’s dad was in the Army and then worked at a Sears for the rest of his professional life, working his way all the way up to manager of the automotive department. Matt’s dad has always been a hardworking and driven man, so being in a constant state of mental confusion is very difficult for him.

Matt’s dad falls asleep, so Matt decides to “spend an hour on my little side project: ‘contacting [his] lender’s about the \$31,000 payment [they] owe next week’” (95). Matt details the labyrinth-like web of automated recordings he has to sift through in order to speak to an actual person. He is overjoyed when he finally speaks to a human and begins to explain his entire situation and why he will not be able to make the payment. The man on the phone is very reassuring, giving Matt a name and extension of a person to contact for more information. The man on the phone then transfers Matt to another automated message which causes Matt to throw his phone in rage.

Later that night Matt and his family are eating dinner. Teddy and Franklin are talking about how much they love their school which makes Matt and Lisa feel guilty as the boys may have to switch to public school. Lisa flashes Matt a reassuring smile that leaves Matt somewhat agitated because, “it would be so much easier to lose [his] wife she were an asshole, but she consistently refused to cooperate in this way” (98).

Matt tells readers how he and Lisa first met. She was a marketing intern for a hospital Matt was covering for the newspaper. Matt explains their relationship progressed. He says her biggest strength is how cool and calm she is about everything. Matt also includes her other greatest strength as being her looks: “Hell, If I were being honest, I’d have to admit she’s still attractive and smart enough to be on cable news...” (100).

Matt asks his Dad to play Scrabble with him rather than watching TV that night. His Dad constantly makes up and misspells words, but Matt lets it be. Matt goes upstairs to find Lisa in bed reading a magazine. She tells Matt that she is going to meet Dani for a concert on Saturday night. Matt immediately finds this suspicious after overhearing Dani mention something about something being so romantic the night before. When Matt questions Lisa about what/where the concert is, Lisa offers to ask Dani if she could get



an extra ticket. Matt is unsure if Lisa is telling the truth of calling his bluff. Unsure of what to say next, he says he needs to think about it and goes to take the trash out.

While taking the trash out Matt marvels at his house. He truly feels it is their dream house. Matt describes how so much of their identity has been tied up into the house. They are obsessed with its value, borrowing against it to remodel somewhat frequently. His mind goes on a tangent and he ends up thinking he could be happy if he lived above the garage to be the poet/driver of the family and Chuck moved in to take over all the husband/father duties. The thought of Chuck being with Lisa sexually makes Matt snap out of his delusions and he marches up to his room to get everything out in the open with Lisa. Once he gets there Lisa immediately tells him they cannot get him an extra ticket for the concert, which indicates to Matt that Lisa does not want him there because she is actually doing something with Chuck. Matt sees Lisa really wants whatever is happening with Chuck which hurts. Matt puts on a fake smile, says he will happily watch the kids, and leaves abruptly to meet Jamie and Skeet for their meeting with the drug supplier.

## Analysis

Matt views his father's dementia in a similar way to which Matt views his current situation: the man is better than the fate he has been prescribed. Matt's detailing of his father's life shows that he feels his father's dementia is unfair. The fact that he has trouble remembering anything from his long accomplished is unfair to Matt. A cruel fate that in Matt's opinion is completely undeserved. This is similar to how Matt feels about his own life at the current moment. He knows he has made mistakes and could have done things differently, but he believes he certainly does not deserve for things to be this bad. He worked hard, found a great wife, and started a family. Why should he have his positive memories clouded by the depressive nature of the present? Matt's having his own form of dementia for the good times in his life just like his father, a fact that agitates and upsets him.

Matt's unwillingness to accept his place in the world is a recurring theme throughout the book. It is a part of Matt's personality that greatly holds him back from making any sort of progress in his life. Matt's dad's dementia is a final reckoning, there is nothing that can be done to escape the disease. Matt's situation, while obviously not an actual disease, is final. He cannot do anything to change the past or make things different immediately. Matt fighting against his place in the world is as futile as if Matt's dad tried to fight against his dementia.

This monologue about dementia also contributes to show the reader that Matt has a problematic view towards women and seeing them as sexual objects. Matt also mentions it is a shame that, even though it was not a good thing to do, his father cannot remember the sex he had when he ran off for a month with a 22-year-old stripper named Charity. Matt essentially equates forgetting about your hard work and family as being as bad as forgetting about sex with a young stripper. Matt's oversexualized view of a woman's role in the world is also highlighted when he recounts the way he and Lisa



met. Matt's most salient memories of meeting his wife for the first time includes what she was wearing and how she looked. After describing Lisa as "open and cool" (100) he also assesses his wife's greatest strength as being her looks. He says she is pretty enough to be one of the cable news girls his father and him make sexual comments about. Matt believes this to be a compliment, but the reader is struck by how shallow a remark this is and makes the reader question if Matt really knows his wife at all. Lisa was previously a driven career woman who made a good salary, but Matt did not seem to place any value on that. He does not see Lisa, or most likely any woman, as having a role in contributing to finances in a meaningful way. This view of women has most likely held him back and will forever stop him from getting his family on the right track.

The chapter ends with a demonstration of Matt's dichotomy of inward confidence and outward cowardice. While taking the trash out and admiring his house Matt convinces himself that everything he is doing right now (trying to become a drug dealer, not addressing Lisa's relationship with Chuck, and withholding certain aspects of their finances from Lisa) is a huge mistake. He concocts a whole speech to deliver to Lisa to right his course of action. The author uses terms such as "fired up" and "claim my life" to show how passionate Matt feels in that moment, but Lisa telling him that Dani cannot get an extra ticket to the concert immediately makes him impotent. His masculine prowess is taken from from him, a common theme in the book.

This display also shows the reader that Matt is incapable of, or at the very least struggles with, acting on impulses that involve people other than himself. Matt has been very impulsive and daring in pursuing being a drug dealing and skirting his mortgage payments, but when it is something involving Lisa he is easily discouraged. This indicates Matt may not be equipped to keep his family together at all and, unconsciously, he has already thrown in the towel. Becoming a drug dealer is more about feeling like a man rather than actually fixing his family situation.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Matt's relationship with his father. Does Matt get any joy out of it or is it purely a burden now?

## Discussion Question 2

Is Matt's perception of the Lisa/Chuck situation accurate? Or has he worked himself into some sort of delusional anxious state?

## Discussion Question 3

What other of Matt's actions and/or comments up until this point in the book have showed a problematic attitude towards women?

## Vocabulary

erudite, ethereal, solvency



# Chapter 10: Dave the Drug Dealer Wants to Look Up My Ass

## Summary

Matt meets Jamie at the 7/11 and they proceed to drive to meet the drug supplier. The meeting is set to take place in a girl named Bea's apartment. Matt immediately finds Bea attractive, noting her "long blond hair pulled in a ponytail, her no-doubt banging body effortlessly buried beneath a pile of tights and sweaters and scarves" (113). Matt also notes "Bea's wall-length hot-English-major bookcase" (114). After being properly distracted by fantasizing about Bea, Dave the drug supplier comes into the room.

Dave immediately asks Matt to strip down so that he can search him for a wire and that he needs to look up his ass. Matt is taken aback and questions the efficacy of looking up his ass for a wire, but Dave becomes aggressively insistent. As soon as Matt begins to take off his pants, Dave relents and says he was only joking. Matt pulls out the \$9,000 dollars he brought from his pocket, to which Dave interrupts and chastises him for bringing that much money to a meeting with people he does not even know.

Dave pulls out a large stack of contracts for Matt to sign, essentially putting in writing that Matt is not affiliated with any branch of law enforcement, that he would not sell what Dave refers to as the "medicinal product" to children, and other stipulations. Dave is a shrewd businessman and is careful not to implicate himself in whatever Matt ends up doing with the drugs. Dave's role is to introduce clients to a grower, negotiate a fare price, and collect an hourly rate for his services. Once Matt begins signing the contracts he is reminded of Thomas, the real estate agent who sold him and Lisa their home. Once all of the contracts are signed Dave gives Matt a menu of different strains of marijuana with prices. Dave tells Matt to take it home and look it over and to expect a call from him the next day.

## Analysis

The narrative structure of this chapter shows Matt's adeptness for distracting himself from uncomfortable/difficult situations. Throughout his description of the events he goes off on tangents, making comments about the clothes Jamie was wearing, and he speaks at length about what he finds attractive about Bea, the girl whose apartment the meeting occurs in. Matt is clearly nervous about the meeting and copes by commenting on inane, unimportant things. Matt is avoiding facing an intimidating situation head on. This is parallel to Matt's desire to get into the drug business in the first place. Rather than addressing his financial and marital issues head on, he is distracting himself by going on an adventure into the world of drug dealing.





The lengthy contract process Dave has prior to conducting any business with Matt, as well as Matt's surprise at Dave's appearance, serves to clue the reader in on just how above Matt's understanding becoming a drug dealer actually is. Matt had assumed he would only be dealing with people like Jamie and Skeet, underdressed and undereducated criminals. Dave's professional appearance surprises Matt: "What kind of a drug dealer wears an overcoat" (114)? Matt has acknowledged he may not fully understand what he is getting himself into, but the he had mentally prepared for a different kind of situation than the one presented to him. This frames Matt as even more of a fish-out-of-water than he had been before.

Matt acknowledges to the reader how intimidated he is by Dave and how he is second guessing his decision, but his excessive pride prevents him from trying to cut his losses and give up. Matt has been dejected for too long and refuses to give in to his logical mind and is fueled by the prideful delusion of considering himself a success again. Throughout the book Matt is provided ample opportunity to abandon his ludicrous plan, and even internally considers it, but his pride pushes him towards inevitable disaster.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Dave as a businessman. Compare the Dave to Matt in terms of their business acumen.

## Discussion Question 2

What about Dave's description/fascination with Bea aligns with other behaviors/comments he has had in previous chapters?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the poem which opens up the chapter. How does it fit in with the narrative?

## Vocabulary

indemnify, perpetuity



# Chapter 11: Turns Out There Are Only Four Eskimo Words for Snow, However -

## Summary

Chapter 11 starts with a poem listing all of the various slang words for marijuana. Lisa asks Matt why he has been googling pot slang, to which Matt responds that he wants to be caught up on the slang to be ready since their boys are getting older. In actuality Matt was trying to figure out the words on Dave's pot menu. Lisa ignores Matt's ludicrous comment and tells him she will hear from her boss at the optometrist office if she will be able to go full-time and receive benefits, though she is not optimistic. Matt notices how well dressed she is for work (a trend that is been occurring the past few weeks) and Lisa asks Matt to pick the boys up from school and feed them dinner since she will be late (another increasingly common trend. Matt assumes she is meeting Chuck but does not put too much thought into it. Matt does his daily check of Lisa's Facebook page and sees she has not responded to any messages, even the innocent ones from friends. Matt assumes she and Chuck's conversations have "moved to a safer platform" (127).

Matt gets his dad into the car to take him to a doctor's appointment. After enduring typical repetition and conversation loops in the car, they arrive at the doctor's office. Matt's father is unable to answer simple questions from the doctors, such as what year it is, and there is some concern over Matt's father losing six pounds in the past month. Matt sugarcoats the truth and says he has about equal good days and bad days, and today happens to be a bad day. The doctor asks if they had given any more thought to assisted living, and Matt says they have thought about it but blames his father's financial troubles as being a barrier.

Matt drops his dad off at home and goes for a lunch meeting with Earl Ruscom, a wealthy developer Matt used to cover when he worked at the paper. Earl wants to start an online publication called "The Can-Do Times" as a publication free of liberal-bias and is looking for an editor. Matt is initially shocked when he enters the meeting and Earl has lost 80 pounds since they last time they met. Once settling in, Earl officially offers the job as editor, but Matt is careful not to get too excited until he hears about pay and benefits. Earl tells Matt there would be no benefits at first but he would be able to pay \$50k. Matt is ecstatic as it is almost as much as he used to make at the paper. Matt's phone rings and he ignores a call from Dave the drug supplier. When Matt negotiates up to \$55k he realizes Earl actually said \$15k but it sounded like 50 with his southern accent. Matt says he has to think about it but warns Earl he does not think he can make it work. Matt looks at his phone which has a text message from Dave saying "1 hour..."



## Analysis

Matt's interaction with Lisa at the beginning of the chapter indicates that he is all-in on his plan to be a drug dealer not only to fix his financial situation, but also his marriage. Obviously, he is looking to sell drugs to get his finances under control, but his lack of comment/action on what is a fairly obvious budding infidelity from Lisa shows that he is confident making more money will bring his wife back to him. Matt assumes by fixing one problem (finances) his other problems (marriage/family) will right themselves. Matt does not say this explicitly but it is inferred in his refusal to act on the matter of his wife. This has happened multiple times in previous chapters, and the example here is the most obvious hint at Lisa's dishonesty yet, and Matt still pretends to be in the dark about it.

Matt downplaying the severity of his father's condition to the doctor echoes Matt's established tendency to be dishonest about bad news. For the entire narrative, Matt has lied to Lisa about the impending foreclosure on their home as well as the seriousness of various other money related struggles. Matt lying to the doctor shows this behavior is not specific to his finances or his wife, but rather a deeper character flaw. Matt does not want anyone (from his wife to his father's doctor) to know how bad his life is. He is ashamed and perhaps holds out hope that things will improve. He lies with such ease that it may be that Matt believes he is not actually lying, since if things get better later his lie will be retroactively substantiated.

Both continuing to outwardly ignore his issues with his wife and underplaying his dad's condition demonstrate the recurring theme of Matt not accepting his place in the world. He logically knows the truth about his life, but he emotionally thinks he deserves better. This manifests itself in willful ignorance (the situation with his wife) and lying (his father's condition). But not acknowledging or by lying he can avoid coming to terms with his life and hold onto the delusion his life is not as bad as it seems.

The parallel references to weight loss (Matt's dad and Earl Ruscom) symbolize how far Matt is straying from his previous life. Matt's father has lost six pounds in the last month and Earl has lost 80 pounds since they last spoke a few years prior. Matt's father's weight loss is relatively meager, not causing any alarm but definitely noticeable and possibly a symptom of something worse. Just as Matt in the past month has made some small transgressions that are pointing towards larger problems for him. Matt's father's weight loss symbolizes Matt's recent change and Earl's massive weight loss symbolizes a larger change over time. When Matt and Earl last spoke, Matt was still employed and confident about his life. He had aspirations for poetfolio.com and would not even consider leaving his job to work for Earl. Now he has no aspirations and poetfolio.com ignited his downfall. He has no other option but to seek out Earl for work even though Matt knows starting a media company in this climate is a fool's errand.

## Discussion Question 1

What reasons does Matt have for not confronting Lisa about Chuck?



## Discussion Question 2

Would Matt have truly dropped his drug dealing plan had Earl offered him an appropriate salary? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe Matt's attitude towards his dad's illness.

## Vocabulary

bluster, marrow



# Chapter 12: You Will Need

## Summary

After the lunch meeting with Earl, Matt is supposed to go meet his unemployment counselor, Noreen. Matt knows that Noreen will just encourage him to take Earl's extremely low-paying job offer, so he decided to go pay Chuck a visit at "the mystical land of lumber for a bit of recon behind enemy lines" (143). The chapter opens with a lengthy list of supplies (written in poetic verse) needed for building a treehouse. Chuck is printing off an invoice for the supplies Matt would need to build a treehouse.

Matt is feeling bitter and inferior to Chuck as he prints out the invoice, but finds a moment of solace when he notices Chuck has a bald spot. Matt rejoices about the imperfection and lets the reader know that he has a "luscious head of hair" (146). The invoice for the wood ends up being \$1,100, which Matt obviously balks at first. As Matt's phone rings with a call from Dave, he haphazardly comes up with a plan: he will have the lumber delivered to the house to have Lisa find it with a "Stehne Lumber" invoice attached to it, causing Lisa to suspect that Matt knows about her and Chuck. He irresponsibly decides to purchase the lumber and Chuck says he can have it delivered by Monday. In order for Matt's plan to work he would need it ahead of the Lisa's rendezvous with Chuck on Saturday (in which she told Matt she was going to a concert with Dani). Matt pushes Chuck to have the lumber delivered the next day and Chuck eventually agrees, saying he may have to deliver it himself.

## Analysis

Matt going directly from his disastrous meeting with Earl to visit Chuck at the lumber store shows he fuels himself through self-pity. Instead of going to his appointment with the unemployment counselor, which may be humiliating but at least would be a positive step, he decided to subject himself to the more internal humiliation of visiting his wife's alleged lover. The plan of having lumber from Chuck's store delivered to the house is only going to cause him more pain and self-loathing - Matt probably knows this. Yet he cannot help himself because his inability to address issues directly leaves this to be the only option.

The decision to visit Chuck after seeing Earl could also be read as Matt doubling down on reclaiming his masculinity. If he can not reverse his emasculation by getting a new, well-paying job he can at least try by humiliating his wife and her possible lover. He fails to regain control of one aspect of his life so he shifts to trying to recklessly reclaim another. The theme of masculinity is omnipresent throughout the novel but is particularly prevalent here.

Matt comes up with the plan as Dave is calling his cell phone, which indicates the rush from his burgeoning drug dealer career is bleeding into other parts of his life. Matt was



feeling dejected about how expensive the lumber for the tree house was going to cost and most likely was not going to buy it, but as soon as he felt his phone vibrating with the call from Chuck he justifies the purchase with a reckless plan. Dave and drug dealing is invigorating Matt with motivation, just not any sort of productive motivation. Over the course of the book these impulses have become increasingly destructive; starting with simply staying out all night smoking pot all the way to this potentially marriage ending plan. Matt is in control of his own destiny at this point but his impetuosity may lead to being his downfall.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the significance of the list of supplies being presented in poetry form?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Matt's joyous reaction to Chuck's bald spot tell the reader about his character?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Does Matt actually want to save his marriage at this point? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

condescension, epiphany



# Chapter 13: On the Spiritual Crises of Financial Experts

## Summary

This chapter consists of a poem (assumedly written by Matt) describing the root cause of the financial crisis. He uses Mother Teresa's admission that she stopped hearing God's voice towards the end of her life as a parallel example of the way people blindly trusted in the economic system of the US. Mother Teresa stayed steadfast in her faith even though she had stopped hearing God's voice, just as millions of US citizens stayed confident the economy would right itself, even during the worst throes of economic depression.

The poem opines that while blame was placed on many things and people for the financial crises (poor people being given mortgages they could not pay, inflated home prices, etc), blaming these things is akin to "saying a cold is caused by a cough - that your pneumonia came from a sneeze" (151). The actual cause of the financial crisis is the financial system itself. The poem ends with a plea to God to smite the "rich fat fuck - this expert who apparently slept through history class" who unfairly places blame on those who do not deserve it (153).

## Analysis

This poem is an example of Matt's victim mentality which pervades his entire life. The poem frames the entire financial crisis as being due to an intrinsically flawed system. Regardless of how responsible or cautious people were with their money, chaos and disarray were an inevitability. Matt demonstrates he partially blames himself for the poetfolio.com fiasco, but the fact that he has not been able to find steady work is a systemic problem. He is suffering because the system will not let him recover. Even when he is offered an admittedly low-paying job from Earl, he feels entitled to something more even though he is in no position to feel that way.

The opinion that the financial system is solely to blame for the crisis also explains why Matt feels justified in becoming a drug dealer and contributes to the theme of modernity. He cannot work within an unwinnable system so he must go outside of that system in order to recover. Matt considers himself a victim, but better than other victims. Rather than just rolling over and taking his fate he is breaking the law and trying to beat the system. Matt is acting with seemingly confidence, bordering on hubris, which may lead to his demise. Matt feels deceived as he was convinced by those around him that he was a modern man. He was convinced he could be successful in the modern financial landscape and feels wronged because he was not. Matt is now making the same mistake of modernity, convinced he can be successful in the drug world - a world he knows nothing about.



The use of a stand alone poem (the only contents of the chapter) at this point in the book serves as something of a check-in point for the reader. Because the reader knows Matt is best understood through his poetry this chapter gives the reader an opportunity to reflect on Matt as a character, uninterrupted by much plot or other characters. The poem provides new information about Matt that the reader can synthesize along with what he or she already knows about him.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why did the author decide to include this poem at this point in the book?

## **Discussion Question 2**

In light of Matt joking about converting to Catholicism, is there any significance to using Mother Teresa as an analogy and speaking to God in the poem?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does the poetry in the book function narratively? Does it serve as a distraction for Matt?

## **Vocabulary**

hectorated, belies, epaulet, endemic



# Chapter 14: On the Spiritual Crises of Drug Dealers

## Summary

The chapter starts with Matt saying Bea kissed him. He quickly recaps how he arrived in this situation: he took his senile father to the doctor, had a lunch meeting with Earl, precipitously bought \$1,100 worth of lumber from Chuck, got angry listening to a financial analyst on NPR while driving to Bea's apartment for the meeting with Dave. Once he arrived at Bea's apartment he stood outside with her while she smoked a cigarette. Matt was telling Bea that she should not date Dave, when all of the sudden Bea leans in and kisses him. Bea tells Matt, "Sorry...I kiss people, It's like...my thing" (155). Matt is flustered and describes it as an "...in-between kiss, not exactly mustached-Aunt-Martha-at-the-train-station, but probably not meant to be erotic either" (155). Bea tells Matt that she does not date Dave (although he wants to date). They have an arrangement where Dave pays part of Bea's rent in exchange for holding meetings at her apartment.

Dave pulls in a Nissan Maxima that is the exact year and color as Matt's car. Matt worries that Dave may have seen him and Bea kiss. They small-talk about the weather and Dave says he was listening to a financial analyst on NPR, the same thing Matt was listening to. Dave says it makes him feel hopeful, as the dire economic climate makes him ponder what all this striving and worrying really means if he dies tomorrow. Matt says the analyst made him mad, to which Dave responds by calling him cynical. Matt's cell phone begins to buzz just as Dave asks if he is ready to go. Matt sees it's his sons' school calling and assumes one of them must be sick. He tells Dave they may need to postpone.

## Analysis

The "rich fat fuck" from the poem in the previous chapter is most likely referring to the financial analyst Matt listened to on NPR and discusses with Dave. This shows Matt continues to use poetry as something of a coping strategy. The analyst he was listening to made him mad, so to cope with that anger he channeled it into a philosophical poem about the current state of the economy.

Establishing poetry as Matt's coping mechanism sheds light on the placement of many of the poems throughout the book as well as the motivation behind Matt quitting his job years prior to start poetfolio.com. There are poems in reference to Chuck, his financial woes, and escapist poems such as the poem in Chapter 4 about a noticing a mother wearing a thong. These are all either stressful and difficult situations or ways to blow off steam coming off of a stressful and difficult situation. Poetfolio.com was most likely how Matt coped with feeling superior with his current job.



Matt's major issue with religion is the idea that one must relinquish control to a higher power. Matt wonders if Dave is becoming religious after giving his thoughts on how the dire financial report on NPR made him feel better, which he frames as a negative thing if it is true. He has been consistently making glib jokes about Catholicism and converting to Catholicism, which demonstrate a ridicule of believing in a higher power. Matt feels one must work for their own success and relying on some sort of higher power is ineffective. It has already been established that Matt feels the system is set up against him so he must go outside the system (deal drugs) in order to attain the success he seeks. With the religious allusions becoming increasingly frequent and the number of road blocks in the quest to be a drug dealer also increasing, Matt could potentially be headed for some sort of crisis of faith and religion.

Taking umbrage with controlling power of religion contributes to the themes of masculinity and hubris. Matt is desperately trying to regain his masculine identity and is being primarily motivated by his own hubris, so the thought of giving up all power to a higher being is unthinkable to him. Matt does not even trust his wife enough to share the full extent of their financial woes, so trusting God is more of a sign of weakness rather than a strength.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Matt's flustered and awkward reaction to Bea's kiss tell us about how he handles unexpected situations? Could this reaction foreshadow anything?

## Discussion Question 2

Matt says having exactly the same car as Dave makes him "feel creepy in some way he can't quite name" (156). What does he mean by this?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe the relationship between Dave and Matt. Is it analogous to any other relationships in the book?

## Vocabulary

strewn, moll, wry



# Chapter 15: Good Choices

## Summary

Matt is in a meeting with Franklin's teacher, Ms. Bishop. Matt describes Ms. Bishop as the "nasty lovely sweet Ms. Bishop of the pouty mouth and black-lined eyes" (160). Matt has a sexual obsession with Ms. Bishop, and has ever since Teddy had Ms. Bishop as a teacher three years prior. During the parent-teacher conference Matt's thoughts are constantly interrupted with sexual innuendo about Ms. Bishop, which Matt attributes to being worked up from the kiss he received from Bea. Ms. Bishop explains Franklin attacked another student with a clacker during music class. The victim said something to Franklin, which he has not been at liberty to share. Ms. Bishop said because this is so unlike Franklin they are not going to suspend him and instead have him write an apology letter to the boy he hit. Matt is brought to the principal's office where Franklin is waiting for him. Even while lecturing Franklin, Matt's mind cannot stop making sexual comments about Ms. Bishop.

On the drive home Teddy pesters Franklin to tell him what he hit the other student with. Matt asks Teddy to be quiet, but Teddy eventually gets Franklin to tell him. They arrive at home and Matt makes the boys and his father dinner and puts the boys to bed. While putting Franklin to bed, he gets Franklin to tell him what the other boy said to provoke him. "He said Ms. Bishop was a slut" (166). Matt deduces Franklin has a crush on Ms. Bishop, gives him a cookie-cutter speech about violence being wrong, and then puts him to bed.

Matt goes downstairs to clean-up and wait for Lisa. He is convinced that Lisa is out with Chuck, possibly having sex. Matt reveals to the reader a little more about Lisa's past: She grew up financially secure until the age of 12 when her father died of a heart attack. Lisa and her mother found out he had a first wife he had never told Lisa or her mother about and never officially got divorced from her. All of his money went to his first family and Lisa and her mother were left with nothing. When Lisa finally comes home she nonchalantly thanks Matt for taking care of the boys tonight. Matt smugly tells Lisa about the incident with Franklin, hoping it will inspire guilt in Lisa for galavanting with Chuck while her family was in crisis. Lisa becomes incensed that Matt did not call her, saying she could have easily left the candle party she was at. Matt realizes she mentioned this party to him weeks ago and he had forgotten. Lisa breaks down and tells Matt she was miserable at the party because she knew she could not buy anything and all the other women pitied her. Matt's dad interrupts and Lisa snaps at him but then promptly apologizes, calling him Jerry, the first time Matt's dad's name has been revealed. Lisa storms upstairs and Matt is lost as to what to do. He could go upstairs and apologize, confront Lisa about Chuck, or say nothing. Frozen with indecisiveness, Matt grabs his keys and leaves the house.



## Analysis

Matt justifies his obsessions, such as his sexual infatuation with Ms. Bishop, by normalizing them. Matt is quick to let the reader know that inappropriate thoughts go “through the minds of the other fathers (and not a few of the mothers)” while Ms. Bishop speaks (157-158). Matt avoids being ashamed of the way he thinks and acts by assuming everyone else is the same. He uses this tactic with his financial situation too. To Matt, everyone is in dire straits just like him and anyone who is not must have be dishonorable. Matt exists in a reality he specifically crafted for himself. All his actions, reactions, and thoughts are right and just.

Matt's inability to know what to do after the fight with Lisa shows how frail he becomes once his world view is shattered. Matt was sure of the fact Lisa was out with Chuck. So sure to the point he felt justified in purchasing \$1,100 dollars of lumber just to spite her. When he finds out he was mistaken and Lisa was not with Chuck, Matt flees the situation. He considered other options, such as finally confronting Lisa about Chuck or consoling her, but he is unable to make a decision because finding out his thought process was woefully incorrect is too much of a shock. He retreats rather than confronts the failure of his perceptions.

Franklin's attack on a classmate shows that some of Matt's impulsive tendencies have been passed down as well as showing that every person has a breaking point. Franklin is described as meek and mild, and the attack is extremely out of character. Similarly, Matt at one time was an unassuming reporter who was pushed far enough to lash out. Franklin, just like his father, has does something rash in the name of honor. Franklin is protecting the honor of Ms. Bishop while Matt is protecting the honor of his masculinity. Franklin's violent outburst seemingly came out of nowhere, which makes sense since children are generally more impulsive with their emotions than adults. If Franklin is seen as being similar to his father, then Matt's slightly longer fuse may be heading towards a violent outburst.

The reveal of Lisa's dad having had a second family may hint that dishonesty and keeping secrets are normalized and somewhat honorable to her. Even after Lisa found out about her Dad's other family, she still idolized the man. If Lisa is truly seeking to stray from her marriage, she may be justifying it by echoing her father's behavior. If it worked for her father, then maybe it will work for her. Her breakdown shows she is at her wits end; she feels torn between the life she has and the life she wants, which may be a life with Chuck or even something as simple as having money to buy candles at a party.

## Discussion Question 1

Why did the author wait to reveal Jerry's name (Matt's father) until now? Why did the author have Lisa reveal it to the reader rather than Matt?



## Discussion Question 2

Describe the differences between Franklin and Teddy. How do they relate/mirror Matt's personality?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the evidence that support Lisa having an affair versus the possibility that Matt is being paranoid.

## Vocabulary

surreptitiously, precipitated, plaintive



## Chapter 16: Welcome to Weedland, Haiku #2

### Summary

Matt is suddenly awoken by Dave telling him, “Welcome to Weedland!” (177). Matt is in the back of Dave’s car sitting next to Jamie. They are driving to meet the weed grower from whom Matt would be buying from. They are in a rural town about an hour outside the city. Matt recognizes the town as he has been there many times before; when he was a reporter he would drive to this town to get rural reactions from farmers and residents about any agricultural related business news that happened. He declines to share with the group that he knows the place, and they soon pull up to the growers house.

Once there they see “a shortish, roundish, twentyish guy in a backward ball cap answers the door, chattering away on a cell phone” (179). This is the growers brother, Chet. The house is adorned with beer posters, maps, and bookshelves full of Reader’s Digests. Matt comments, “there’s something...I don’t know...wrong about it...something forcedly random, as if it’s been put together for a family melodrama by the set designer of a local theater (180). The grower finally comes into the room and introduces himself. His name is Monte, he wears a large black parka and there is somewhat awkward in his movements and speaking. After a moment of small talk, Dave leaves the room and Monte take Matt and Jamie into the basement.

The basement is revealed to be a sophisticated grow house. The basement has tunnels which lead to two other houses close by that Monte also owns; they are also grow houses. Monte explains he draws power from local businesses in exchange for paying them double whatever their electric bill is. It is easier to justify a high power bill from a business rather than a residential property. Once the tour is over, Matt hands Monte the money. Monte explains he can only give him part of the package now as he had to make sure all the money was there. Matt can come by the next night to pick up the rest.

Once the transaction is complete Dave enters the room and hands Matt a large envelope containing what he calls “a prospectus” (191). Monte wants to sell Matt his entire operation for four million dollars. Monte says he has recently experienced a nervous breakdown and is looking to get out of the business. When Jamie told Dave and Monte about Matt they thought he would be a perfect fit. Monte and Dave are asking Dave to put down 15% and then gradually pay off the rest. Matt is somewhat flattered they thought he would be the perfect man for this, but he is obviously mostly skeptical. Matt looks through the proposal and sees their profits and assets are through the roof. Were this a legal operation it would be a no-brainer. Matt tells them he absolutely cannot do it, which Monte counters with an offer to sell for \$3.8 million.



## Analysis

Matt's discomfort with Dave driving the same car and wearing the same jacket as him as well as comments on the set-like quality of Monte's house indicate Matt developing a sort of meta, self-awareness to what he is experiencing. It could be described as an out of body experience or even simply as heightened awareness. Matt thought drug dealers would be scary men who drove old beat-up cars, not men like Dave who physically mirror himself. Matt's references to this meta-awareness have been sporadic throughout the last few chapters, and show up more frequently here. The deeper Matt descends into the world of drugs the less he recognizes himself and the less he recognizes reality.

Matt's comment about Monte's house looking like a set someone created could indicate the author is employing a twist on a "play-within-a-play" literary device. This device is generally used to highlight important themes in the story. The narrative of Matt getting into drug dealing is a separate narrative from his home life. Matt's comment about Monte's house shows he feels he is acting in a fictional reality and not living his own life. If Matt is on a "set" and acting in a "play," his behavior here may reveal important themes. For example, in this scene Matt will make an offhanded comment to the reader about smart stock choice: "Domino's Pizza's time-tested delivery platform and low price-point make it a solid recession buy" (184). This is Matt compensating for feeling out of his element by demonstrating something he is good at. Also, Matt mentions several times how flattered he is that Monte thinks he is capable of running a business, showing the audience how deeply bruised Matt's ego is and how craved for success he has become.

Monte symbolizes the fate that Matt is trying to avoid. Even though Monte and Matt come from very different backgrounds, they seem to have come from similar starting points. Monte was a confident, successful marijuana farmer and Matt was a confident, successful business reporter. Monte had a nervous breakdown at some point over the pressures of running his business and wants to completely retreat. Matt is currently under parallel pressures from his lack of work, money, and familiar crisis. Monte could not handle what was around whereas Matt is at a stage where he is barely keeping everything afloat. At any moment Matt could crack and break down, becoming a mirror image of Monte feebly trying to sell his business to get away from it all.

### Discussion Question 1

Discuss how much Matt's lack of sleep is contributing to his behavior.

### Discussion Question 2

How do you think Lisa is reacting to Matt leaving the house every night for the past few night?



## Discussion Question 3

What sort of relationship is developing between Matt and Jamie? Describe it.

## Vocabulary

sotto voce, prospectus, feint





# Chapter 17: In Monte's Fields

## Summary

Matt awakes on the couch at his house. As he awakes he is filled with hope and “it feels like something has lifted, some weight” (199). He admires a painting he and Lisa bought years ago of a couple standing near a road, but realizes for the first time the man in the painting is reaching out for the woman. Matt is feeling hopeful because for the first time in a while he feels he has a plan. He is going to sell the three ounces of weed he has to Richard and Amber, ask them for names of other potential customers, and then tonight go back to Monte to get the rest of his marijuana. Lisa is silent to him as she gets the boys ready for school, still angry from their fight the night before. Matt is making Teddy and Franklin breakfast when he gets a call from Earl Ruscom, who says he can go as high as \$20,000 as a salary for part-time work. Matt says that’s still not enough to live on, but says he will most likely take the job.

As Earl celebrates Matt gets a call on the other line from his lender. Matt is overjoyed to hear he may qualify for mortgage modification program which means he will not lose the house and has more time to get his finances in order. Matt is giddy with excitement as he feels things are finally starting to turn around. He is most excited to begin to process of winning Lisa back. Matt reveals to readers that in couples therapy he and Lisa learned they have different love languages, which means they give and receive love in different ways. He believes he will finally be able to show Lisa love in the way she needs it. As Matt gets in the shower he begins to think about the amount of money he may make from selling weed, which he says he may “even be underselling the potential of this thing....” (206).

## Analysis

The ellipsis which closes the chapter (“I wonder if maybe I might not even be underselling the potential of this thing....”(206)) is a cliffhanger indicating Matt is descending into another trap of hubris. Matt has already been exhibiting signs of hubris by thinking he could beat the system by breaking the law and selling drugs. Now that he has been given a lifeline in the form of an adjustment to his mortgage Matt could feasibly drop the drug dealing plan for the job with Earl and supplement his income in other ways. Instead, Matt’s pride pushes him to want more. The ellipsis is the beginning of a plan to not only get out of the crippling debt his family is in, but to be even better off than he was before. Excessive hubris tends to lead to the downfall of a character, which is a direction Matt may be heading in.

Even though Matt is excited to be able to show Lisa love in her love language again (feeling secure and taken care of), Matt has made no attempts to make Lisa feel loved in that way previously in the book. Matt is singularly minded in thinking the only way to show that love is by having money, when his unwillingness to find other ways to show



that love has driven his wife away from him. Matt is tepidly reassuring to Lisa when talking about money, but largely leaves her in the dark and only cracks jokes about how bad their situation is currently. Matt is assuming just because he does not have a job or income he cannot love his wife correctly, so in ignoring his wife's needs he is driving her farther away. He thinks now that there is a possibility of him being financially successful again he will be able to win her back without much issue, but he will most likely discover his marital strife goes much deeper than money.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What do you think Matt's new plan is going to be?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss why the author reveals information about Matt's life (such as details about his marriage) at such a slow pace, only revealing a little bit about his past at a time.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What actions of Matt's in Chapter 17 reflect his newfound optimism towards his life?

## **Vocabulary**

munificent, inanity, rebuke



# Chapter 18: My Consortium - a Villainelle

## Summary

The chapter starts with a poem in rhyming verse about how to put together a consortium to buy Monte's drug business. Matt is sitting with his friend Ike at their favorite coffee shop. Matt is telling Ike about the business proposal, still saying he is not interested in buying it. Ike pushes Matt, saying he would not be talking about it so much unless he was at least a little bit interested. Matt then lays out his plan for selling weed, mapping out on a napkin how quickly he believes he will be able to make \$50,000, which Matt determines will be when he stops dealing. Ike is supportive of his plan, panicked himself as he believes he will soon be laid off from the newspaper. Ike gets up to leave and Matt fantasizes about the two female baristas working behind the counter when he is approached by two men.

The two men are cops (Greg and Randy), which makes Matt panic. Greg recognizes Matt because Matt interviewed him for the paper a few years ago. Matt feels some relief, thinking they were only talking to him because they recognized him. When Matt is telling them about what he is up to, they ask him about his drug dealing. The two officers are drug enforcement agents who have been creating a case against Monte, Dave, and their whole operation. Through a wiretap, they heard Matt's voice the other night. When Greg recognized Matt as a reporter, they decided to approach him before flat out arresting him. Matt is intimidated by the officers asking about his kids and family. Matt internally panics and admits that has been wrong to do any of this in the first place.

## Analysis

The opening poem of this chapter is the first in the book to be in rhyme, indicating the happy and hopeful mood he is in. All of the previous poems have been non-rhyming, generally very depressing, wry, or sardonic. If the poetry is an extension of Matt and how he copes, this poem show it is also a way in which is celebrates. He is not seriously considering coming up with the money to buy Monte's drug operation, but he is getting enjoyment out of fantasizing how he might pull it off.

The coffee conversation with Ike highlights Matt's ineptitude and naïveté when it comes to the drug business. He writes his entire plan out on a napkin, using incriminate terms like "pounds" and "units." He is also confident beyond any doubt he would be able to sell 20 pounds of marijuana, when at this point he only has two customers. This is not so much arrogance as stupidity. Matt has no knowledge of the actual logistics of selling drugs outside of have a place to buy it from. His profit projections are based off of two sales which he has made. He truly believes he has a handle on the situation, which is why being confronted by the cops directly after his conversation with Art amplifies how over his head he is. Thematically this is Matt further falling into the trap of modernity,



assuming he is capable based on his experiences when he actually does not have the tools to succeed

The author is quick to take Matt down from his good mood because Matt as a character has not earned happiness or release. The whole book has been Matt making a series of terrible decisions with seemingly good intentions, but obviously misguided. Only a few hours have passed since Matt awoke in his house in optimistic bliss. This sharp fall from grace is the author's way of telling the reader that Matt does not deserve reprieve from his problems. A few hours is all he gets before his world comes crashing down around him.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What do you think Ike's true opinion of Matt's plan is?

## **Discussion Question 2**

The chapter ends before the officer's reveal their intentions with Matt. What do you think they plan to do?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Describe Matt's objectification of the barista's and how it fits in with his character.

## **Vocabulary**

consortium, apocryphal, kafkaesque



# Chapter 19: Ah Yes, Now It's All Coming Together - Haiku #3

## Summary

Matt is at the Regional Drug Task Force office, only a few blocks away from the coffee shop. A small sample of Matt's weed is taken for evidence and the rest is returned to his bag. Matt is then asked to fill out and sign a variety of papers, not knowing exactly what he is signing. Greg and Randy explain they have been building a case against Dave (real name Edmund David Waller Jr. AKA Eddie Waller AKA Dave Waller) for the past few years. Dave has multiple prior convictions including assault, intimidation and vehicular manslaughter, of which he may have killed a witness who was set to testify against him. Greg speaks and acts in a bombastic manner while Randy is much more mild mannered. Greg gets worked up that Matt is not understanding what he is being told and storms out, so Randy takes over.

Randy explains they want Matt to be a part of their ongoing operation, acting as a criminal informant for the next two years. Matt will buy the business from Monte and wear a wire in order to entrap Dave. If Matt does not comply or does not follow orders in any way he will be charged for the weed he has, facing up to a year in prison. Randy's explanation is very religious centered, speaking of the forgiving power of Jesus Christ. Eventually he tosses Matt's criminal file in the garbage saying "Those are your sins, Matthew. How does that feel?" (229).

Matt agrees to all the terms and is told he may get paid for his work, but it is all hinging on a conviction for Dave. He is reminded that if he steps out of line even once he will be sent to prison. Matt is also told he must refrain from smoking any marijuana.

## Analysis

This entire chapter thematically serves as karmic emasculation for Matt. Matt's masculinity has been challenged for the entirety of the book, and it could be argued that this is a driving force for his actions. In heteronormative society, one of man's primary functions is to provide financially for his family. Matt has been stripped of this ability so he has desperately tried to regain the status of a heteronormative man by any means necessary. After failing at this Matt has ended up in a room with two men berating him for his mistakes, condescending to his intelligence, and generally stripping Matt of the ability of having independent thought. He has no option but to sit and listen and do whatever the officers say. He has not only lost the ability to provide for his family, he has lost the ability to have free thought, free speech, free actions, and freedom in general. His previous actions have led to him being trapped with no way out.



Randy's religious diatribe to Matt serves to frame the entire situation as completely out of Matt's control. Matt has always struggled with religion because he is not comfortable completely giving all power to a higher being due to his hubris. Ironically, Matt now must accept Greg and Randy as his higher power. Randy compares the situation Matt is in as accepting religion - he can either accept Jesus and avoid hell (work with the police and avoid prison), or rebuke Christ and be sent to eternal damnation (refuse to become an informant and instead go to prison). Matt's pride cannot lead him to do anything else as he is not legally bound to obey. Matt has teased religion throughout the book, but now he must make a religious-like commitment to Greg and Randy. If he sins, even just once, his salvation will be out of reach.

## Discussion Question 1

What in Matt's character makes it so he is still making jokes, verbally and internally, while in as bad a situation as he is in?

## Discussion Question 2

When he sees his file being thrown in the garbage can Matt says, "For the first time in my life I understand the power of religion. What if you could take all of your trouble, out it in a file folder and throw it away" (230)? Discuss this quote and how it relates to Matt's process with coping with obstacles in his life.

## Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Matt's demeanor from the beginning of Chapter 18 to the end of Chapter 19.

## Vocabulary

beatifically, omnibus, assuage



# Chapter 20: Stopped by wood on My Front Lawn

## Summary

Matt arrives home from the Drug Enforcement Office completely dejected and on the verge of a complete breakdown. The lumber he had bought from Chuck is waiting for him. He sees his father bewildered by the unexpected delivery. Matt sees the invoice and that it was not even delivered by Chuck, squashing his plan of embarrassing Lisa. Matt received a call from Amber, most likely wanting to buy her drugs from him. Matt is unsure what he is supposed to do, knowing there is some sort of protocol but he does not remember so he lets the phone continue to ring.

Matt looks at his Dad wishing he could be a comforting presence but knows he cannot. Matt reminisces to his childhood where his father would always defer to his mother to comfort him. Matt and his dad, even when he was well, never hugged or showed any sort of affection towards each other. Just as Matt is about to tell his father he is falling apart, he has an epiphany. He realizes that all his crises - finances, marriage, weed dealing - are all connected. They are not separate discrete issues, rather "interrelated systems, reliant upon one another, broken, fucked-up, ruined systems" (239). With that thought Matt goes from dejected to excited and he tells his Dad that he has a plan.

## Analysis

Matt is a tragic character who is trying to force himself to be a heroic one. Matt has seemingly met his ultimate fate - forced informant for the police with possible jail time hanging over his head. He finds himself in a worse situation than he did at the beginning of the story, which was already a pretty dire situation. Matt sees this refusal to accept his fate as heroic action when in actuality it is just delaying the inevitable. Matt Prior is tragic - he is leading himself to his own destruction based on poor decisions and judgements. Matt is frantically trying to save himself from this fate, truly making himself believe time and time again he is a hero and will come out triumphant in the end. This is the mark of a tragic hero and at this point in the narrative his fate seems all but sealed.

Narratively, the use of a cliffhanger (Matt saying he has a plan but not what it is) is extremely appropriate as it engages the reader as well as hint at how ill-conceived the plan will be. The reader knows enough about Matt at this point to make educated predictions about him. By Chapter 20, the reader will inevitably try to guess what Matt's plan will be. Aside from engaging the reader further, the cliffhanger indicates the plan is not very well thought out. The plan comes together quickly and serendipitously and the chapter just as quickly and serendipitously ends. The abrupt end to the chapter indicates Matt's plan will be a stupid one - had it been a good plan there would be a more evident thought process as well as likely a subsequent explanation.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What do you think Matt's plan is going to be?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What about reminiscing about his mother made Matt have his epiphany?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Matt's relationship with his dad mirror his relationship with his sons?

## **Vocabulary**

interrelated, gruff





# Chapter 21: Agent CI OH-2 Goes Rogue

## Summary

This chapter consists of a short poem assumedly depicting the beginning of of Matt's "plan." It starts with Chuck looking at Matt like he is crazy. Matt seems to be trying to sell Chuck weed, saying he felt bad about returning the wood so he wanted to give him a good deal. Chuck politely and repeatedly tells Matt he is not interested and he does not smoke pot. Matt is wearing a watch with a microphone in it, given to him by the officers, which Matt says, "...picks up my insane laugh" (241).

## Analysis

It is fitting that the audience learns the beginning of Matt's new plan through poetry form, as it has been established poetry is a way Matt copes with reality. Matt is seemingly has no where else to go, but suddenly had an epiphany of a plan that is related to readers in a frenetically paced poem. Because it is in poetry form the audience knows is more of an escape for Matt than an actual plan. Just as he has used poetry to make light of a difficult or awkward situation, Matt's poem here is delaying the inevitability of his situation. The poem makes what he is actually doing (trying to entrap his wife's suspected lover by selling him weed) seem slightly less desperate and pathetic, though the reader knows Matt's character well enough at this point to know he has completely lost his composure.

## Discussion Question 1

Is Matt's plan to save himself or more of a suicide mission? Does he care what happens to him anymore?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Matt's plan fit into his idea that all of his problems are part of "interrelated systems"?

## Discussion Question 3

Close read the poem from this chapter. Is there anything significant in the format of the poem?

## Vocabulary

whir



# Chapter 22: A Good Old-Fashioned Newspaperman

## Summary

Matt failed at the first part of his plan, trying to sell Chuck drugs in order to get him arrested, but Matt does succeed at his secondary goal: making it known to Chuck that he is Lisa's husband. While Chuck is processing the lumber return he sees Matt's name and address on the receipt. Chuck immediately becomes pale and excuses himself for a moment. When he comes back he awkwardly stares at the floor while they complete their business. Matt tells Chuck not to tell anyone he tried to sell him weed, as his wife does not know he sells. Matt feels elated that he has drawn Chuck into a stalemate.

Matt then moves into the next phase of his plan: fully embracing his role as a CI by taking down truly bad people by recording selling them drugs and then taking it to the police. Matt calls Amber and Richard to tell them he cannot sell them drugs (as he deems them to be too good of people). Matt then calls the office of his old boss (still only referred to as M-) to attempt to entrap him. He calls under the guise of apologizing for a rude outburst last time he saw him. While on the phone with M-, Matt casually says he got a prescription for medicinal marijuana and how much it has helped him. M- tells Matt he has been under a lot of stress having to fire so many people and he will be leaving the newspaper soon too. Matt offers to sell M- some of his weed, which M- agrees to.

Matt and M- meet in the parking garage beneath the newspaper. Matt gives M- the weed and M- begins to ask questions about what he is up to and what the job market is like. Matt offers to give M- weed whenever he needs it and to just give him a call, to which M- responds that he wishes they had spent more time together. Matt replies, "Never too late to start!" (249) as he holds back a maniacal laugh.

## Analysis

The interactions in this chapter with Chuck, Amber, Richard, and M- show that Richard is caught between being an empathetic caring person and simply being vengeful. With Chuck he is definitely much more comfortable embodying the latter. He shows no remorse in trying to trick Chuck into buying weed. Once he explains he wants to sell to people who "deserve to go to jail" (244) it shows he believes Chuck "deserves" to go to jail. While what Chuck has been doing may be dishonest, Matt is acting on his own personal hang ups rather than some sort of worldly morality. He lets Amber and Richard know he cannot sell them weed, sparing them the fate he thinks Chuck deserves. Matt does have to resist temptation with Richard, as Matt feels he was a terrible financial planner who is partially responsible for Matt's disastrous finances. He relents and does not pursue Richard as a victim, but that brief tension shows Matt has not fully



transitioned into a revenge machine nor is he still fully his old self. He is caught somewhere in between.

The encounter with M- further shows this tension, as Matt has to resist the urge to remember M- is a “person,” and not look at him as “the Idi Amin of newspaper editors” (245). When M- tells Matt he is leaving the newspaper and he is somewhat scared about the uncertainty of the future, Matt has “to turn away to keep sympathy from welling up” (249). Again, Matt’s more human sensibilities are poking through, which does not interrupt the sale, but could be a sign of his humanity and morals being an obstacle in his plan of being judge, jury, and executioner towards people who have wronged him.

Humanity and morals shining through his newfound maniacal, vengeful exterior may be a manifestation his recent curiosity and ponderings on religion. He has been intrigued by religion but generally rejects or condescends to it. Once Randy makes the metaphor of his criminal file being thrown away as being the same as salvation from sin Matt realizes his problems are interrelated. He has clarity and feels he needs to do what is right. Currently, what is right is clouded by petty revenge and anger. If he is truly on the path of redemption, he needs for the perspective of the world being interrelated to evoke positive action and thoughts, giving in to sympathy and empathy, not negative actions and thoughts as he is doing in this chapter.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss what Matt’s definition of someone who deserves to go to jail is.

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Matt feel Chuck is worthy of his ultimate revenge? Why M-? What does this say about Matt’s character?

## Discussion Question 3

Now that Matt’s plan is more clear, reflect back on what led him here. Is this a natural progression? Or has Matt truly snapped?

## Vocabulary

stalemate, untenable, arbiter, magnanimous, fey



## Chapter 23: OH-2 the Vengeful

### Summary

Matt attempts to continue his revenge spree by looking up people who have wronged him in the past. The man who talked Matt into refinancing his mortgage last year no longer works at the same company, the salesman who talked Matt into buying a more expensive car had been laid off, but the Australian real estate agent who sold them their house was found to be having an open house not far away. Matt enters the open house and the real estate agent, Thomas, does not recognize him initially but Matt reminds him he sold them their house. Matt then begins concocting a points system to determine whether or not a person is worthy of being set up with a drug deal. "Real estate, or any kind of predatory salesmanship, is four points. Fake or affected accents? Two points. Frosted Hair? Four points" (251). Matt casually says if he bought this house he would put a grow house in the basement, and then offers to sell Thomas weed. Thomas declines because he is training for a marathon, but asks Matt if he can get him some cocaine.

Matt then drives to pick up the boys from school, deciding his vigilantism is finished for the day. While waiting outside the school, he sees the father of the boy who Franklin attacked and considers setting him up. He then sees another father who is overly competitive and cut Teddy from the T-ball team, and Matt also considers setting him up. Matt then goes on a tangent of thinking of people from his past he could set up and get revenge on, including his 8th grade basketball coach, a girl who would not kiss him, and a guy who sold him a truck with a cracked block.

Matt's sons hop in the car which snaps him out of his trance. The boys say they had good days at school and Matt realizes he never turned his watch recorder off after the meeting with M-. Matt is having trouble focusing and is exhibiting signs of an anxiety attack. They arrive home and Franklin asks about the wood in the front yard and says it reminds him of Jenga. This makes Matt cry because he used to play Jenga with Franklin every night before bed and the nature of Jenga reminds him of his life currently: "...even though you can never win, and it is always the same...breathless and tentative...the world teetering above your head" (257).

### Analysis

The final passage in the chapter about Jenga is very telling of Matt's awareness of the path he is on. The past two chapters he has been moving forward with his plan with reckless abandon, showing signs of remorse or pause here and there but moving on with wanting to destroy the lives of those he feels have wronged him. The Jenga metaphor shows Matt is aware how this will all end. Just as every game of Jenga ends with the blocks coming tumbling down, so must his journey. There is no escaping his



fate and he knows this, so it would seem his struggle is to do as much as he can before this inevitability comes.

The Jenga moment comes after talking to his kids about their day which shows Matt's children are representative of his last true connection to his humanity and civility. He is completely on the outs with his wife and he has only one friend in Ike who cannot help him. Teddy and Franklin still love their father unconditionally which reminds Matt that in the end he is just a man. He cannot expect to take down dishonest salesmen and apathetic former bosses and receive true fulfillment. True fulfillment comes from family and love. If Matt is to continue on his conquest he would have to completely shun the love of his sons and the Jenga metaphor shows he may not be capable of that.

The watch recorder given to Matt by the police has become a symbol of Matt's perceived power. It is his ultimate weapon in bringing down those he feels are dishonest and unjust. Once he picks up Teddy and Franklin from school he notices his watch was never turned off, meaning it is out of recording space. His powerful weapon is out of commission momentarily. This, combined with the aforementioned relationship with his sons, strips Matt of his power and gusto. He could not pursue any more justice for the unjust even if he wanted to. This is another contributing factor to Matt's breakdown at the end of the chapter.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Matt's erratic behavior and how it might be perceived by his children.

## Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast the different potential victims of Matt's wrath. What do they have in common? How are they different?

## Discussion Question 3

How might Matt's frenzy help him better identify with his father and his father's illness?

## Vocabulary

capo, lithographs, calloused



# Chapter 24: You May Be Experiencing

## Summary

The chapter begins with a wikipedia entry on the effects and dangers of sleep deprivation. Matt is shocked when the entry ends with saying sleep deprivation may lead to death. Matt puts his head down and ends up falling asleep for about an hour, being awoken by Lisa. He is still in a groggy, confused state and can barely make out that it is Lisa who has walked into the room. She tells Matt she received his message and asked, "When did you become cruel" (260)? She is referring to the wood in the front yard from Chuck's store. Matt tries to go back to sleep but he is interrupted by Franklin, who asks Matt to come to his room to ask a question. Matt assumes it would be about why he has been acting so strange, but instead Franklin asks, "Who would win in a fight? Godzilla or a Tyrannosaurus" (261). Franklin is drawing an apology painting for Elijah, the boy he attacked at school. Matt is moved to tears by the gesture, and Franklin asks him what they are having for dinner. Matt says they are ordering pizza.

Lisa refuses to come down for dinner so Franklin, Teddy, Matt, and Matt's Dad sit around the table. Teddy is telling Franklin all the nice things his classmates have that they do not. This is what Matt calls Teddy's "consumer confidence report" (263). Matt receives a call from Jamie giving details of where to pick him up before they go to pick up the rest of Matt's weed from Monte. Once plans are set, Matt's Dad suddenly asks Matt, "What happened to me?" (265). Matt gets this question regularly from his dad and usually ignores it or makes something up, but this time Matt's dad continued to press him. Matt explains to his Dad everything he has done, from leaving his wife and moving to Oregon with a stripper named Chastity to being diagnosed with early onset dementia. Matt's dad asks for more information, which Matt simply replies, "I don't know dad" (268).

Matt reveals to the reader something he left out in his recap to his father. He left out how unhappy his marriage to Matt's mother was and how Matt's mother always thought he would come back to her. Matt describes in detail what it was like to drive up to Oregon and find his father alone and confused and what it was like when his mother died and his father had no reaction. Matt begins to cry and his sons are staring at him. Matt tells the reader that fathers "only have two lessons, but these two things are everything you need to know: (1) What to do and (2) what not to do" (271). Matt stares out the same window his father is staring out and sees his reflection faintly along side his father's.

## Analysis

The chapter beginning with a Wikipedia entry rather than a poem symbolizes Matt's mental fatigue. Many chapters have begun with a poem reflecting Matt's mental state as he copes or avoids a problem. Matt is so drained he cannot muster any sort of output;



he can only read about an condition which is drastically taking its toll, and this Wikipedia entry that he reads is also what readers of the novel are presented with.

Matt's poem about his father's home in Oregon is shared with the audience as it relates to his current life. The poem speaks of a dried up river and the desolate nature of the area:

"And I wonder if we don't live like water

seeking a level

a low bed

until one day we just go dry" (268).

The past week, months, and years have been Matt "seeking a level/a low bed." Matt recapping his father's life reminded him of this poem because he knows the closing line of it is tragically applicable to his own life:

"I wonder if a creek ever realizes

it had made its own grave" (268).

Matt has made his own grave, he realizes this. He must now turn his attention the ones who stand to be most impacted by this: his sons.

Matt's words on the lessons fathers can teach their sons and his reflections meeting his father's in the window represent Matt knowing that all he can do is hope his sons do not end up like him. It is not that Matt blames his father for the person he is, but, rather, Matt regrets learning from his father's mistake. Not looking to his father and knowing "what not to do" (271). Lisa is metaphorically and physically separated from him at the moment and his sons do not know the truth about his actions. He does not want to impart the same lessons, or lack thereof, on his children as his father on him.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolic significance of Matt, his father, and his sons all sitting around the table at the same time.

## Discussion Question 2

Describe Matt's encounter with Lisa as he is coming out of a sleepy haze. Is there anything symbolically significant about it?





## Discussion Question 3

Discuss what Matt could do to ensure his sons do not end up on a similar life path as him.

## Vocabulary

recrimination, viscous, pocked, couleed, blearily



# Chapter 25: The Last Time I Remember Crying, Haiku #4

## Summary

This chapter consists of only a haiku:

"I was an adult

When my parent got divorced

Or so I was told" (272)

## Analysis

This haiku is a reflection of Matt's parents marriage on his marriage. Obviously Matt's marriage is in a precarious spot. Matt has acknowledge even though he was 26 when his father left his mom, their marriage was over long before that. This relates to his marriage and his sons may experience the same thing. Neither Matt nor Lisa are particularly actionable people, so Matt may stay with Lisa for years past the end of the marriage.

## Discussion Question 1

Why include such a short poem/chapter at this point in the book?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is the haiku format an appropriate form for what Matt is trying to convey?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of the title of Chapter 25: "The Last Time I Remember Crying, Haiku #4."

## Vocabulary

haiku



# Chapter 26: On the Spiritual Crises of Confidential Informants

## Summary

Matt arrives at a party to meet Jamie to go pick up their weed from Monte. The apartment they are in is disgusting, with the guests hurling pizza crusts at the host, Larry, whenever they finish a slice as some sort of practical joke. Matt is offered weed multiple times but has to decline because of his new role as a CI. He cannot find Jamie at first but does see Skeet. Skeet is with a woman named Lana and tells Matt that Jamie is on a beer run and would be there soon. Matt mentions to the reader he wants to talk to Skeet alone, but he has to wait until after the trip to see Monte. While he is waiting for Jamie, Matt sees Chet, Monte's brother, at the party complaining to someone on his phone about how lame the party is.

The front door opens and Jamie walks in with Bea and a few cases of beer. Matt is "strangely...so happy to see them both" (276). Jamie sees Chet is annoyed he is there and almost confronts him but lets it go. As Jamie comes over to Matt they overhear Chet accuse Matt of being a cop. This prompts Jamie to confront Chet and begin to fight. Jamie takes a punch in the face, which causes Matt to attack Chet. He wrestles Chet to the ground and they relent after a few seconds. The party goes back to normal and Jamie and Matt plan to leave. Bea asks if she can walk them to their car.

Jamie is collecting beer money from the party guests while Bea waits outside with Matt. This is when Matt has another epiphany: "there are no such things as epiphanies - no moments of revelation, no great reversals of motive and fortune" (280). Matt decides to tell Bea that Dave is not a good person and that she needs to get away from him. He reveals he was picked up by the cops and is now an informant. She stares at him puzzled as Jamie arrives and pulls Matt into the car to drive to Monte's.

## Analysis

Matt attacking Chet is parallel to Franklin attacking his classmate in illustrating that all people have a breaking point when it comes to people they care about. Just as Franklin was defending his teacher's honor, Matt is defending Jamie, of whom he has become protective of. Franklin is remorseful of his attack just as Matt is unsure why he engaged at all. One of Matt's fatal flaws, which he may have passed down to his son, is investing in a idea or person so much that he has no idea how to appropriately act when that idea or person is threatened. Matt's livelihood and financial stability are threatened by various forces which lead him to recklessly enter the drug trade. Franklin's teacher is threatened of whom he cares deeply about so he attacks another student. Matt's pseudo-son figure, Jamie, is threatened by Chet so Matt lunges at him. Matt acts solely on instinct rather than thought.



Matt's epiphany of the nonexistence of real epiphanies is a major turning point for the character as it sets him free to existentially accept his fate. He now knows no matter how much he struggles, no matter how hard he tries he is on a path of assured destruction. There have been hints in the past few chapters Matt was heading towards this conclusion: the metaphor of the Jenga block teetering and his poem about creeks flowing to inevitably run dry. Matt has finally accepted his fate and all he can do is attempt to save the people he cares about. He almost tells Skeet about his CI role and ends up informing Bea. He wants anyone who he even remotely has affinity for to be as far away as possible when everything comes crumbling down.

## Discussion Question 1

How has Matt's attitude toward Bea changed from the last time he saw her?

## Discussion Question 2

What about Jamie and Skeet resonate with Matt? Why does Matt want them to be safe?

## Discussion Question 3

Matt tells Bea that he is probably going to jail. Predict what parts of his plan Matt has not revealed yet.

## Vocabulary

fetid, implacable



# Chapter 27: Transcript, 36-ounce Buy, Operation Homeland 11.15.08: 23:31 -

## Summary

This chapter is presented in the form of a transcript, assumedly from the recorder in Matt's watch. Monte is showing Matt the bags of weed that are for him when Matt tells he wants his money back. Monte is confused and Matt continues to say he wants his money back and to give Jamie his money back too. Jamie tells Matt to calm down and tells Monte he is just freaking out. On the transcripts, Jamie's voice is labeled as "CI OH-1," revealing him to also be a criminal informant. Matt persists and tells Monte and Jamie to get as far away from Dave as they can. Jamie continues to unsuccessfully calm Matt down when suddenly Dave enters the room in a fury. He asks, "What have you done, you snitch fuck" (284)? Matt smiles, telling Dave he is thinking about who would win a fight, Godzilla or a tyrannosaurus.

## Analysis

The author uses the transcript format to create a dramatic irony. The audience is now aware Jamie is also a criminal informant, but Matt, or anyone else, is not. This will heighten tension in the final few chapters as well as allow the reader to be angry with Matt's actions, as has already happened in this chapter. Matt is trying to save Jamie, but in actuality is hurting Jamie by ruining the sting operation. Jamie most likely has a similar deal with the cops as Matt. If things go south, Jamie will go to jail.

Matt's positioning as a tragic character is further solidified in his attempts to save Jamie. When the reader is shown that Jamie is a criminal informant, Matt's attempts to save him are understood as reckless and dangerous. Matt accepted his fate in the previous chapter but seems to have been hoping he can at least do one heroic thing before his demise. He is unable to even accomplish this as his reckless breaking up of the sting has put Jamie in danger when he was not in danger in the first place.

## Discussion Question 1

Why did Matt quote his son at the end of Chapter 27?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe Matt's attempt to save Jamie. Even if Jamie was not a CI, was it a well thought out plan?



## Discussion Question 3

Predict how Dave figured out that either Matt or Jamie were criminal informants.

## Vocabulary

snitch



## Chapter 28: Eddie's Anger - A Limerick

### Summary

Dave stands in front of Jamie and Matt beside himself with rage. Matt assumes Bea must have called Dave and told him what she was told. Matt is particularly mad at Bea, citing her loyalty to Dave as commonsense. Monte is confused and unsure what is happening and then Chet enters the room shouting he knew it all along. Dave repeatedly asks what he should do when Monte finally figures out what is going on and vomits bile all over the carpet. Dave tells Chet to put Matt downstairs while they figure out a plan.

Matt sits in the basement awaiting his fate, only hearing frantic footsteps up above. Dave comes down stairs and questions Matt. Matt reveals that he is not wearing a wire, only the recording watch which is not turned on. He also tells Dave the cops told him about his criminal history and that his real name is Eddie. Dave gets more worked up and Matt braces to fight, thinking to himself that he would do whatever it takes to see his family again. Dave suddenly breaks down against the wall and begins to cry. Matt compares it to the kind of crying he heard when Teddy crashed his bike into a parked car.

Dave originally wanted to board up Monte's grow house but was talked into trying to sell it. Dave's plan was to go back to school and become a counselor. Dave confides the manslaughter charge was a car accident that was not his fault and the other driver was drunk, but because he blew a .01 BAC he was also charged with manslaughter. Dave is terrified because since it is a federal drug task force he will be sent to federal prison, Dave says he thought he was getting his life together and that he is a good person, the police are trying to paint him as a villain when he is not. Matt comforts Dave by rubbing his back.

### Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to create sympathy for Dave and create a parallel between him and Matt. In Dave's anger and eventual breakdown it is revealed that the business with Monte was only to make enough money to send himself back to school to become a counselor. Obviously, he got greedy and now is paying the price. This is almost the exact path Matt has taken. Matt planned to enter the drug business only temporarily to get back on his feet and then move on. Both Dave and Matt were driven by desperation that led to greed. Matt's journey was admittedly much shorter than Dave's, but it is this sympathy that causes him to console Dave at the end of the chapter rather than make a desperate move to escape. The parallel created thematically exudes the zeitgeist of post-recession America. Matt and Dave having analogous experiences shows that in this time period people of many different walks of



life are experiencing the same kinds of issues. Matt's struggles are universal to a certain extent.

Matt's resignation to his fate shows strongly in this chapter in his calm demeanor, except when it comes to his family. Matt has realized he will most likely lose everything but he still thinks he can keep his family. This is shown by Matt only getting worked up when he thinks about doing anything to see Lisa and the kids again. Adrenaline pumps through him, preparing him to do something drastic. He tries to reason with Dave, telling him he understands why he would be so upset. He stays calm when he is thrown in the basement. He only raises his fists at the prospect of not seeing his family. Matt's acceptance of his tragic fate is not complete as he still holds onto hope that he will be able to at least go back to his family.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the significance of Matt comparing Dave's crying to his son's.

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the greater thematic implication of presenting Dave as a thematic character?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Matt not more upset about Bea? Why did he trust Bea in the first place?

## **Vocabulary**

faux, retches, guttural





# Chapter 29: Lincoln Log Dreams

## Summary

Matt wakes up in the basement of Monte's house to the sound of an alarm. He had given Dave, Monte, and Jamie a head start before he went to the police and quit being a CI. He walks upstairs and everyone is gone. He finds his keys on the table and drives home. He arrives home to see Chuck at the edge of his driveway watching Matt's dad build the fort out of the lumber. Chuck says he told him he was there to take it back but Matt's dad ignored him. Chuck stumbles over his words to Matt, apologizing for sneaking around with Lisa, but admitting while they did not do anything he was in love with her. Matt simply says, "It's okay" (299) and Chuck drives away. Matt's sons come excitedly run outside and ask if they are going to get to keep the fort. Matt says yes and the four Prior men work to complete the fort.

Greg, the police lieutenant, drives up to house with the intention of bring Matt in to be arrested. Greg recognizes the fort, saying he built the same one for his kids a few years ago. He asks Matt for coffee and tells him he can wait while they finish building their fort. Once they are finished, Matt sits with his dad and Greg on the porch. Greg reveals Monte and Dave turned themselves in and that Jamie had been an informant the entire time. He also tells Matt the watch was not actually a recorder, just a regular watch. Greg and Randy thought Matt would get suspicious or not behave if he wasn't wired up, so they gave him the watch as a way of investing him in the sting operation.

Greg tells Matt it is time to go but is given the opportunity to say goodbye to his family. The boys are playing video games and hardly react when Matt says he is going away for a while. He tells his dad he is going to jail, to which his dad lifts his coffee mug as a toast. He goes upstairs to find Lisa on the phone with an empty suitcase on the bed. Matt begins by simply saying, "I am sorry" (306).

## Analysis

The reveal that the watch was not a recording device at all shows the small amount of power Matt thought he had left imaginary, reaffirming how tragic a character he is. Ever since Matt was picked up by police he was operating on the idea that even though he has lost everything, this watch symbolized the last bit of power he could wield over others. His attempts to sell drugs to his old real estate agent and his old boss are now even more desperate seeming than before. Matt thought he was getting revenge when really he was just incriminating himself even further. Had any of those encounters gone south he would have been held responsible. All of Matt's actions after getting picked up by the police have largely been meaningless.

The lumber Matt had bought represented his desperation, but the fully built tree fort represents his acceptance of his mistakes and a small amount of hope. Matt has failed



at so much and taken himself down such a reckless path, building the treehouse is a therapeutic activity for him to realize that he can still try to be a good father. The treehouse does not represent a complete fix or reversal in fortune, as evidenced by Franklin and Teddy playing in it for 15 minutes and then returning inside to play video games. It represents a small moment of clarity where Matt must live in the current moment and radically accept reality.

The reason for the empty suitcase on the bed when Matt approaches Lisa is left ambiguous to reinforce Matt's newfound respect of the present and rejection of fixating on the future. Matt has a few guesses as to why the suitcase is there, but he knows all that matters right now is attempting to make amends with his wife. Matt has spent the entire book scheming and planning ways to make his and his family's future better, ignoring the turmoil he is causing in his family's present. The empty suitcase could cause Matt panic, thinking Lisa is leaving him or kicking him out, but he instead calmly accepts the reason for the suitcase is unimportant; being honest and truthful with his wife in order to mend their present takes precedence.

## Discussion Question 1

When Matt arrives home he says, "And I look up at our bedroom window, but all I get is a flat reflection of the gray sky" (300). Discuss the significance and symbolism of this quote.

## Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Greg, Matt, and Dave. How are they alike? How are they different?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of Matt's dad initiating the building of the treehouse.

## Vocabulary

scowl, whiff



# Chapter 30: After 7/11

## Summary

Chapter 30 acts as a prologue to the story. Matt plead guilty to drug charges and was given probation on account of having a family and no prior arrests. Matt and Lisa file for bankruptcy and lose their house along with anything else they owed money on. Matt moves into a small two-bedroom apartment in a triplex near downtown while Lisa feels she needs some space so she stays with Dani, but Matt suspects she is spending her evenings with Chuck. Matt's dad is sent to live in a nursing home just one mile away from Matt's apartment. Matt has the wooden fort moved into the front of his triplex, which Teddy and Franklin never play in but some neighbors love to play with. Matt's favorite part about his new home is the balcony. He cannot wait for warm weather so he can sit on it and watch his boys play outside. Matt is working at the online newspaper for Earl, which is going surprisingly well. He is enjoying the work and the issues are coming out beautifully but the company is still years away from being profitable.

Lisa begins to eat dinner with the family once a week. One night Lisa decides to spend the night, and then spends the night a week later, and a week later Lisa and Matt sleep together. Lisa says it was a mistake but continues the same pattern. Lisa eventually comes clean about Chuck, saying that it is over and Matt forgives her. One day after dinner Matt suggests taking the boys to the movies. They can only afford two movie tickets so Matt and Lisa wait outside the theatre and share an ice cream cone. They jokingly bicker about the size of licks Matt is taking when Matt sees Jamie and Skeet, who is wearing Matt's loafers, walking out of a theater.

Matt reveals to the reader Monte had taken a plea deal and will only serve a few years in prison. Dave is still awaiting trial but it is expected that he will take a deal as well. Matt never heard what happened to Jamie, but assumes he may have become a professional criminal informant. Skeet does not see Matt, but Jamie does. The two share an acknowledging look but do not speak. Lisa asks who that was and Matt tells her it is his old weed dealer. Matt wonders if he could possibly be better off now than he was before, to which he does not have an answer. He cannot help wondering about the future but also focused on the present, namely winning his wife back and being a good father.

## Analysis

Matt still is feeling the tension of looking too much towards the future, but this prologue indicates he is doing a much better job of managing it. He is tempted by a run-down house for sale while walking home from work, doing quick math in his head to figure out how much he would need to buy it and fix it up. He catches himself quickly, admitting he needs to focus on the present. This experience is representative of how Matt has



changed as a character. He is more centered and grounded, but still has his same old impetuous urges.

While Matt's new lifestyle is not ideal, it is much better than jail. The story ending like this is a commentary on how while the contemporary economic climate is extremely brutal, it does afford second chances, but personal strife is only mended through hard work. Bankruptcy is a restart for the Priors in terms of their finances, but a personal restart is much harder to comprehend. Both Matt and Lisa seem committed to working very hard to save their marriage but the narrative does not paint this as a sure success. Lisa wakes up in the middle of the night from a nightmare and begins to cry, telling Matt she is trying extremely hard. Effort still causes pain and does not erase the past.

Matt's experiences riding the bus to and from work show him how incorrectly he was viewing life and success. He pities a poor family whose son has lost his glove, but then upon seeing the father be proud of the son for figuring out he can just keep his hand in his pocket Matt feels wracked with guilt. He judged the family for being poor but now sees they may be happier than he is. Matt knows he has completely misjudged how fulfillments are achieved in life. He has had attached happiness to finances and now that his finances are in a still-bad-but-stable place, he can focus his energy on reassembling his family - the biggest victim of his actions.

Skeet wearing Matt's loafers is symbolic of how Matt will never be able to fully leave behind the drug world, as much as he might want to. Matt knows his drug dealing adventures were a mistake but not the kind of mistake he can take back. The first night Matt met Jamie and Skeet he left his loafers at Skeet's apartment. Those loafers, just like his mistake of pursuing drug dealing, he will never get back. Seeing Skeet still with his loafers serves as a reminder to Matt that even though things are going better, his life will never be completely the same

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe how Matt is both in a better and worse place now.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Matt able to forgive Lisa for the Chuck situation so quickly?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why was it so important for Matt to bring the fort with him to his new home?

## Vocabulary

feigns, dilation, surliness, bifurcated



# Characters

## Matt Prior

Matt is the protagonist and first-person narrator of the book. He lives in a nice house in an unnamed city with his wife and children. Matt was previously a business reporter for the local newspaper until he left two years prior to the beginning of the book to start a website called 'poetfolio.com.' The website was a complete failure and he managed to get his old job back at the newspaper, only to be laid off a few weeks later. His unemployment and financial woes (he is in danger of losing his house) lead him to concoct a plan to sell drugs until he is able to get back on his feet.

Matt decides to use his last \$9,000 to buy marijuana and sell it to former colleagues and friends. He is quickly picked up by a federal drug task force who coerce him into being a criminal informant to aid in an investigation of Matt's drug supplier. Matt decides he does not want to go through with it and ruins the investigation by giving the drug suppliers a head start to get away. In the process of his illegal plan he loses the trust of his wife and his family nearly falls apart, but the book ends with his relationship with his wife on the mend.

Matt's marriage to his wife is tenuous. She has been having flirtations with an ex-boyfriend, which Matt handles by coming up with a plan to embarrass his wife rather than addressing it head-on. He has a close relationship with his dementia-ridden father. Even though his father is a financial burden, taking care of him makes Matt feel important and righteous. Matt loves his sons very much and they represent what he is trying to save. He wants to make sure his sons are able to have a better life than he did.

Matt does not handle his problems effectively, keeping many secrets and telling many lies to avoid confrontation or hurting others. He is also obsessed with completely fixing his situation but does not take in to consideration how his actions can hurt or impact others. He is many times impetuous in his actions and until the end of the book refuses to accept his present. These attributes drive the action of the plot.

## Lisa Prior

Lisa is Matt's wife. As a young woman she was a rambunctious young professional working in the marketing department for a sports medicine practice. She first met Matt at a press conference at a hospital. Once Matt and Lisa got married she left her job to take care of the kids with the plan of returning to the workforce when the boys were old enough. When she attempted to find a job again she was unsuccessful and had to settle for a part-time job as a receptionist at a optometrist office. Ever since then her self-esteem has been gradually decreasing.

In a manic state while Matt was unemployed Lisa went on a shopping binge on eBay racking up thousands of dollars of credit card debt. Ever since she has filled the



shopping void by being on social media constantly, where she has been interacting with her ex-boyfriend, Chuck, in an inappropriate way. Lisa does not completely blame Matt for their financial situation but she obviously feels trapped and their marriage is suffering because of it.

## **Jerry Prior (Matt's dad)**

Matt's dad, Jerry, is only referred to by name once in the book. Matt's dad has lived with Matt and Lisa for a few years. He suffers from early onset dementia. Preceding moving in with his son, Matt's dad had left his wife and moved to Oregon with a stripper named Charity. She stole his identity and robbed him of everything, but he was too proud and embarrassed to tell anyone what happened. Eventually, Matt drove up to his dad's house and found him alone and confused, eventually offering to take him in. Matt's dad has worked hard all his life and struggles with feeling worthless and unhelpful due to his illness.

## **Teddy Prior**

Teddy is Matt and Lisa's 10 year old son. He is in the 4th grade. Teddy is starting to mature from the wide-eyed excitable young boy he once was. He is unaware of both his father's dealings and his parents' marital issues.

## **Franklin Prior**

Franklin is Matt and Lisa's 8 year old son. He is in the 2nd grade. Franklin is very vulnerable and sweet. Matt sees a lot of himself in Franklin. He is also unaware of both his father's dealings and his parent's marital issues.

## **Jamie**

Jamie is a young drug dealer who Matt meets in 7/11. Jamie is who introduces Matt to the drug supplier. Jamie dresses sloppily and calls Matt "slippers" on account of the loafers Matt was wearing when they first met. Jamie speaks with poor grammar but seems to be an intelligent young man. He aspires to go to college one day and hopes to be a writer. Matt and Jamie develop a sort of faux father-son relationship, with Matt very much caring for him. It is later revealed Jamie has been a criminal informant for the police the whole time.

## **Skeet**

Skeet is with Jamie the first night they meet Matt in 7/11. Skeet does not deal drugs, but he does use copious amounts of them.



## Chuck Stehne

Chuck was Lisa's high school boyfriend. He runs "Stehne's Lumber," a family business he inherited from his father. Matt is threatened by Chuck, as Chuck is taller and in better shape than Matt. Chuck has been carrying on flirtatious conversations with Lisa via social media and sexual conversations via text messages. It is never made clear exactly how far the relationship went, but it is hinted they never actually slept together. He is a generally kind person who is divorced and has three children.

## Ike

Ike is Matt's former co-worker and confidant. They meet for coffee weekly and talk about their problem. Ike still works at the newspaper Matt was laid off from and is fearful that he may be laid off next. Ike is the only person Matt tells about his idea to deal drugs. Ike does not condone it, but also doesn't actively discourage it. He thinks of Matt as a smart person who has a handle on what he is doing. He eventually gets laid off and goes back to school to become a teacher.

## Dave Waller

Dave is a self-proclaimed "drug lawyer." He is a former lawyer who sets up meetings between potential dealers and a pot grower. He is very professional and thorough in his work, taking precautions to not be culpable should the parties he is servicing become arrested. He formerly had an anger problem leading to an assault charge, but has largely changed. He also was charged with vehicular manslaughter even though the accident was not his fault, he blew .01 BAC and was charged. Dave entered the drug business in order to make enough money to cover legal costs and pay for himself to go back to school to be a counselor. Dave is highly emotional and becomes overwhelmed easily. He ends up turning himself in to the police and is awaiting trial.

## Bea

Bea is an associate of Dave. She allows him to hold meetings at her apartment in exchange for paying part of her rent. Bea is tall and beautiful. Matt is enamored with her. She is overly flirtatious, kissing Matt on a whim but claiming she does that with everybody. Matt tells her to get away from Dave and that he is working with the cops, which she in turn tells Dave as she is more loyal to him than to Matt.

## Lt. Greg Reese

Greg is a detective on the federal drug task force that picks up Matt and make him a criminal informant. Greg is a large man who is extremely passionate about what he does and aggressively committed to bringing down drug dealers. He department is





looking for additional funding, which is why he brings Matt on board. If Matt pretends to buy Monte's drug business they can extend the scope of their investigation. Greg is a father and sympathetic to Matt's struggles as a father.

## Randy

Randy is Greg's partner. Randy is also quite tall but is softer spoken than Greg. He has a very foul mouth, prone to using obscenities when he gets frustrated, but still rarely raises his voice. Randy is deeply religious and uses accepting Jesus Christ as an analogy for why Matt needs to become a criminal informant. Matt sees him as the "good cop" for Greg's "bad cop."

## Monte

Monte is the weed supplier whom Matt plans on buying from. Monte owns three houses in a rural town about an hour outside of the city that act as his grow houses. He is a brilliant botanist but is completely exhausted by the business side of things. He lacks self-confidence and is easily confused. Monte recently experienced a complete nervous breakdown which prompts him to want to sell his business to Matt. Matt pities and identifies with Monte, as he seems to be doing something he no longer wants to do anymore.

## Earl Ruscom

Earl is a gregarious business man who Matt used to cover for the paper. Earl wants to start an online newspaper and have Matt as the editor. He speaks with a thick southern accent and has a larger than life presence. Matt eventually goes to work for Earl for a very meager salary.

## M-

M- is Matt's former editor at the paper whom he loathes with a passion. He is condescending and shows no empathy to those who are a part of the middle or lower class. Matt attempts to entrap M- into buying drugs as revenge for M-'s years of treating Matt poorly at work.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Matt's Watch

This watch symbolizes Matt's power, which it turns out he never had in the first place. Matt is given a watch from the police and is told it is a recording device but, in actuality, it is just a watch. When Matt first receives the watch he is filled with a sense of importance and power, thinking he can use the device to take down those he feels have wronged him. It turns out he never held any sort of power to begin with though; Matt's actions with the watch were meaningless.

## Windows

Windows are used as a way to symbolize Matt's connection with his family. For example, when ruminating on his relationship with his father he always hopes he can be better to his sons than his father was to him. At one point Matt's dad is starting out the window and Matt looks, seeing his reflection superimposed on his dad's. Matt realizes he and his dad are one in the same, sharing many of the same stubborn mannerism. Towards the end of the book Matt looks up to his bedroom window looking for Lisa, but only sees the gray sky reflecting back. This is symbolizing the distance and lack of definition his relationship with his wife currently is.

## Poetry

Poetry symbolizes Matt's disconnect from the world around him. Matt uses poetry as a way to cope with and convey his inner feelings. Many chapters begin with poems that depict a fantasy of Matt's or represent a struggle he is encountering. Poetry is seen as a release for Matt, but he only puts his true emotions in his writing and does not address them directly with the people around him, such as his wife.

## Weight Loss

Weight loss is used at one point to symbolize how far Matt has strayed from his previous life. A few days after Matt begins his journey into the drug world Matt's dad is told at the doctor he has lost six pounds in month. a seemingly meager amount but still a marked change. Matt then meets with an old associate, Earl Ruscom, who has lost 80 pounds since they last saw each other five years ago. Matt has changed "six pounds worth" in the last month but has changed "80 pounds worth" in the past five years.



## Monte's mental state

Monte's fragile mental state symbolizes what Matt is trying to avoid in his own life. Monte has been working in the drug business for long enough that the stressed caused a complete nervous breakdown. Matt unconsciously fears he could suffer the same fate (which he does) if he does not work to avoid it. Matt thinks making money through selling drugs is a way to cheat his fate of completely breaking down.

## Franklin's attack on a classmate

Franklin, who is a very meek and mild young man, attacking a classmate symbolizes all people have a breaking point, especially when it comes to someone they care about. Franklin is provoked because a classmate is mocking their teacher, whom Franklin has a crush on. Franklin does something drastic, just as Matt does something drastic to support his family. Both Franklin and Matt make poor choices in how to act and then suffer the consequences of them.

## Matt's Sexism

Matt's overly sexualized comments about women throughout the book are representative of his low-self esteem and growing crisis of masculinity. Whenever there is an attractive woman near him he always crudely describes her appearance and how he would like to sexually dominate her. Matt is unable to provide for his family so he is overcompensating by hyper-sexualizing woman and overemphasizing his masculine prowess.

## Matt's dad's dementia

Matt's dad's dementia symbolizes the infinite loop Matt feels he is caught in. Matt's dad will repeat the same phrases and actions over and over again. Matt feels stuck in a similar loop of financial problems, always feeling he is getting ahead and then something happens to put him back at square one.

## Stehne's Lumberland

Stehne's Lumberland represents all the inadequacies Matt feels about himself. Chuck is taller and in better shape. He also owns a store centered around working with one's hands, something Matt has no experience or skill at.

## Matt's loafers

Matt's loafers are symbolic for his crossing into the criminal world and how it took a part of him that he can never get back. At the beginning of the book Matt leaves his loafers

at the party with Skeet and Jamie. At the end of the book Matt sees Skeet at the movies wearing his loafers. While Matt got out of the drug world, it took a part of him that he will never get back.

# Settings

## Matt's House

Matt's house originally symbolized he and his wife's, Lisa, dreams for the future, but by the end of the book the house symbolizes Matt's financial ruin.

Matt's house was the house of their dreams when he and Lisa bought it. It is a very old and sturdy home with beautiful features, and many updates that Matt and Lisa have put in. The house is located on the edge of a low-income neighborhood, but Matt and Lisa bought the house assuming the whole area would gentrify, raising the value of their home. Because it is zoned for a bad school Matt and Lisa must send their boys to private school. The house now represents Matt's financial ruin as he owes more than \$400,000 on it and has no way to keep up with his mortgage.

## Monte's Properties

Monte's properties, AKA "Weedland" are located in a small rural town about an hour outside of the city. Monte's three houses have basements that contain grow houses. All the houses are interconnected by a series of tunnels left over from prohibition era moonshiners. It is very messy and musty, with piles of trash all over the place, out of date appliances, and beer posters all over the wall.

## Matt's Car

Matt spends a lot of time driving from place to place in his Nissan Altima. Matt was talked into getting a more expensive car than he planned on so he resents the car as a symbol of his unassertiveness. It is the exact same kind of car as Dave, which Matt finds unsettling.

## Jamie, Skeet, and Bea's Apartment Complex

This is a low-rent, somewhat seedy apartment complex where Jamie, Skeet, and Bea live. It is where Matt generally meets his associates from the drug world. Matt has his first meeting with Dave at Bea's apartment.

## Coffee Shop

Ike and Matt have their weekly meet ups at a coffee shop. Matt finds the baristas to be very attractive and frequently fantasizes about them. This is where Matt is first confronted by Greg and Randy about his weed dealing.



## Stehne's Lumberland

This is Chuck's lumber store. Matt visits it frequently while trying come up with a plan to expose Chuck and Lisa's affair. Matt is very intimidated when he is in the store because he has no handy skills or knowledge of how to build things.



# Themes and Motifs

## Crisis in Masculinity

Matt's combats his feelings of emasculation due to his unemployment and personal life issues by overcompensating with sexist views and comments, not realizing his limited mindset is part of what holds him back from getting back on track in life Matt's expectation for himself as a man and a father is to provide for his family without the help of anyone else. He believes he should be able to make his own success. This is a very heteronormative mindset to be in which can be crippling if that expectation is not met. Matt shows this masculine expectation for himself in several ways, including his opinion on his wife working, his over-sexualization of women, and his desperation for power.

Even though Matt is unemployed and he is desperate need of cash flow, he still admits he prefers it when his wife does not work. Lisa was a driven career woman working in marketing when she and Matt first met. Matt was relieved when they had children and she left her job because he no longer felt threatened by her success or the men she worked with. Even in their current devastating financial state, where Lisa is depressed and drifting away from him, Matt still admits he would rather her like this than be back in the work force full time. This shows how much Matt values his traditionally masculine identity and role in his family.

Matt's crisis of masculinity also manifests itself in the way he over-sexualizes women. Everyone Matt finds attractive, from the baristas at a coffee shop to his sons teacher, Matt feels entitled to demean them by reducing them to sexual objects. Because Matt feels emasculated at home, he is compensating by being hyper-masculine in other arenas. While he never mutters his fantasies out loud, the read is privy to them in order to frame Matt as someone going through a crisis.

Matt's desperate attempts to gain and regain power and control of his life also indicate he is going through a crisis. Planning to deal drugs to make money or using a recorder to entrap those who have demeaned him are not sane, well thought out ideas. He has reached such a desperate point in his masculinity that he is going to drastic lengths to reclaim it. This, of course, leads to his demise and forced acceptance of not living up to his expectations of being a man.

## Crisis in Modernity

Matt journey is occurring at a point in history where striving to be a "modern man" is largely out of reach for many, making many of Matt's actions and decisions futile. The time leading up to the 2008 economic collapse was a time where many lower/middle class people were led to believe they could enter economic endeavors, such as buying homes outside their price range or putting large amount of money in stocks, without fear of backlash or consequence. The people, such as Matt, who were were aggressive with



their money lost almost everything when the economy collapse. This is a crisis of modernity, people acted according to modern values and ideas only to learn those values and ideas were not feasible for them long term.

Matt is resentful, as many Americans were, at the system that allowed him to make so many missteps. Matt's investments went south, including stocks he bought and buying an expensive house betting on its value increasing. Matt believes he can "beat" the modern system that wronged so many people by going outside of it. Matt plans on breaking the law in order to restore his rightful place in the modern world.

The crisis of modernity occurs on a macro level, meaning it's not simply just affecting Matt or a small group of people. Its impacts are far-reaching. This frames Matt's course of action as completely ineffectual. From the moment the book begins the idea that Matt could pull himself out of economic crisis is completely out of reach. Matt's failure's throughout the book are inevitable as he is partly a victim of the societal situation. This is not to fully exonerate Matt from his poor decisions. He would have been much better off taking a less risky course of action, but no matter what he did he would not be able to fully actualize his goal of going back to the way things were before the economic downturn.

## Hubris

Matt's hubris, or excessive pride, sparks his decisions and actions throughout the book which, in turn, creates many of the central conflicts. Matt's pride is driven by his masculinity, or lack self-perceived lack thereof. He believes he can do things that other people cannot, such as breaking the law or forcing his family to return to a healthy state. Matt's hubris prevents him from addressing any of his problems directly, rather is misdirects him to act in reckless ways. Though he never justifies any of his actions using pride, it is tragically obvious he would act in a much more logical way were he not fueled by prideful impulses.

His hubris is most evident later on in the narrative. Early in the story his decision to sell drugs in order to recover financially seems more desperate rather than prideful. He is willing to do anything to save himself and his family. As the initial plan becomes more derailed Matt's decisions are more influenced by his hubris. He refuses to give up and continually traps himself in more dangerous situations. Being picked up by the cops should have been his signal to relent on his lofty drug related aspiration, but instead he feels entitled to continue his plan and even convinces himself he'll be able to achieve more than he originally thought. This creates an entirely new conflicts which further contributes to Matt's downfall.

## Zeitgeist of post-recession America

The author captures the spirit of post-recession America by showing the parallel struggles of different characters, and in doing so frames Matt's struggles within a greater social context, making him slightly more sympathetic. Many of the characters in





the book are experiencing the same pattern in their life: being previously previously prosperous, getting in over their head, and being forced to do something drastic to try and save themselves. This very much was the zeitgeist of middle-class America after the economic collapse.

Matt is obviously the prime example of this. He made bad investments, took a risk on starting a website, now finds himself in financial ruin, and must do something extreme to save himself. Monte is also in a similar cycle. He has experienced many stresses from his drug business, experienced a breakdown, and now must sell his entire business in order to start over. Finally, Greg and Randy's drug task force is about to run out of funding, so they desperately pick up Matt and ask him to pretend to buy the drug business in order to lengthen their investigation and keep their jobs. All three of these situations convey the trapped situation people felt after the economy collapsed. None of these plans succeeded for any of the characters, just as many people's real-life desperate plans faltered.

By establishing Matt's desperation in light of the societal milieu Matt becomes more sympathetic as a character. Matt's character is questionable at best; he is sexist, selfish, manipulative, and greedy. By placing him within the post-recession zeitgeist the author is able to allow the reader to feel sympathy for Matt. Even though he makes poor decisions and is generally unlikable, because his problems were so universal at the time he is easier to relate to.

## Accepting One's Place in the World

Matt mistakes his rejection of his lot in life as industriousness when in actuality it is this rejection that causes most of his problems and finally accepting his status is what allows him to make progress. Were he to accept his situation from the start - bankruptcy may be the only option and that he is losing his wife and needs to act thoughtfully - he would have been able to avoid much of the pain and suffering he brought upon himself and his whole family. Instead, he possibly permanently damaged his marriage and risked losing his family entirely.

Matt's friend Ike represents a foil to this, as he has resigned himself to his fate. He knows he will most likely be laid off soon, and while he finds Matt's plans exciting he shows no interest in joining in. He is later revealed to have had a plan to go back to school to become a teacher and start a new phase in his life. Matt is so desperate to hold on to the way his life was it took him being arrested and wife leaving him to enter a new era. The purpose of having Ike as a foil is to give the reader an exemplar of how Matt should be handling his life. Matt's decisions are already suspect, but by seeing Ike handling a comparable situation with a much more logical manner the reader sees how stubborn and myopic Matt is.

Matt eventual acceptance of his place in the world (by turning himself in and declaring bankruptcy) is the only redemption Matt is afforded. The other crises Matt experiences (masculinity, modernity, etc.) are not rectifiable until he accepts who he is and his life. In

the final chapter, masculinity and modernity still loom over Matt, but because he is comfortable with where he is in life the reader sees Matt have rational hope for the first time.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is written in first-person narrative form from Matt's point of view. Majority of the text is Matt narrating what is going on around him, providing insights and information on the characters. Matt is not an omniscient narrator, so any information conveyed by Matt about other characters is only his opinion and does not represent fact.

Matt's limited perspective on many of the characters leaves room for readers to predict and make their own assumptions. Many times Matt's opinions are clearly wrong and the reader is able to make the correct assumptions. This dynamic also leaves the reader with questions which will be answered later. For example, Matt and Lisa show no signs of ever having been happy but later in the narrative the audience learns of how in love they were at the beginning of their marriage. Because the narrative is told only from Matt's perspective, many plot points do not get resolved. For example, while Matt does see Jamie and the movies, his fate in terms of his role as a criminal informant is never fully revealed. Also, the extent of Lisa and Chuck's affair is never explicitly explained, only hinted at by observations by Matt.

Matt frequently expresses himself through poetry. The reader is generally given the opportunity to interpret the poem on their own and then the true meaning of it is revealed in subsequent pages or chapters. All of the poems are either introspective to Matt or relating to his view of the actions around him. Many times Matt's assumptions posited in the poems are later proven to be incorrect or off-base. For example, Chapter 18 opens with a poem detailing how easy Matt thinks it would be to put together a consortium to purchase Monte's drug business. Matt quickly learns he underestimated the practicality of doing this considering how illegal it is.

## Language and Meaning

The book's contemporary setting lends itself to a fairly standard vocabulary. Matt's vocabulary tends to become more advanced when he is using poetry as a device or if he is giving a lengthy description of a person (particularly women he finds attractive) or situation. Matt considers himself something of a poet and tends to pride himself on his vocabulary and wit. When Matt is speaking with his wife or father, his vocabulary tends to be more basic indicating he has less excitement and creativity when dealing with situations with them. For example, while Matt finds his wife attractive his description of her is very simplistic, such as calling her a "babe" or admiring the "curvy business suits" she used to wear (29-30). By comparison, Matt's initial description of Bea could be considered circumlocution: "...a tall, leggy, striking girl named Bea..her hair pulled in a ponytail, her no-doubt banging body effortlessly buried beneath a pile of tights and sweaters and scarves - she is a walking coat rick - and as we shook hands, Bea fixed

me with a most alarming blue-eyed stare of my life, the kind of stare in which you think some potent subliminal message is being passed along" (113-114).

## Structure

The action of the entire book takes place over the course of about a week. There is no distinct pattern to how much time each chapter covers, but most chapters tends to last over the course of a few hours. Some chapters consist of only a poem (or in one case a transcript). These chapters provide the reader with small amounts of information that they can use to predict what will happen next and then the next chapter explains what the previous chapter was referring to. For example, the end of Chapter 20 has Matt coming up with an unexplained plan. Chapter 21 is a poem detailing Matt's attempt to sell Chuck weed, giving the audience an opportunity to predict what Matt's plan is. Chapter 22 features Matt revealing the entirety of his plan. The final chapter jumps forward in time by roughly six months to a year to present the aftermath of Matt being arrested and declaring bankruptcy. Many times the reader is not present for certain scenes, but given a brief recap after the fact.



## Quotes

Because as fucked as the world is, as grim as the future surely seems to be, as grim as it revealed itself to be for my mother as she lay dying of the tumor that kills us all, there is a truth I cannot deny, a thing no creditor can take; even as my doomed boys stir in the cold unknowing of predawn sleep, even as the very life leaches out of me, soaks into the berber, in to the cracks of my arid grave, I must grudgingly admit - that was one great goddamn burrito.

-- Matt (chapter 1)

**Importance:** Matt says this after getting high with Jamie and Skeet and eating a burrito from 7/11. This is Matt indicating that the drugs he just smokes and the subsequent burrito gave him reprieve from all of the problems crushing down on him. This is the first indication of Matt's newfound obsession with drugs and his plan to sell them.

And here is my lightning quick assessment of my enemy's strengths, relative to mind: (1) Chuck is taller. (2) Chuck is a few years younger and clearly in better shape). (3) Chuck really does have dreamy eyes."

-- Matt (chapter 5)

**Importance:** This demonstrates Matt's generally misunderstanding of his marital issues. Matt thinks these superficial reasons are why Lisa may be pursuing an affair with Chuck. Matt completely ignores his emotional neglect of her as well as Chuck potentially being an emotional outlet for her.

Franklin pleaded, 'Can't I just play until I die?' I know that he means until his little Game Boy character dies, but it chokes me up anyway (I'm so weepy these days).

-- Matt & Franklin (chapter 6)

**Importance:** Franklin's comment makes Matt emotional because even though Franklin did not mean it this way, Matt feels he is in a life or death situation. There is no settling, Matt must either fix his family and their financial problems or they must completely cease to exist.

All I know is that I have a check in my pocket for less than ten thousand dollars, a check that represents the last threads of the money we always assumed would serve as our safety net, and that might be the stupidest thing we did - not starting a poetry-business website or buying shit on eBay or taking a six-month stay of financial execution, not emailing old boyfriends or getting high at a convenience store - no, the truly stupid mistake was believing that when we fell, a net made of money could catch us.

-- Matt (chapter 6)

**Importance:** Matt has completely given up and rejected the financial system he used to live by and work within from the past. He has resigned himself to having been duped into believing the system, as it is, could work.



It was also during this late '90s entrepreneurial euphoria that my tumor of discontentment first began to replicate cells, as I sat chained to my desk and watched various friends and colleagues slip into phone booths and emerge as dot.com superheroes.

-- Matt (chapter 8)

**Importance:** Matt is depicting another time of financial strife for the country; the dot.com bubble of the late 1990s. Seeing so many people get rich quick inspired him to make his website. He is of course leaving out, or ignoring, that many people subsequently lost a lot of money in that time as well.

This is the first metaphysical question I have planned for the church hierarchy once my Catholic training is complete: Okay, your holiness. Seriously...What the hell?

-- Matt (chapter 9)

**Importance:** Matt jokingly says he would convert to Catholicism in order for his boys to qualify for financial aid at their Catholic school. This quote shows how Matt generally searches for big answers and big solutions, rather than focusing on his own individual life and problems.

He wears a sports coat over a button shirt, and I think, Hell, since I took a buyout and stopped showering, I look more like a drug dealer than you.

-- Matt (chapter 10)

**Importance:** Matt is describing Dave after seeing him for the first time. Matt is acknowledging he was incorrect for assuming he was the one stooping down to the level of drug dealers, when in many ways they are just like him and perhaps even superior.

That's when Dave pulls up, in a Nissan Maxima exactly the year and color of mine. This makes me feel creepy in some way I can't quite name.

-- Matt (chapter 14)

**Importance:** Matt is uncomfortable with Dave driving the same car as him because it makes Matt feel like he is in the same league as hardened drug criminals. Matt is not better than the criminals he is beginning to work with.

It makes me realize just how low I've sunk in my unemployment funk, that it's actually flattering to hear that I'm perfect for something, anything - even a drug operation.

-- Matt (chapter 16)

**Importance:** This quote demonstrates how low Matt's self-worth and self-esteem is. He is being offered the opportunity to buy a drug business, and he is flattered to be even considered for an opportunity.

And as I start for the shower, for just the briefest moment, the old healthy greed returns, and I wonder if maybe I might now even be underselling the potential of this thing...



-- Matt (chapter 17)

**Importance:** Matt demonstrates he simply cannot help himself when the opportunity to get ahead presents itself. Even though he is already operating well outside the law, he has a natural instinct to double-down his commitment and try to make more. This is a prime example of his hubris.

I don't mind someone telling me what I'm thinking. It's nice.

-- Matt (chapter 19)

**Importance:** Matt is being told his new role as an informant by Greg and Randy. Matt has completely given up and would prefer to be told what to do rather than make decisions on himself. He no longer trusts his own judgement.

And I look up at our bedroom window, but all I get is a flat reflection of the gray sky."

-- Matt (chapter 29)

**Importance:** Matt is looking for Lisa in their window. The grey reflection of the sky indicates that he has all but completely lost her. No sunshine or blue, very little hope left for the clouds to part on their marriage.