

# **I Know This Much Is True Study Guide**

**I Know This Much Is True by Wally Lamb**

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# Plot Summary

*I Know This Much Is True* by Wally Lamb follows Dominick Birdsey on his quest to care for his schizophrenic identical twin, Thomas, and figure out their dysfunctional home life in the 1950s and 60s. Many of his revelations come from reading his maternal grandfather's self-serving memoir about life in Italy and Three Rivers, CT, in the early decades of the 20th century.

In 1990, in the Three Rivers Public Library, paranoid schizophrenic Thomas Birdsey amputates his right hand to end the growing war in Iraq. His identical twin, Dominick, the novel's anger-filled narrator, becomes his full-time advocate against a politically-motivated bureaucracy, in alliance with quirky caseworker Lisa Sheffer and psychologist, Dr. Rubina Patel, who soon begins treating Dominick's own anxieties over a broken marriage and a lifelong jealousy of Thomas for having been their mother's obvious favorite. As an adult, Dominick still hates his violent stepfather Ray and longs to know who his biological father is.

Much of the novel is devoted to flashbacks to the twins' difficult upbringing, spanning the Cold War and Vietnam War. While their mother is dying of cancer in 1987, she entrusts to Dominick her beloved Papa's memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings." As Dominick reads the long, self-serving text, spanning the early decades of the 20th century, he understands much about his mother's meek acceptance of her fate and his own volatile temper, but does not learn the secret of his paternity. Surprisingly, this comes from Ray, who mellows after losing a leg to diabetes, shares his own miserable early life, and reveals that their father is part African and part Wequonnoc Indian. Patel helps Dominick understand that Ma had shared this information with Thomas, knowing that he would accept it placidly, but had withheld it from Dominick, whom might have done himself harm. Her gift to Dominick had been the manuscript.

Thomas, like their beleaguered grandmother Ignazia, drowns himself to escape the evil world, freeing Dominick of much of his burden. He deals with being "untwinned." He and Dessa remarry and adopt the daughter of his post-divorce lover, Joy, who dies of AIDS. He reconciles with his stepfather in Ray's declining years, and turns the ancestral home into a refuge for abused women, named in Ma's memory. Dominick embraces his Wequonnoc heritage and finds peace and a measure of understanding.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

On 12 October 1990, in the Three Rivers Public Library, Thomas Birdsey amputates his right hand to end Operation Desert Shield. The day before, his identical twin, Dominick, impatient at his ranting about Armageddon, misses the sign. Emergency personnel transport Thomas and his hand to the hospital, where he vehemently refuses reattachment.

In Chapter 2 Dominick recalls 1958, when their television explodes and Ma rescues her photo album. In 1987, suffering terminal cancer, she shares with Dominick old news clippings and talks about her immigrant "Papa" whose life story in Italian she has never read. Dominick resolves to get it translated for her, but graduate student Nedra Frank vanishes with the manuscript. Ma dies on 1 May 1987.

Chapter 3 shows Thomas being transported to Three Rivers for observation, wondering why their stepfather Ray has not visited. Dominick, silent, recalls the history of Thomas' treatment and Ray's refusal to consider Thomas' antiwar act heroic. His girlfriend Joy is complaining of notoriety. When Dominick goes through the motions of sex with her, he is thinking of his ex-wife Dessa. Now riding in the squad car, Dominick panics, seeing them pass the Settle Building for the Hatch Forensic Institute. Chapter 4 depicts the hellish places, as Dominick tries to contact Settle, Thomas' usual home, to straighten things out. Dominick grows louder in his brother's defense until Thomas is dragged off, crying about being nailed to the cross. Exasperated by Dominick's taunts, "Robocop" knees him in the groin.

## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The first chapter establishes that Thomas Birdsey has for twenty years lived on-and-off in a state hospital, suffering paranoid schizophrenia, meaning that he hears voices and hallucinates. His identical twin brother, narrator Dominick Birdsey, who admits to both loving and hating Thomas, misses signs of approaching crisis and blames himself when Thomas amputates his right hand. Thomas views it as a sacrifice to draw attention to the slaughter being carried out by President George W. Bush's Operation Desert Shield. The religious motivation is contained in Matthew 5:29-30, where Jesus Christ tells his disciples to cut off body parts that offend in order to avoid burning in hell intact. Thomas takes it literally and maintains that it is his religious right to refuse reattachment. Armageddon in the Bible is where, at the end of the world, the final battle between good and evil will be fought. Thomas declares that he is no longer a doubter like his namesake but now a Simon Peter on whom God will build a new order. Patched up, Thomas returns to the state hospital one-handed and zealous. Prophecy is a gift and a burden. The volatile mix of politics and religion is firmly established.



Chapter 2 consists of Dominick's various recollections of childhood, adolescence, adulthood. They are succinctly captured in references to popular culture: the 1950s by Clarabel the Clown on The Howdy Doody Show, the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show, and the present-day (1980s/90s) by John Lennon's "Instant Karma." The intense fear of a Soviet nuclear attack in the 1950s is also emphasized. The chain begins and ends with the day that their television set explodes and the house catches on fire. "Ma" risks rescuing her photo album. Dominick's recollections establish that Ma is a gentle woman, in contrast to her tyrannical husband Ray, who works third shift at Electric Boat. As the memories unfold, Ma's immigrant father, Papa, is even worse.

Dominick's memories are conditioned by Ma's being diagnosed in 1987 with terminal cancer, which she accepts as God's will. This makes Dominick bitter, but Thomas makes an insipid "God = Love!" collage for her. Remodeling Ma's 1950s-era kitchen, Ray finds her Papa's handwriting, which leads to them looking at the album and two news clippings. One announces the twins as the 1949/50 New Year's babies, arriving three minutes before and after midnight. The article tastefully avoids the reality that they are bastards. Ma marries Ray somewhat later. The picture second shows them with Mamie Eisenhower at the launching of the USS Nautilus in 1957, her proudest day.

This sets Ma to thinking about Papa, Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, and the memoirs he is writing in Italian when he dies in 1949. While Ma searches for another artifact to share, Dominick jumps to 1964, recalling how rude he had been to her while being fitted for ugly glasses. To comfort him, Ma had talked about the taunting she had endured because of her harelip, normally a taboo subject. Dominick also recalls lifting weights and hating Thomas as a "Goody-Goody Boy." This begins to explain the love/hate relationship between the siblings.

Ma produces Papa's life story, dictated and written shortly before his death. She details the arduous project, involving poor Angelo Nardi, a handsome stenographer. Papa had been secretive about the text. She recalls finding him dead over his work, collecting his scattered pages, but never reading them. Dominick encourages Ma to translate the document, but she pleads that her Italian is rusty and Papa writes in a mixture of standard Italian and Sicilian dialect.

As a last gift to Ma, Dominick resolves to hire a translator and gets Nedra Frank, a disagreeable graduate student grudgingly to agree—but not to be hurried. Ma's chemotherapy radiation wears her out. Dominick visits regularly and sometimes takes Thomas, who suffers a psychotic episode on I-95, which convinces Dominick to go alone thenceforth. Thomas' deepening problems are emerging. Dominick's sharp temper is shown in rebuking a nurse.

In February, Nedra visits Dominick. They talk about the project and his tastes. She notes that he tells time by what is on television. When finally she makes sexual advances, he laughs in shock. He still pines for his ex-wife. Nedra storms out, drops out of school, and vanishes with the manuscript. Ma dies undramatically on 1 May 1987. Thomas takes the news placidly. As they look at the album together, Thomas does not recall the Nautilus, and Dominick has only spotty impressions.



Chapter 3 takes place mostly in a police cruiser as Thomas is certified "dangerous to himself and/or others" and committed to a 15-day period of observation at Three Rivers State Hospital. Afterward he can be prosecuted for crimes or confined longer. Following the procedure he is taken out in handcuffs and sedated. Dominick asks the officers to stop their insensitive, macho crowing about Operation Desert Shield.

As they pass the McDonald's where Thomas briefly works before taking himself off Haldol, cracking up, and being recommitted, Thomas asks Dominick to read him to him the 26th [27th] Psalm. Reading, Dominick wishes that Thomas had not gotten into "Bible voodoo," which costs him his hand and destroyed Dominick's peace as reporters and "religious crackpots" swarm him. When Thomas wonders why Ray has not visited, Dominick reviews in his head telling him the news when he returns from fishing and trying to convince Ray that it is a heroic if goofy antiwar statement intended to bring Bush and Hussein both to their senses.

When Dominick takes him to Shanley Memorial to see Thomas, Ray only pretends to enter. While he waits, Dominick chats awkwardly with his ex-wife Dessa, whom he will always love. Details of her new life come out and later he thinks of her while having make-up sex with Joy over about how this publicity inconveniences her. Dominick is angry at Ray for having pushed young Thomas to "toughen up," for giving unsolicited advice on his painting business, and for living instead of Ma. Although he feels guilty about supporting Thomas' right not to have his hand reattached, he tells Ray it is Thomas' decision. When they reach the hospital, the cops drop him not at the Settle Building but, ominously, at the Hatch. Why he is concerned about this comes out in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 opens as the police cruiser arrives at the hellish Hatch Forensic Institute, introducing the sympathetic Sgt. Mercado, who would like to let Thomas' doctors at Settle straighten things out, but orders are orders. This is emphasized by the unbending intake officers whom Dominick calls derisively "Robocop" and "Fatso." Thomas has been "reassigned" and will be assigned a new doctor. Hatch limits contact between patients' families and the medical and nursing staff. Dominick is not allowed to talk with Thomas' Forensic Treatment Specialist (FTS), Lisa Sheffer, who becomes a key figure in the novel going forward. Thomas cries about religious persecution as he is dragged off to his new home, and Dominick grows so caustic in his brother's defense that he is kned in the groin. Guards believe he is crazier than their new inmate. Dominick knows that Thomas faces sexual predation here.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5 looks back to 1958, when Ma takes the boys to the movie theater. Bored, Thomas worries about his new teacher while Dominick daydreams of a kinder father. Afterwards, after ice cream sodas, Ma splurges on a religious painting, and on the bus ride home, they are scared by a dirty, crazy man. Ma forbids telling Ray, who at dinner beats Thomas for being a "namby-pamby."

Chapter 6 brings Dominick home, needing to get Thomas out, and to get even with Robocop. He ignores phone messages, accepts that he has acted like a jerk, and recalls first meeting Joy at a gym with his friend Leo, whom he tries unsuccessfully to call for commiseration. He listens to phone messages from Lisa Sheffer, assuring him that Thomas is fine. It is too late to reach her. In Chapter 7, Dominick and Joy quarrel, he recalls past episodes of Thomas "preservation," and tells her about Ray's brutality towards Thomas, but insists on blaming biochemistry alone. Dominick would like to change his life, but being a twin and having promised Ma to watch over Thomas make it hard for him to break out.

Chapter 8 looks at 1968/69, beginning with a typewriter that the boys receive at high school graduation. Ma and Ray fight over sending them to college as a safe alternative to Vietnam, where a friend, Billy Covington, has died. Ma convinces Dominick to room with Thomas at UConn, where Thomas proves too distracted to study. Thomas' dependence on No-Doz worries Dominick. At the end of the year, Thomas is put on academic probation.

## Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Chapter 5 looks back to 1958, when the twins are entering third grade. It is rich in nostalgia of the times. Ma takes them to "Back-to-School Festival of Fun" at the theater. She does not care for the Three Stooges and they are bored by Francis the Talking Mule. The audience has to be threatened by the "husher" and Bulgy Eyes, the manager, and Dominick is attracted by the cursing they are learning to effect. At the same time, he worries about the venial and mortal sins that Ma always notes. Khrushchev and Jayne Mansfield both have "jet-black souls."

Thomas is upset that his new teacher is the mean Miss Higgins and is easily tricked by his brother. Dominick, who earlier wishes that his father was television's Sky King, now daydreams about The Rifleman, Lucas McCain, who treats his son Mark so well. Ray always puts down the Lucas character. Dominick recalls Thomas once crying so hard over the flying monkeys in The Wizard of Oz that Dominick had also started, and Ray had dragged them out and threatened to dress them as girls. Today, going to the bathroom by himself, Dominick is roughed up by the bully Lonnie Peck, whose follower



is Ralph Drinkwater, seen briefly in the present time working at Hatch. He and Penny Ann are the only other twins at their school.

On the bus rides to and from the theater, Ma regularly warns the twins not to gawk or talk about people with deformities, who seem to be everywhere. A dirty, crazy man tries to get familiar with her and gets off when they do, trying to avoid him. Even safe at home, she sobs, but hangs a picture of Jesus, whom she credits with their deliverance. She fears what Ray would say if he learned. Throughout the chapter, Ray has been declining as a sympathetic character, and hits bottom when he whips Thomas for being a "namby-pamby." Thomas' psychological problems are growing evident at age ten. Ma is helpless to defend him and Dominick enjoys tormenting him. Dominick also wants the Rifleman to be their father, or Sky King, or anyone but Ray.

Chapter 6 looks at Dominick at home after the horrors at Hatch. He admits that he has acted badly but vows revenge on Robocop for kneeling him. He is too hungry and too much in pain to do anything concrete, like having his injured testicles documented. The chapter opens with a note from his lover Joy about broadcaster Connie Chung wanting to talk. Dominick ignores phone messages, including one from his current house-painting customer, and from Ray, whose attempts at outreach always annoy Dominick.

Dominick recalls how he first meets Joy at a gym, which he joins to please his old friend, Leo. Much of the chapter is devoted to showing the factors that are causing friction between Joy and Dominick, and both Joy's and Leo's histories are developed in detail. Details are also filled in on his failed marriage, including ex-wife Dessa's and lover Joy's relations with poor Thomas. Dominick is particularly concerned that Joy not intensify the financial recklessness that has put her badly in debt or resume the shoplifting that a psychologist says is related to being sexually abused as a young woman. Note that Dominick has little use for psychologists, even apart from Thomas' treatment. Joy's sexuality both excites and scares him. Sex plays an important and diverse role in the chapter, helping to delineate all of the characters.

Among the phone messages is one from social worker Lisa Sheffer, wanting to talk about the upsetting night he has had. Thomas is fine, given the circumstances, and the units are mostly humane. Unable to reach her, Dominick is happy that she at least sounds human. She clearly knows the institution's bad reputation and tries to reassure Dominick.

Chapter 7 opens with Dominick dreaming about ignoring Thomas' skill in skipping rocks across a pond. The alarm goes off at 5:30 AM and it is cold. This brings back to him the horrors of Hatch and the telepathy that the twins have always enjoyed. Much of the chapter is devoted to further showing the conflicts between Dominick and Joy and the ways by which Dominick is chained to his fate.

Dominick makes a mental list of things to do while watching Joy dress. He contrasts her open sexuality to Dessa's shyness and gets some commiseration about his black-and-blue crotch. Quickly, however, they revert to feuding. Joy's sloppiness is a constant with which he copes. She favors him talking to sympathetic newscaster Connie Chung;





Thad's agreement naturally draws Dominick's sarcasm, which inflames Joy's anger and her demand that he care for her as much as he does Thomas. She bristles at mention of the party dress on hold for her, a detail that keeps the economic aspect alive.

Dominick recalls Thomas' past episodes of "perservation," the technical term for obsessing about something and being unable to let go. Thomas' past causes have been abortion and the hostages in Iran. Joy's sloppiness and sarcasm and the newspaper headlines annoy Dominick, along with their general inability to communicate. She claims that he thinks that she is stupid..

Catching himself thinking about baseball, Dominick considers his burden, put upon him both by being a twin and by having promised Ma. In their first year of college, when freedom should have been his, he has to protect Thomas from Ray's brutality. Wanting to let history lie silently, Dominick nevertheless describes some of Ray's tortures. It would be convenient to blame Ray for Thomas' condition, but Dominick knows the scientific facts.

Chapter 8 looks back on 1968/69, beginning with the portable typewriter that the twins receive from high school graduation. Ma and Ray fight over sending them to college, he wanting them patriotically to enlist or work for Electric Boat, and she wanting them safe from Vietnam. The short life story of Billy Covington, who idolizes Superman, is recounted as background for Ma's fears. Ma forces down worries about working in the world to earn the boys' tuition at a maid's job at Howard Johnson's, but chauvinist Ray cannot have his wife working. He and his buddies eat at the restaurant and humiliate her. Ray "coughs up" \$4,000, and Dominick has to return Ma's uniform when she happily resigns. He considers that with all the pressure Ray, Thomas, and he put on her, Ma is as empty as the frock.

There is another sexual interlude, as Dominick works over the summer at the YMCA pool. He fantasizes about sex with a fellow instructor, who convinces him to go out with a younger, less desirable co-worker. Dominick is not interested in love or dating, just sex, and fantasizes about Anne Generous while Patty Katz gratifies him. It is at the YMCA pool that Ma convinces Dominick to room at UConn with Thomas and embarrasses them both. Dominick has been an A student and wants to go away to school, but Thomas, at best a B student, is not ready to let go. Thomas proves too distracted to study and is put on academic probation by the end of the year. He begins taking massive amounts of No-Doz and acts so peculiarly that Dominick's friends nickname him "Lurch" from television's *The Addams Family*. Popular entertainment thus wends through another chapter. In a fit of frustration, Thomas destroys the typewriter that Ma gives them at the beginning of the chapter, believing that some thief has taken a key, which he forgets he has himself hidden.



# Chapters 9-12

## Chapters 9-12 Summary

In Chapter 9 Dominick visits Sheffer's office, sizes her up as a "goofball," and learns that he cannot get his brother out in under 15 days. Sheffer explains the political climate and endorses Thomas' new doctors, Chase and Patel. She explains the institution and how Thomas, as a danger to himself, needs treatment. If his doctors do not recommend release, the State could hold him here for a year. It takes two weeks to get clearance to visit patients; Dominick should sleep and document his bruises.

Chapter 10 follows the twin's sixth-grade class trip to New York in 1962 to Radio City and the Statue of Liberty. It is nearly wrecked when Thomas locks himself in the restroom and panics. Back home, he rates the trip good, while Dominick is nearly in tears and dreams of being trapped like a squirrel inside the Statute of Liberty.

Chapter 11 takes Dominick to a clinic to have his injuries documented, to the Roods' to promise to finish painting their house quickly, and to Ray's, to brief him. He thinks about Papa's stolen memoir and vows (perhaps) to find Nedra and recover it. Chapter 12 continues with a visit to Leo, who is selling cars for father-in-law Gus Constantine, Dominick ex-father-in-law. Leo, an aspiring actor, is sure that a movie part is coming. Dominick is moved when Leo asks to be on Thomas' visitors list.

## Chapters 9-12 Analysis

Chapter 9 introduces Lisa Sheffer, the social worker whom Dominick quickly evaluates as a "goofball." Lamb's writing is appropriately frenetic. Dominick knows that he must behave for Thomas' sake, but is impatient, asking Sheffer to avoid jargon and insisting that he will not wait 15 days to get his brother out. Sheffer, who resents the charge that she is a team player, clarifies that the State of Connecticut is engaged in "damage control" on this case. At the highest level it has assigned new doctors to Thomas—Dr. Chase as his psychiatrist and Dr. Patel as his psychologist. Patel is met in a hallway, in passing.

Sheffer also observes that Dominick carries an abnormally large amount of responsibility for Thomas and tries to bond with him as a fellow "Don Quixote," alluding to Cervantes' novel about the deluded wandering knight of Spain. She works constantly to calm Dominick, explaining how the institution works and the realities they face. Hatch is not as bad as is commonly claimed, she says, but looking out her window, Dominick sees nothing encouraging. Sheffer volunteers to be the twins' liaison during this trying period of evaluation. She goes so far as to recommend that Dominick document his bruises in case leverage is needed. By the end of the chapter, Sheffer has become a compassionate character, quirky enough to promise much in the chapters ahead. The



politics of Vietnam and Iraq are also sure to occupy many pages as Sheffer and Dominick agree they are both tragic.

Sheffer's mentioning a seven-year-old daughter, Jesse, reminds Dominick of his and Dessa's late daughter, Angela. Clearly more about the tragedy of losing a baby must be told.

Chapter 10 is another look back at childhood, following the twin's sixth-grade class trip to New York. Thomas is excited to see The Radio City Easter show, while Dominick wants to be able to count a fourth state besides Connecticut that he has seen and to spend money that he has saved from odd jobs. Dominick observes that when Ray needs help with projects he asks him, never ten-thumbed Thomas.

Much of the chapter is given over to describing the bus ride. Writing as a sixth-grader in 1962, Lamb gives a feel for the array of characters one remembers from the past: the nerdy kid, the fat kid, the popular rich kid, the boy/girl conflicts and budding attractions, the wise ass whom the teacher always has her eye on and, of course, the teacher whom they try to break psychologically. Dominick has been in good with the rich kid, even visiting their mansion a few times and learning the mysteries of sex from his older brother's collection of magazines, but when Thomas locks himself in the restroom, nearly wrecking the trip, Dominick knows that he will be forever excluded. The nerdy kid realizes that Thomas may have mixed up right and left and suggests through the door that he slide the lock the opposite way.

Thomas emerges in tears and is hooted at by his cruel colleagues. They miss out on the fun because Thomas is so shaken and Dominick must sit with him. That night, Dominick is nearly in tears and dreams of being trapped in the Statute of Liberty, like the squirrel he recalls from a childhood vacation that someone locks in a firebox and it dies in terror. The chapter is nicely rounded out. It also provides new glimpses of Ma and Ray's personalities in that period.

Chapter 11 chronicles Dominick's visit to the clinic to have his injuries documented. Dr. Judy Yup is willing to testify that "oppression is oppression," equating Dominick's testicles to the protesters squashed in China's Tiananmen Square. Dominick next drives over to client Henry Rood's, promising to work as fast as possible, weather permitting. He asks that the phone calls stop. Ruth Rood recalls from her childhood a neighbor ripping out an eye for religious reasons. Ruth is sorry for Dominick's troubles. As Dominick drives to Ray's house, he thinks about Nedra Frank stealing Papa's manuscript and, arriving, wonders why Ray has let the property go.

Entering the house makes him feel ten years old again and powerless. Dominick finds the house cluttered and Ray asleep. Rather than wake Ray, Dominick leaves a note detailing what Sheffer has told him. He feels sorry for the lonely old man he had so often wanted to see die. This attitude helps introduce nuance into Ray's depiction. Looking around the tattered yard, Dominick vows to find Nedra and Angelo the stenographer.



Chapter 12 continues Dominick's exhausting day, with a visit to Leo at his father-in-law's car dealership. Much of the chapter is devoted to sketching Dominick's friend as a big-talking sex addict, stuck in a going-nowhere job but convinced that he will get his break in the movies. Leo has always been an Eddie Haskell, the schmoozing character on *Leave It to Beaver*. A high school musician and UConn acting major, Leo is the foil for injecting many cultural items from the 1960s and 1970s. It is hinted that at some point in the past Dominick, Leo, and Hatch custodian Ralph Drinkwater pull a "bag job" together. For a while Dominick and Leo are brothers-in-law, and Dominick wonders in passing why his marriage to Dessa fails, while screw-up Leo's to Angie weathers all storms. The chapter deals with the psychology of sales and debates the meaning of "law of the jungle." It ends with Leo asking to be put on Thomas' visitors list, an act of decency that throws Dominick.



# Chapters 13-16

## Chapters 13-16 Summary

In Chapter 13, Dominick recalls in third grade lying about Penny Ann Drinkwater on the day she disappears. A week later, her body is found. Her twin, Ralph, is a ferocious character whom Dominick does not see again until tenth grade, when they sit together in American history. Ralph is thrown out for taking the Indians' side on Manifest Destiny, and Dominick feels bad for not sticking up for the oppressed.

Chapter 14 finds Thomas, ten days into his stay at Hatch, "holding his own," according to Sheffer and Patel, who summons Dominick to a meeting. Seeing young dance students triggers memories of his daughter Angela's death and funeral and how he and Dessa drift apart. Dessa blames Dominick's toxic anger. Suffering an anxiety attack while teaching, Dominick switches to house painting. Little girls makes him think about what might have been. Chapter 15 depicts the therapy session. Patel observes Dominick's anger and skillfully relieves it, saying that she needs Dominick to open up about their childhoods. After discussing world myths about twins and the blessing of having a twin, she plays a tape of the afternoon session with Thomas and requests comments. She explains that Thomas is feeling alone in the universe, starring in a "hero-myth." He is very sick but good and even noble. Her long-range goal is to hone Thomas' life skills and get inside his skin. She proposes listening regularly to tapes. Dominick finds her sincere and competent and voluntarily opens up about Angela's death.

Chapter 16 looks back on 1969, with the twins working for Public Works, teamed with Leo Blood and Ralph Drinkwater. A major battle breaks out at home when UConn report cards arrive. Ray is livid at Thomas' failing grades and refuses to pay for a second year but also mocks Dominick for making the dean's list. They fight when Dominick disparages the Vietnam War and storms out. Ma waits up to explain Ray's difficult boyhood, and evades the question of the twins' real father.

## Chapters 13-16 Analysis

In Chapter 13, Dominick returns his thoughts to third grade, focusing on poor, unpopular Penny Ann Drinkwater about whom he lies to the principal on the day that Penny Ann disappears. Dominick's susceptibility to nightmares is reiterated. When her body is found and her murderer captured, Ray demands that society take brutal vengeance. Dominick finds the man's picture in the paper quite normal—not at all frightening, like the crazy man on the bus ride from town, related earlier in the novel.

Penny Ann's twin, Ralph, several times mentioned, is a ferocious character in elementary school. They do not see one another for years, until Ralph takes offense at the American history teacher's presentation on Manifest Destiny, portraying the stealing



of Indian lands as a positive movement. Ralph is a mixture of black, white, and Wequonnoc Indian, but discriminated against as "colored." That day, he declares himself full-blooded Wequonnoc and Mr. LoPresto's orthodox views "bullshit." The offended academic writes him up and dismisses him. Partly because of guilt over mistreating Penny Ann long ago and not sympathizing with her family's poverty, Dominick grows angry at LoPresto but says nothing. He writes down the facts he will need to regurgitate on the examination.

The chapter opens with a description of Three Rivers, CT, in colonial times and of the Indian cemetery beside which the State Hospital stands. Dominick weaves into the opening memories of a summer job, Sunday walks with Thomas and Dessa, and the gory legend of the Falls that lead into the recollection of Penny Ann's tragedy. It is a particularly well-structured and executed narrative.

Chapter 14 finds Thomas a week and a half into his stay at Hatch "holding his own," according to Sheffer and Patel, with whom Dominick talks regularly. Haldol has relieved his agitation and he has developed rapport with Sheffer. Both Sheffer and Patel keep Dominick advised by phone. The chapter opens with Dominick sitting in his car, waiting to meet Patel face-to-face for the first time, in her office, about some incident. The office is located in a strip mall, near a children's dance studio, and seeing girls who would be his late daughter Angela's age sends his mind flashing back to her death and funeral and how he and Dessa drift apart. Dominick retains grief at having been too busy at the end of a semester to enjoy the new baby, but is consoled that he rather than Dessa finds the body. He takes charge of arrangements, while Dessa leaks from eyes and breasts and retreats within herself. At the funeral, Thomas sees Angela's death as a warning from his unseen enemies that he is to be assassinated. Dominick loses control. The innocently insensitive things that people say and do while someone is in mourning are brilliantly characterized. Both parents seek to be alone at the Falls.

At the heart of the chapter is the pre-Christian Greek philosopher Epicurus' question: why does not God abolish evil? At the time of Angela's death, Dominick already feels overburdened by his twin's affliction; why must he now lose a daughter? What good is a three-foot-long coffin? Fighting about this would rip scabs off the raw truth, so the parents avoid the topic. Dessa believes that either God is so hateful that he singles them out for suffering, while Dominick maintains that there is no God, that life makes no sense and is just a cosmic "whoopie cushion, a chair yanked away just as you were having a seat." Earlier it has been seen how Dominick's cynical atheism affects his dying mother, a pious Catholic who accepts her own death as God's plan for her.

Dessa heals while on a Mediterranean cruise paid for by Angela's life insurance, which her Greek father is careful to take out. Dominick is disgusted by the thought and busy teaching. He does not tell Dessa about his vasectomy, and when she learns of it, she declares it a symptom of his toxic anger and leaves him. How they have come to be divorced is finally revealed, and he reiterates that both move on with their lives. He also recalls how his teaching career ends with an anxiety attack and how every time he sees little girls, thoughts of what might have been overtake him.





In Chapter 15, Patel details the "incident," how Thomas starts a melee by yelling at security cameras and hurling food at them. He is briefly restrained but refuses to go to meals and is sullen, even with Lisa. Chase is considering increasing the Haldol dosage. Recalling Ray's and Settle's methods, Dominick grows angry, which she notes and tries to relieve. She assures him that she is the patients' advocate, opposing over-medication.

The chapter provides biographical details about Patel and paints her as a patient, attractive, incisive character. She patiently and even enthusiastically explains Hindu gods to Dominick. She perceives Dominick's need for privacy and deep-seated anger, but gets him to open up about his and Thomas' childhoods. She uses professional jargon, but always explains the meaning. Her talk of them being mirror images, however, renews Dominick's fear of becoming crazy.

Patel discusses world myths about twins and emphasizes the blessing of having a twin, and eventually discloses that having Dominick listen to tapes she makes with Thomas and help contextualize his statements is the heart of her therapy. As they listen to the afternoon session in which he is uncharacteristically belligerent, Patel scolds Dominick about keeping his lid on too tight, passing it as a comment on American idiosyncrasies. On tape, Thomas is belligerent, calling her Patel "Mrs. Gandhi" and insisting on being called Simon Peter, as the keeper of the keys and a fisher of men. He rants about Communists, Iraqis, the CIA, George H. W. Bush, and his own new-found fame that makes him untouchable. Paranoia pours from him.

Dominick hears no "progress," but Patel assures him that talking openly like this is good and that Thomas believes that this is reality. He feels alone in the universe filled with evil powers, which are testing him all the time. He is starring in a "hero-myth." All children's literature is about coping, as is all religion. Thomas is struggling to cure himself of chaos. He is very sick but very good and even noble. Patel brings out the basic differences in the twins' childhood characters: Dominick is the risk-taker, to Ma a "spider monkey," while Thomas is a cuddly "bunny rabbit." Thomas has always been as big a "worrywart" as Ma about Dominick. Both are cautious around Ray and distant, but Thomas gets the brunt of Ray's anger. Dominick still feels guilty about that. Initially, Dominick avoids saying anything about children.

Patel's long-range goals, if the probate judge allows her, are to hone Thomas' life skills so he can graduate to a group-home placement. She needs Dominick's help in getting inside Thomas' past and present realities. She proposes listening to tapes together and hearing about their boyhoods—as Thomas' healthy mirror. She sounds sincere and competent. She appreciates him volunteering information about losing Angela to AIDS and prescribes three titles: *The Uses of Enchantment*, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and *The King and the Corpse*.

Chapter 15 is important for explaining many things previously hinted at and suggesting that Dominick and Patel will enjoy a fruitful collaboration. Her interests in Jung's "collective unconsciousness" and ability to explain Indian spirituality are also sure to enliven the novel.



Chapter 16 looks back on 1969, examining the boy's summer labor with the Department of Public Works. Dominick enjoys it and Thomas survives it, regaining some weight and losing his Lurch-like appearance. They are teamed with Leo Blood and Ralph Drinkwater. As in high school, Thomas disapproves of Dominick's friendship with Leo, whose youthful antics are described at length. Ralph remains distant and enigmatic. Among their jobs is mowing cemeteries, which allows for several deceased characters to be recalled. Ralph's cousin, who dies in Vietnam, stirs Dominick's zeal against Nixon's war. Their supervisors are profiled amusingly and Ma's preferential treatment of Thomas continues to be shown in details.

Dominick remarks early on that he drops his guard about Thomas' condition when he appears to do well. The chapter does not directly reference this concern, but does show for the first time a major confrontation between Ray and the rest of his family. Report cards arrive, with Thomas failing and Dominick excelling. Ray has been stewing by the time the boys come home from work and Ma is looking anxious. Ray launches into Thomas, declaring that he will not waste more hard-earned money on educating him, and then attacks Dominick for taking useless courses while boys his age are dying for their country. Ray has never appeared as despicable, ranting at the boys, silencing their mother, and finally destroying her whole day's worth of preserving. Dominick stands up to the rage, demanding that Ray let go of his T-shirt and ignores his orders not to walk away. The reader finally has a clear understanding of what the family endures in Ray.

Ma waits up for Dominick's return and tries to excuse Ray's temper as a product of his own troubled childhood. She distinguishes Ray from his temper and insists that he is the twin's father. Dominick will not hear of this and demands to know the truth. Ma evades the question of their real father. The family dynamics are much clarified in Chapter 16, including Dominick's need to defend his mother and brother. He is cagey enough to fall silent when any word only gives Ray more ammunition. It may be the root of the aloofness that Dr. Patel has recognized in her office. Vietnam, already mentioned several times as a precursor for Bush's folly in Iraq, is moving to the forefront during flashback chapters. Ray has drawn his ultra-patriotic line in the sand and Dominick is not about to abide by it.





# Chapters 17-20

## Chapters 17-20 Summary

Chapter 17 listens in on a painful recorded session, focusing on Ray's abuse. Dominick denies specific allegations of torture, maintaining that Ray is a bully, but not inhuman. He objects to the "family history" technique, which for 20 years has insinuated that Ma is to blame for Thomas' troubles—followed by heavy drug treatments. Feeling the old guilt, Thomas admits that Dominick had been singled out, because he does not know how to play defense. Thomas claims that Ray is jealous of God's special plans for him, recalls Ray's conversion to Catholicism, and thinks Dominick is mad at him, forgetting that he lacks clearance to visit. Dominick feels release in fury over being chained to Thomas. Sheffer arrives with news that the judge is dropping criminal charges but has released Thomas to the PSRB. His hearing is in a week, too soon for medication to work. Politics may be the deciding factor. Patel assures Dominick that his insights have been useful and wants to help both brothers.

Chapter 18 returns to 1969 and the moon landing. Ray is so happy that the U.S. is beating the Russians that he buys a color television as an unspoken apology for his tantrum. Dominick's going to the beach with Leo is a "no thanks." Their fake IDs are rejected at one bar but get them into the Dial-Tone, where Dominick endangers himself by defending a beautiful waitress against a sailor's advances. They meet later in the parking lot and talk a long time about their backgrounds. Dominick falls instantly in love with Dessa

Chapter 19 describes the start of Dominick and Dessa's torrid love affair, at the Constantine mansion, while her family is in Greece. Dessa teaches Dominick patient sex and feels secure with him, but doubts his declaration of love. Leo, Ma, and Thomas are curious, while Ray warns him about "being careful." At work, Dominick, Leo, and Ralph regularly get stoned, but Thomas refuses and once lectures him about the evils of marijuana. Thomas is curious about sex. After brief candor, Dominick tells him to get a girl—and get high—and cannot return his "I love you" until Thomas is asleep. To Patel, Dominick regrets having squandered time that summer, before voices take Thomas away and is bitter that the disease is separating them, as he has so long tried. He aches to have Thomas back and wonders, why Thomas rather than himself?

Chapter 20 returns to August of 1969. Both boys return to UConn but Dominick rooms with Leo and commutes weekends to see Dessa. At work, Thomas finally sticks up for himself before their boss Dell, demanding not to be called "Dickless," and quits after the humiliation. The crew is warned to say nothing or have its dope smoking revealed. At home, Thomas believes that UConn has erred in assigning him a new roommate. When Dominick reveals the truth, Thomas panics. Dominick rides his bike to the beach and waits for Dessa until 2 AM. She is not in the mood for sex, but Dominick forces himself on her. Declaring it rape, she drives away. After a long hitchhike, he finds a cryptic note



from Thomas about the Holy Ghost stealing his sleep. Dominick cannot sleep until dawn.

## Chapters 17-20 Analysis

Chapter 17 listens in on another recorded session, focusing on Ray. Thomas is paranoid, manipulative, and combative. Dominick observes that he must watch his flip remarks to Patel. They are in Sheffer's office, strategizing because the probate judge has moved up Thomas' evaluation. Patel has warned that the tape is upsetting.

Dominick regularly contextualizes Thomas' charges against Ray, denies that Ray beats and rapes Ma in front of them. Thomas says that Ray does it to teach them about the real world and toughen them up. Dominick tries not to listen and asks Patel why Thomas is conning her. He maintains that Ray is a bully, but not inhuman. This is hard for someone who has long hated his tormentor. Thomas objects to the "family history" technique, which he has experienced for 20 years, as doctors insinuate that Ma is to blame for Thomas' troubles and then increase his drugs. Dominick is clearly in command of the history of Thomas' treatment. Patel dissociates from that approach, but insists that getting inside the past is the key to teaching Thomas self-management. She claims to be searching for a lost boy in the woods, on foot, calling his name, unlike those who are overhead in helicopters.

Patel mentions studies being conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health, examining schizophrenic and healthy twins, and wants to run MRIs on them both. When Dominick insists that they are not "lab rats," she lets it drop for the present.

They resume listening to the tape, as Thomas talks about frequent beatings by Ray, with Dominick correcting details. Feeling the old guilt, Thomas admits that Dominick had been singled out. He tells Patel that he had known when to stop "pushing Ray's buttons like Thomas." Defense had been Dominick's key, learned from Ray on the basketball court.

On tape, Thomas says that Ray is jealous of God's special plans for him. Ray converts to Catholicism when they are 9-10 years old and becomes "buddy-buddy" with the priests, as though doing odd jobs for them would get him into heaven despite mistreating his sons. Thomas displays typical Evangelical disdain for Catholic ritualism. Notably, he had earlier asked Patel about reincarnation, but she refuses to discuss her beliefs with patients. Thomas continues that seeing what God wants and does not want is a terrible burden. God does not want the U.S. in Iraq, any more than worshiping money or killing Indians, but under "house arrest," Thomas is powerless to wake people up.

Thomas believes that Dominick does not understand his sacrifice and is mad at him. He forgets that Dominick has not visited because clearance has not yet come. When Dominick explains the context of Thomas' feet being cut by glass, Patel pursues the nature of Ray's "temper tantrums," but Dominick insists that he is not the patient. He



objects to Patel's dignifying claims that Ray had stuck objects up Thomas' anus and feels release in fury over all he is enduring, the mess that his whole life has become. Thomas is his life's inescapable anchor, who will cause him to drown. In this tirade, he understands Ray's rages better.

Dominick and Patel are interrupted when Sheffer enters and announces that the judge is dropping criminal charges but has released Thomas to the PSRB, so he could be committed to keep himself safe from himself. The hearing is in a week, fatefully on Halloween, too soon for medication to be effective. Patel is concerned. Sheffer warns Dominick not to show up at the hearing and "raise holy hell." Politics may be the deciding factor. Patel assures Dominick that his insights have been useful and sees that there are two young men lost in the woods, not one. She wants to help.

The chapter deals with Patel's Indian background in several ways. She declines to discuss reincarnation with Thomas and calmly deflects Dominick's insinuations that as an Indian she is behind the times scientifically. She graciously accepts that he means well, even when insulting her. Dominick apologizes. Dominick has to explain to Patel Jackie Gleason's tag line from *The Honeymooners*, "One of these days, Alice. Pow! Right in the kisser!" as Thomas describes Ray using Ma as a punching bag in front of the twins. Pop culture continues to be a recurring element in the novel, even when the mood is somber.

Chapter 18 returns to 1969 and the moon landing. Ray is so happy that the U.S. is beating the Russians that he buys a color television and adjusts it to obscene brightness. Ray is angry that Dominick instead goes to the beach with Leo. Most of the chapter depicts two under-aged, over-sexed young men in a bar. Leo has a hard time not making unpatriotic, anti-military wisecracks among the sailors who form most of the clientèle. He also scores women at the tables and weaves an elaborate story about coming from Hollywood, where he is Robert Redford's stand-in for the jump into the river in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. He is bitter that the "A chicks" disbelieve him. Dominick endangers himself by defending a waitress against a sailor's advances but backs off in time. She appears unappreciative, but Dominick admires her face, body, and gutsy attitude.

Patrons watch the moon landing and enjoy free champagne. Dominick and Leo reminisce about the early space program, of which they had both been fans in elementary school, and laugh about Ray getting a hard-on watching this patriotic moment, narrated by Walter Cronkite. Lamb portrays the emotions of that night—and the space race—to perfection. He even includes the conspiracy theory that it is being staged in New Jersey.

Dominick wanders outside, thinking about being "existentially alone," when the waitress he had rescued asks if he has jumper cables. She complains about nightly "grab-ass" on the job and she has learned to act tough. Dessa Constantine is easy to talk with. They talk about their families and kiss, but go no further. Dominick does not mention Dessa on the ride home but has her phone number. This meeting, so partially hinted at, is finally brought to life. Humans walk on the moon and "pixie dust" shines in the water.



Chapter 19 divides into two unequal parts. It first describes the beginning of Dominick and Dessa's torrid love affair, at the Constantine mansion, while her family is in Greece. She is forbidden to have male visitors. Dessa is more experienced sexually than Dominick, but has been abused by both of her earlier partners. She appreciates Dominick's shyness and feels safe with him. She hates being ogled at Dial-Tone but cannot afford to quit, since she needs to prove her independence to her generous but always strings-attached father. She teaches Dominick patient sex. When he first says that he loves her, Dessa thinks it is a line.

When Dessa asks about his childhood, he can think of nothing but horrors. They return to sex, which they are powerless to resist. Whenever he returns home long after midnight, it looks pathetic by comparison and he returns to imagining Dessa's body. At work, Leo chides him about always being sleepy. Ma wants to meet his "new gal." Thomas wants to know what Dessa looks like. Ray warns him about "being careful" with his "chippy" and silently provides Trojans and demands gratitude that he does not get.

At work, Dominick, Leo, and Ralph regularly get stoned, but Thomas refuses moodily. Dell works at making his life miserable and the others laugh at his expense. Ralph remains secretive of his private life and sensitive about racial jokes. He gets sulky when they work in the Indian graveyard, where Penny Ann had been raped and murdered and is now buried unobtrusively. Once, when swimming at the falls after work, Leo taunts Ralph almost to the point of suicide. He apologizes, saying he had not lived in Three Rivers when Penny Ann had died.

On the night that Dominick and Dessa fight about money, Thomas lectures Dominick about the evils of marijuana, is cruelly rebuffed (with a reference to Disney's Jiminy Cricket as an external conscience), and asks innocently about what sex is like. Dominick is also in no mood for a lecture about premarital sex, but sensitively admits it is better than a wet dream—it is a private connection with another person. He vows to make it up to Dessa. Frustrated by all the talk, Dominick tells Thomas to get a girl—and get high. Tellingly, he at first he ignores Thomas' declaration of brotherly love and concern, but when Thomas starts snoring says "I love you, too." Earlier, Dessa states that men are all alike: emotionally frigid or boastful.

The story shifts to a tape (indicated by italics) of Dominick recalling these things to Patel. She has clearly gotten his confidence and broken down his shell. Several times she offers him Kleenex when he tears up. Dominick realizes that Thomas had still "been there" in 1969, that disease had not yet controlled his brain, and regrets having squandered precious time before the voices cut Thomas off from caring about others. When Dominick and Dessa marry, Thomas is too troubled and medicated to attend, and had not reacted to a visit. When Dominick tells him about Ma's death, Thomas is philosophical and shares bizarre martyr stories. Thomas likes the idea of being an uncle when Angela is born, but never gets to see her. Dominick is most bitter about how this disease is succeeding in separating them, as he so long has tried to do. He aches to have Thomas back. He wants to hold Thomas, but the guy is now Jesus' apprentice, hunted by the FBI and KGB. Why Thomas rather than himself?



Chapter 20 finds Ray in August 1969 relenting and paying both boys' tuition. Thomas swears to make good; Dominick vows silently not to coddle Thomas or to room with him. He rooms with Leo and commutes weekends to Boston to be with Dessa. He buys a second-hand car and thinks of buying a ring. Dessa and her father are fighting about Dominick, whom they formally inspect. He tries not to buy a car from Constantine Motors and is offered a deal from Dell until Thomas sticks up for himself, demanding not to be called Dickless. Dominick cringes. Meaning to tell Thomas about rooming apart, he had declined to talk to Dell about the nickname. Dell pokes fun at Thomas about crying to Lou Clukey, and gets more aggressive as the crew members try to get him to back off. Thomas tearfully drops his pants to show that he is a man, humiliating Dominick.

The story turns to payback and leveraging power. Dell gives Thomas and Ralph the worst job in the swamp but still Dominick cannot speak up but goes to work, imagining swiping Dell's and Ray's throats with his scythe. Riding home, Ralph threatens Dell, who demands that none of them talk about today's incident to anyone. Otherwise, he reports their dope-smoking. Thomas quits and Dominick walks the opposite direction. When he gets home, Thomas is upset about his new roommate. He and Ma are shocked to hear about Thomas rooming with Leo. Thomas panics, turns sarcastic about Dessa, calls Dominick a traitor, and refuses to make up. He is "Thomas Dirt," to be trod upon.

Dominick rides his bike to the beach, imagining Dessa. She is working. He waits in her car, thinking about being free of Thomas. Dessa gets off work at 2 AM. They have not had sex in two weeks. Her mother has found her birth control pills and her father has fought with her about selling herself short. She deserves someone rich, not a teacher. She gets disrespectful and now they are not speaking. Dessa hates her father. She has no interest in sex as she rants on about her father's shallowness. She is tired and unconcerned about his long bike ride. Angry at everything that has happened that day, he forces himself on Dessa, and she declares that she has been raped. When she offers to drive him home, he hitchhikes indignantly. She drives off with his bike in the trunk. He arrives home to a note from Thomas, talking about the Holy Ghost stealing his sleep every night. Dominick cannot sleep until dawn.



# Chapters 21-24

## Chapters 21-24 Summary

Chapter 21 continues in 1969, with Dominick waking up guilty. In Ma and Ray's room, phoning Dessa, who does not answer, his memories are sparked by photographs and mementos. Thomas ignores his attempts at making peace, but he says that Dessa has called. Dominick is sick of Thomas' game, and is torn between hitting Thomas and comforting him. Smiling serenely, Thomas tells Dominick, "You are me." Chapter 22 continues. Leo picks up Dominick to go fishing, suggesting that they buy marijuana from Ralph and sell it on campus, and driving him to look at Dell's used car. Dell lowers his price only when Leo threatens to say that he and Ralph, who lives there, are gay. At the trestle bridge they mellow on wine and dope. Their hypothetical talk about having sex with men is interrupted by the police.

Chapter 23 follows the police interrogation, with Capt. Balchunas first building rapport and then seeking confirmation of Leo's testimony, which implicates Ralph as a homosexual drug dealer. Dominick maintains that he does not "hang out" with Dell, but has gone there, once, to buy a car. Dominick bristles when Thomas is mentioned, twisted out of context, and grows steadily angrier at Leo and louder with Balchunas. Released after midnight, Dominick and Leo drive around in hostile silence followed by Leo's confession to combining truth and bullshit to survive. They fight and Dominick walks home, past his house, to take a swim. He feels as much a bully as Ray. On tape, Dominick admits this to Patel, who notes references to "sin." She asks him not to disown his insights and tells the legend of Bhagirath, who reroutes the Ganges River to wash away his ancestors' sins. By recalling the past, Dominick may yet forgive himself.

Chapter 24 continues in 1969. Dominick and Dessa make up. Angie goes out with Thomas until he gets too weird, and then begins her life with Leo. Dell and his wife are arrested for child pornography, with Ralph an underage model. Dominick and Leo both draw "safe" draft numbers, while Thomas is sure to be inducted unless he improves his grades. He drops out, fails the psychiatric part of the draft physical, stops eating, bathing, and talking, tells Dominick about voices in his head, and that night goes to psychiatric lockup for the first time. Dominick dreams about him being killed in Vietnam.

## Chapters 21-24 Analysis

Chapter 21 shows Dominick the afternoon after raping Dessa, feeling guilty and wanting to make amends. He is also troubled by Thomas' recent bizarre behavior and particularly his obscure note. He wanders into his parents' bedroom to phone Dessa, cringing at how shabby it is compared to her parents'. He is torn between the reality of his unfitness for her and anger at her father's arrogance. Dessa does not answer. Objects in the room spark old memories and suggest new attitudes. Ma's "holy-roller" painting brings him back to the bus and how Ma had waited for Jesus to rescue her





from the crazy guy. Dominick segues to a professor talking about religion as "the opiate of the people" and how Dominick makes a point of not going to Mass, saddening Ma and angering Ray. Thomas, of course, goes every Sunday, which seems a bit odd, given Thomas' Fundamentalist, apocalyptic views. An art professor, whom Dominick believes might have been coming onto him, has helped him believe that God is dead. He imagines how Ma's painting would shock her and her "patron saint," Jackson Pollock's aesthetic senses.

The stripped, stained bed makes Dominick think about sex. He wonders if passive Ma conceives them during a rape and shudders at the thought of Ma having sex at all. He recalls passing on to Thomas how it is done, as soon as he learns. Even in elementary school, Dominick had known that the world is a bad place, but Thomas had not. Seeing Ma's music box, Dominick recalls Thomas mentioning wanting to save up to buy it, but Dominick, having shoveled snow all winter, has ready cash and beats him to it; Dominick has played dirty tricks on his twin but also saved him often enough. Framed photographs spark memories. The largest is of Papa. Ma never answers Dominick's questions about that apparent son of a bitch. Ray's orderly side of the room communicates "no trespassing." He recalls being forced to march for hours, up and down stairs as penance for losing Ray's shoe horn.

Leo, not Dessa, phones and they arrange to go fishing. Meanwhile, Dominick tries to make up with Thomas, who sits silently, watching an old Tarzan movie. Its stereotypical plot is woven into the narrative. Dominick and Thomas have always debated whether Johnny Weissmuller or Lex Barker is the best Tarzan, and Dominick fantasizes about Barker being their real father. Imagine the Ape Man swooping down on a vine to Ma.

Two things break Thomas' silence: racist World War II-era songs and mention of Dessa. Thomas reveals that they have talked by phone, she believing that he is Dominick, so he knows about the rape. She is going to drop off the bicycle tomorrow. She sounds nice. Dominick is relieved. As Dominick presses the roommate situation, Thomas laughs at the idea that it is for his benefit and demands that Dominick stop playing "Mr. Friendly Brother," because he has known about the work crew's plot all summer. He sings loudly while maniacally shredding the new TV Guide (which will send Ray into a rage). They wrestle and fight. Dominick wins. They clean up the mess, and Thomas resumes his silence. Dominick is sick of Thomas' game, whatever it is. He is torn between hitting Thomas and comforting him. Smiling serenely, Thomas tells Dominick, "You are me."

Chapter 22 continues with Leo picking up Dominick and suggesting that they buy a few pounds of marijuana from Ralph, smoke some and sell most on campus. Facing a tough semester, Dominick declines. They head to Dell's to look at the car, talking about Leo's auditions and the problems caused by the change in roommates, Thomas' quitting the job. Leo returns to investing in dope. They find Dell's run-down house in a minority neighborhood. The car looks beat-up but Dominick is desperate for wheels. When they knock, Ralph answers, flustered, and flees. When Leo deduces that Ralph and Dell are homosexual lovers, Dominick flees. As they look at the car, Dell admits that Ralph lives with them, taken in by his bleeding-heart wife after his mother abandons him. Leo



refuses to lower his price until Leo extorts him about being gay. Although he has a car for \$250, Dominick is upset.

At the trestle bridge they mellow on wine and strong dope and Leo talks hypothetically about having sex with men. Dominick is simply glad to be out of the house and phone. Leo insists that being a theater major makes him an expert on homosexuals, although he has never been tempted. A professor kisses him, but does not push further. Dominick recalls Thomas being hit on while hitchhiking, but the telling sounds like it happens to him. He feels like Dessa had the night before. The story is interrupted by the police.

Chapter 23 continues with the arrestees' interrogation. Officers Avery and Overcash have physical evidence. Dominick fears that his teaching career is doomed and he will die in Vietnam. Leo, "Mr. Nonchalance," wants to do the talking, but when his turn has finished looks panicky. The lion's share of the chapter consists of Capt. Balchunas asking questions with the arresting officers serving as "good cop" to his "bad cop," once he gets past the rapport-building pleasantries. He talks Dominick out of getting a lawyer, as this will only complicate matters. They are dealing with a simple lapse in judgment, and Balchunas hopes that Dominick will be as candid as Leon. He does not to arrest Dominick and Leo because they are not important enough. They want to know about Ralph.

Dominick blurts out the tragic Drinkwater family history but insists that they got from Ralph only 2-3 joints. He insists that they were at Dell's to buy a car and believes that Ralph has given—not sold—the joints to Leo as he had shared with co-workers maybe 7-8 that summer. Leo has mentioned someone named Roland as Ralph's possible supplier. Dominick has never heard any such thing but also has no reason to protect Ralph. Leo has also suggested that Ralph is homosexual and has "something funny going on" with Dell. Balchunas intimates that Dominick might be selling himself to Ralph. Wondering what kind of story Leo has been telling, Dominick denies this vehemently and again demands a lawyer.

The police placate him. This will draw out the investigation. He does not need a lawyer, since he is not under arrest. They need simply to iron out discrepancies with Leo's story, particularly Roland. Leo has told him: Ralph grows the plants somewhere. Balchunas continues trying to tie Dominick into Ralph's life, particularly his "radical literature" before involving Thomas. Dominick charges that he is jumping to wrong conclusions and tries to explain the summer-long harassment. Dominick grows ever angrier at Leo, and Balchunas changes, deciding to get tough with this arrogant "little twerp" who is wasting their time. He is prepared to release the cooperative Leo. It is a key psychological moment. Dominick sticks to his story and resists the temptation to tell them about Leo's plans to sell at college. He admits that anything is possible, but he is not privy to any plans. When they push Dominick to decide whether the "maybe" plan is yes or no, in order to cut the interrogation short, he says "yes."

Dominick and Leo are released after midnight. They drive around in silence until Dominick demands to know what Leo has told the police. This portion of the chapter provides a summary of the combination of truth and bullshit that Leo has used as a self-





protecting smoke screen. He maintains that it has also saved Dominick. Leo has no problem with "bagging" Ralph and Dell, knowing that the homophobic police will follow that trail. Dominick appreciates being free but hates the idea of the survival of the fittest. He lets Leo worry a while about whether he blames the selling plan on him before declaring that he does not bag his friends. Leo tells him that Roland is his great-uncle from New York, a false lead, which Dominick worries could cause trouble later, because he has admitted perhaps to having heard of him.

The action grows dramatic as Dominick goads Leo about his kissing professor, throws his eight-track tapes out the window, and starts choking and punching him. Leo's cries sound like Dessa's in the parking lot. Leo leaves Dominick to walk and think for hours. He cannot bear to enter his house, but goes for a swim in Rosemark's Pond. This fails to cleanse him of his sins. He feels as much a bully as Ray. Dominick has clearly told all this to Patel, for the chapter concludes with a tape recording of him talking about his guilt, including seeing Ralph working as a janitor at Hatch, an example of how minorities are kept down. When Patel notes that he has twice used the word "sin" in this session, Dominick gets angry, vents about his daughter, and reiterates that he has given up on God. Patel tells the Hindu legend of Bhagirath, who reroutes the Ganges River from the feet of Brahma the Creator to those of Shiva the Destroyer, to wash away his ancestors' sins. By recalling the past, Dominick may yet forgive himself.

Chapter 24 again looks back to Dominick making up with Dessa and quitting his job. Leo has also quit, discourteously. Dominick shakes hands with Ralph on the way out of the manager's office. Dessa and Angie visit the Birdseys and wild Angie flirts with Thomas, who is then acting normally, and they begin dating. As school starts, Dominick and Leo ignore what has happened and get caught up in dorm life. Angie spends weekends with Thomas, angering her father, and tells Dessa that they are in love and she is pregnant. Dominick confronts his twin, who buys a book about martyrs and makes her read gory stories to him while he masturbates. She breaks up and tells everyone that he is weird. Angie begins going out with Leo and, amazingly, they remain together.

In November comes news that Dell and his wife are arrested for child pornography, when Ralph turns them in. They had been filming him since his sister's murder at age ten. On 1 Dec. 1969, the dorm watches the draft lottery broadcast on television, gathering around a keg of beer. Vietnam has no sense of purpose like World War II. Leo draws No 266 and Dominick No. 305; anything over 120 is considered safe. Thomas, born before midnight on 31 Dec., draws No. 100; if he flunks out of school he will be inducted. Thomas notes next day that Dominick always has the luck. At exam time, Thomas drops out and moves home, a nervous wreck. He ruins Christmas for the family and the New Years/birthday celebrations. Ray is angry, having Thomas home and on his reverse schedule but doing nothing. Thomas will not see a doctor as Ma pleads and prays.

In March, Ray drives Thomas to his draft physical, hoping the Army will toughen him up, but Thomas fails the psychiatric examination. Thomas stops eating, bathing, and talking—but when he does talk it is senseless worry about the Russians. Ma finds mysterious



traces of blood in the bathroom sink. Worried sick, she gets Dominick to talk to him. The stories that Thomas tells about competing voices in his head are fearful, giving him headaches. Incidentally, he is fairly sure that Bp. Fulton J. Sheen of television fame is their real father. He claims to have broken up with Angie to keep her out of danger. That night, Thomas goes to psychiatric lockup for the first time and Dominick dreams of being in Vietnam with Ralph and Thomas and seeing a sniper blow Thomas' brains out. Dominick never forgets that dream.



# Chapters 25-28

## Chapters 25-28 Summary

In Chapter 25 Dominick visits Sheffer to "brainstorm" about the PSRB meeting, evades Patel's question about skipping an appointment, and begs Ralph, a janitor at Hatch, to phone him if he sees Thomas being abused. Dominick is relieved to watch Thomas briefly in the recreation yard. Sheffer talks about downsizing mental health facilities and warns that Dominick may have to care for Thomas personally. Dominick needs to calm down before the hearing and stop talking about Hatch as a hellhole.

Chapter 26 examines the eve of Thomas' hearing, a harried day for Dominick complicated by his finding a home pregnancy test. Sheffer announces that he is cleared to see Thomas, but fears that the hearing will go badly. Patel is abstaining from judgment. When they see Thomas, he cannot focus on what he dubs "the Spanish Inquisition," and claims that he is being tortured and raped behind Sheffer and Patel's backs. Arriving home late, Dominick ignores Joy and Thad, provoking a fight. When she tells him that she is pregnant, Dominick goes for a drive (Chapter 27), which sees him wondering about fathering someone else's kid, falling asleep at the wheel, seeing Ma and Grandma Ignazia alive in a dream, and ending up down an embankment, his one arm badly bleeding. Chapter 28 finds Dominick, after being stitched up and medicated, sitting at the Constantine car lot, waiting for the insurance adjuster and thinking about things he should be doing. The insurance adjuster offers \$500 above book value. Feeling himself falling apart, Dominick takes two Tylox and phones Ray.

## Chapters 25-28 Analysis

Chapter 25 returns to the present, with Dominick visiting Sheffer, who wants to "brainstorm" about the SRB meeting, having concluded that Thomas will get no good out of another year at Hatch. Patel interrupts, asking privately about Dominick skipping yesterday's appointment and refusing to say how she will vote on Thomas' release. As Patel leaves, Ralph enters to replace a light bulb and ignores Dominick's small talk. Dominick begs that he phone if he sees Thomas being abused, and only later realizes that Ralph takes the phone number he had seemed to refuse. Ralph does, however, refuse Dominick's apology for 20 years before. Dominick sees Thomas in the recreation area, paunchier, over-medicated, non-responsive to taunting, and being ignored by the attendant, "Tex."

Sheffer returns and resumes talking about it being a long shot to get Thomas out. She talks about the problem of downsizing mental health and the possibility that Settle might close. She reminds Dominick of Thomas' failures living in group homes, whose funding is also endangered. The only choice might be releasing him to his family—meaning Dominick personally. She reminds him of all that will entail. Patel has told Sheffer about Joy's attitude towards being intertwined with Thomas, which Dominick takes as



infringing on doctor-patient confidentiality. He fears Joy walking out like Dessa. He also fears that Patel might vote to keep Thomas in Hatch in order to spare him, having learned his history in analysis. Sheffer insists that both are Patel's patients and that she will do right by both. Dominick needs to calm down before the SRB hearing and stop talking about Hatch as a hellhole. They are working hard to make it a good place. She admits to setting it up so Dominick could watch Thomas from afar and promises to look into how Duane—Tex—treats Thomas.

Chapter 26 examines the eve of Thomas' hearing. Dominick is harried with chores and surprised to find a home pregnancy test in the garbage. He is frustrated to have to wait in Sheffer's office; she is the "queen of the unexpected emergency." Sheffer brings his security clearance and news of a neutral vote about Thomas, male doctors against female staff, with Patel oddly abstaining. The politically-conscious SRB will do as it likes at any rate. Dominick's testimony is crucial, so he must restrain his temper. If he forced to remain at Chase, he will get good treatment and in another year will be less hounded by the media. Dominick worries about Thomas being murdered and asks if she would let her daughter come to Hatch. Dominick has always had to protect Thomas like a child and being unable to is killing him.

When they bring Thomas in he looks like a raccoon, jerking, trembling, claiming he is doing "lousy." The guard must stay. There can be no physical contact. Thomas wants river water from by the Indian cemetery to cleanse his brain. It is a rare admission of responsibility that brings tears to Dominick's eyes. The guard forbids it. Thomas wants to talk about Desert Shield, but Sheffer steers him towards the hearing—what Thomas dubs "the Spanish Inquisition"—but he cannot focus. As he quotes scripture as answers to everything, Dominick's "Sicilian temper" rises. Thomas talks about Dessa and Angela and promises to tell the judges the truth about his sacrifice to prevent Armageddon. Thomas claims that he is being tortured and raped. Nice Sheffer and Patel do not know what goes on behind their backs. Against orders, Dominick hugs Thomas.

It is after 8 PM by the time Dominick goes home, ignores Joy and Thad, and lies down. Joy picks a fight about him being rude and drinking. Threatened, Thad leaves. He dreams about Dessa giving him oral sex, but it is Joy. Dominick tells her about seeing Thomas, but she interrupts to say that she is confirmed pregnant. He is speechless.

Chapter 27 finds Dominick unable to sleep, even before chasing off Halloween vandals. He flips channels, wondering who has gotten Joy pregnant. When Joy catches him crying, he goes out for a drive, past Dessa's house, thinking about Dessa amputating him, just as Thomas does his hand. He passes the state hospital, relieved not to enter, and heads for New London. A cop asks why he is strolling the beach so late and tails him back to I-95. Passing Electric Boat, he wonders about fathering someone else's kid, hating and beating him as Ray had them. It is a new perspective. Dominick falls asleep at the wheel, dreaming about unbaptized babies trapped under the ice, as in limbo. This renews the theme of theodicy—how can God not relax his own rule and allow them into heaven? Ma appears, in a tree, holding a baby, and Grandma Ignazia under the ice, begging him for something and slipping. As Ma's cedar tree catches fire, horns awaken



Dominick, who has crossed into oncoming traffic. He veers over an embankment and slams into a cedar tree in a meadow. One hand is badly bleeding.

Chapter 28 finds Dominick, after being stitched up and medicated at the hospital, sitting by Leo's desk, waiting for his insurance guy, thinking about the things he should be doing. The car dealership is running an anti-Saddam "God Bless America" promotion, but no one is buying. Leo agrees to take Dominick to the hearing at 4 PM, but has to get back by 5:30; Dominick opts to have Ray drive. Leo suggests looking at replacement trucks. Pain builds, but Dominick resists taking more painkillers. The insurance adjuster arrives, takes Polaroids and collects evidence. Leo joins them and leeringly mentions Dominick's connection to "world famous" Joy. They chitchat about the casino being planned for the reservation and the Japanese buying up Manhattan. As Dominick is ready to take a pill, Gene Constantine drives up. When talk turns to Iraq, Dominick lashes out about "Vietnam II," realizing he is wrecking his chances of a good settlement on his truck. Leo gets Dominick to go call Ray and explains his stress to Tudesco. Feeling himself falling apart, Dominick takes two Tylox before dialing. Tudesco declares the truck totaled and will try to get \$500 above book value.



# Chapters 29-32

## Chapters 29-32 Summary

In Chapter 29, Ray shows uncommon concern for "his kid," which gives Dominick pause to think: Ray is here for him. Ray has a doctor's appointment, but offers to help Dominick paint tomorrow. Ray's rant about Halloween reminds Dominick of a time he gets Thomas in trouble, sharing candy during Mass. At the Roods', Ruth tells Dominick that it is a bad time to paint, but he removes the shutters, tearing his stitches. When Ray does not return, Dominick climbs to the third-story, and sees Henry Rood put a gun to his mouth. Dominick falls in slow motion, seeing Ma and Angela.

In Chapter 30, Dominick awakens in Shanley Memorial Hospital, suffering vivid morphine dreams. He learns about his splintered left leg and foot and endures meeting his flatulent roommate, Steve Felice. Sheffer visits, tells about Thomas hitting her and ranting at the PSRB hearing, and gives him the transcript to read. Thomas is stoic about being kept at Hatch for a year. Patel has sent a gift: Shiva, god of destruction, which brings renovation. When Joy arrives, Dominick's throat constricts. She is overjoyed by motherhood. Against his will, Dominick discloses his vasectomy, but she swears that it is his baby. Later, Thad brings a tape of Joy, ashamed and shocked, explaining her bleak childhood and admitting that the baby is Thad's. She hates herself but cherishes their two years together, is sorry to have betrayed Dominick and to lay this on him while sick, and hopes that he will not hate her. Dominick does not hate Joy. He is numb and suicidal. Clearly, there is no God. Felice's fiancée arrives: Nadra Frank, bringing Papa's manuscript.

Chapter 31 opens "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," down through his immigration from Sicily in 1901. Domenico ("Papa") is descended from great men but his life has been marred by sadness, tragedy, and now the afflictions of old age. He is bitter about having no sons. Mt. Etna kills his maternal grandparents and scars his future grandmother, Concettina Ciccina, who hears voices of souls in limbo. In 1874 she marries Giacomo Tempesta, a miner and town hero. Papa is born in 1880, followed by Pasquale and Vincenzo. Witnessing a miracle gets Papa sent to a convent school and seminary in Rome, until he must return and work for Uncle Nardo. When Giacomo dies, Papa becomes head of the family, fights with Nardo, and emigrates with his brothers in 1901. He still hears his mother's curses. Humiliated by rich passengers, Papa vows to become rich and powerful enough to spit in their faces.

Chapter 32 find Dominick heading to his first appointment with Patel in three months. Still on crutches, he needs answers. As the air war in Iraq progresses, Dominick thinks both of Papa's greed for money and power and the biblical epics that Ma used to take them to see. Thomas' prophecies seem not so crazy after all. At Hatch, Thomas' fighting spirit is gone. Before entering his session, Dominick recalls the night he nearly kills



himself. Needing to finish Papa's memoir stops him. Entering Patel's office is excruciating.

## Chapters 29-32 Analysis

Chapter 29 opens with Ray sparring playfully with Leo when picking up Dominick and grilling Dominick about insurance and demanding that he buy an American-made replacement truck. Dominick is struck by the concern that Ray shows, calling him his kid. Dominick again brushes aside Ray's offer to help paint tomorrow. Today, he has a doctor's appointment for some minor numbness in his legs. Ray is worried about being laid off. As he rants about Halloween, whose celebration he had never encouraged, and dismisses his birthday next day, he warns Dominick against taking on too much and admits that he does not keep up his end on visiting Thomas. He then segues into complaining about Ma spoiling on Thomas. Why Thomas would cut off his hand is tormenting Ray. This candor disarms Dominick.

As they drive alone, Dominick thinks that they pass Nedra Frank, jogging, but is wrong. Even if it had been, she has probably destroyed Papa's memoir. The jogger gives them the finger, sending Ray into a rant about women's liberation. The incident serves to keep Frank and Papa's story in the reader's mind.

In the parking lot of Colburn's Pharmacy, Thomas recalls trick-or-treating with Thomas and having to be in early to go to All Saints' Day Mass in the morning. Thomas had enjoyed celebrating Ray's birthday on 1 Nov., but not Dominick. Dominick always eats his candy during Mass to be impious, but Thomas gets caught, the one time he gives in, is forbidden Communion, and is walloped in the parking lot. Parishioners stare at the poor Birdseys. At home, Ray smashes Thomas' present and refuses to celebrate. Thomas never tells on Dominick, who also never confesses and carries the guilt his whole life. Dominick is tired of talking about this with Patel.

Ray drops Dominick off at the Roods, warning him not to overdo it. Ruth does not register details of Dominick's accident asks him to leave. Thinking of Thomas, Dominick cannot feel sympathy for Henry's depression. He continues removing shutters that he has no way to get home to strip, and when Ray fails to return, he tackles the third story. Frightened by a bat, an old phobia, Dominick see Henry with a gun in his mouth, and falls backward in slow motion, seeing Ma and Angela.

Lengthy Chapter 30 is set in Shanley Memorial Hospital, where Dominick awakens after midnight, days after complex surgery and morphine-induced sleep. He has dreamed vividly about hanging Thomas, who turns into a forgiving monkey. He learns how EMT's stumble upon him while responding to Ruth's emergency call about Henry. Dominick is angry that Henry gives him the evil eye just before he fires the gun, involving him in his suicide. A chatty male nurse, Miguel, keeps him company, urging him to think positive. Dominick surprises himself at Thomas' hearing. He is surprised to hear that Ray weeps while visiting his unconscious son. Dominick gets no information when he calls Three





Rivers and Ray does not answer at home. When Sheffer calls, she admits only that Thomas is remaining at Hatch and promises to visit.

Meanwhile, Dominick endures socializing with his roommate, Steve Felice. The scenes are lightened by the fact that medication for Felice's bleeding ulcer leave him constantly flatulent. Dominick half-listens to Felice's woes about layoffs at Electric Boat; Felice and Ray have enjoyed swapping stories. Felice soon turns out not to be another colorful but minor character like Manuel. Dominick worries about how long he will be laid up. While contemplating Ruth's condition and thinking that she is better off without Henry, Dominick recalls Leo telling him that his father-in-law had said the same to Dessa when she announced the divorce. Dominick and Gene had been close, so it hurt. Dominick now understands why the vasectomy had been the last straw, killing Dessa's options, and scares himself, contemplating death. The suicidal urge grows throughout this chapter.

When Dominick phones Joy, she is overjoyed and urges him to take care of himself, herself, and the baby before Thomas. This irks Dominick. When she promises to come right over, Dominick wishes that he could escape. He wonders if Thomas has been suffering for 21 years the voices that he has heard only overnight, and worries that this might not be caused by morphine but a sign of schizophrenia. When he dozes, Dominick dreams about Ray holding him in midair.

Sheffer visits, her mouth bruised by Thomas, it turns out. Dominick notices that she hides her mouth as Ma always had. Sheffer summarizes Thomas' agitation when Dominick fails to arrive and cannot be reached, and his certitude that the Syrians have kidnapped him. He knows that Dominick is hurt. Sheffer blames herself for getting into a vulnerable physical position with Thomas, allowing herself to be struck. She also admits to offending the Board by arguing that a patient's welfare must come before political considerations. Sheffer reports that the treatment team offers no recommendation, reads letters on Thomas' behalf, and pleads that Dominick's unexplained absence not be construed as indifference. The board's findings are in the transcript that she hands to Dominick to read while she goes for coffee.

In the document, Thomas is asked why he cuts off his hand. He quotes scripture and claims to be atoning for America's sins. He would obey God again if called upon. He hates being watched at Hatch, repeatedly violated, and having mail from Jimmy Carter intercepted. He lectures the Board about Bush and the CIA, and declares that the powers that hold him prisoner have not broken his spirit. The Board prompts Thomas into admit that if Jesus told him to kill someone he would. The vote to retain Thomas for twelve months is unanimous and deemed lenient, since Thomas could have gotten a three-year prison sentence. Returning to the room, Sheffer says that she had been furious but had kept silent, knowing that arguing against politics is hopeless. Thomas had been stoic, asking only about Dominick and Ray, who had wept when told the news. Before Sheffer leaves, Dominick opens Patel's gift, a statuette of Shiva, god of destruction. Dominick explains that destruction brings renovation.





Joy next visits. Dominick summarizes the decision and cannot return her "I love you." He is contemplating worst-case scenarios, which he does not share with Joy. He laughs, thinking about becoming the crybaby while Thomas is stoic. He wants to give up and drown. Having fought the temptation, Dominick declares that he knows that the baby is not his. He should have told her about the vasectomy right away. Both have lied to the other. He is damaged goods, unable to get past Angela's death. Dominick admits using Joy and not being able to fake it any more. Joy swears that it is his baby. Joy leaves while Dominick is being attended to by a new nurse, Vonette. Leo later surprisingly brings by a huge fruit basket from the Constantines and asks about Joy, but Dominick asks to sleep.

Dominick awakens to see Thad, who offers a tape recorder and leaves. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to Joy's apology, which she cannot write out and is ashamed to deliver in person. She explains her life-long desire to become television's Carol Brady, through years of constant moving, hunger, and a succession of her mother's boyfriends. She has always been afraid at home alone and hopes this baby will make her a better person. Hearing about Angela helps her understand Dominick's odd anger at the world. She wishes that she had known earlier and could have tried to help. Joy has seen Dessa and Angie and wishes they could be friends. She knows that Dominick has never stopped loving Dessa and has, therefore, held back from her.

Assuring Dominick that her feelings for him have always been real and wishes the baby were his, she admits that it is Thad's. He is bisexual. His boyfriend Aaron has kicked him out. She relates her long, sad history with Thad as he "experiments" with guys and ruins her second marriage. Dr. Grork has told her to get Thad out of her life and come clean about him with Dominick, but she could not risk it. Thad is manipulative and controlling, but she is addicted to him. Joy has let Thad watch her and Dominick make love twice. She is quitting her job and moving out before Dominick is released. She may have the baby in Anaheim, where her mother lives, and may get the guts to leave Thad, who will not be a good father, because she is determined that this baby will not endure her kind of childhood. Joy is sure that Dominick will recover and find someone worthy. She hates herself but will always remember their two years together, especially the beginning. She is sorry to have betrayed him and to have to lay this on him when he is sick. She reassures him about AIDS and HIV, because Thad and Aaron are careful. Joy is also sorry for acting jealous about Thomas. She hopes Dominick will take care of himself more and hopes he will not hate her.

Dominick does not hate Joy. He is numb. He decides to commit suicide when he gets home, without leaving a hateful mess like Henry. He cannot decide which of the weird scenarios of the day is the weirdest. Clearly, there is no God. Dominick wants to throw Thomas into the Falls and jump in after him. His steadily-embittering train of thought is interrupted by the arrival of Felice's fiancée. It is Nadra Frank, and she hands over Papa's manuscript. All of the potent themes brought up in this chapter are suspended until Papa's words are heard.

Chapter 31 reproduces Domenico Onofrio Tempesta's recollections from 8-16 July, 1949 in Nadra Frank's translation and recalls her condescending attitude towards



Papa's mixture of literary Italian and Sicilian patois and penchant for leaving some supposedly untranslatable words in the original. This is clearly affectation, for the Italian words and phrases are easily understood by readers who have not studied the language. Papa claims to be descended from great men and having lived a life marred by sadness, tragedy and, as he writes in 1949, the afflictions of old age. He is bitter about having no sons to carry on the name and dismisses his daughter—Ma—as too homely ever to marry. She is his housekeeper and nemesis. He writes his story to keep the Tempesta name alive and instruct Italian youth.

The family history is molded by eruptions of Mount Etna in 1865, 1879, and 1898. It leaves his maternal grandmother, Concettina Ciccìa, an orphan at age eight. As a child, through moths, she hears voices of dead souls that do not reach the heavenly light, begging her help. These voices return to her after raising three sons and being widowed. The boys leave her behind when they emigrate to America. Papa is conceived in 1879 just before an eruption and at age six witnesses a miracle that results in his being sent to study for the priesthood.

This vocation ends when his brother Vincenzo disgraces the family and he has to take his place, working for Uncle Nardo, whose memory he still, in 1949, curses. In school, the rich children pick on Papa, but he excels them in scholarship. He regrets not becoming a priest. He hates masonry but must obey his father and masters the art. Fights with Nardo convince him to join paternal cousins, Vitaglio and Lena Buonano in America. As they leave in 1901, Concettina curses them for leaving her to poverty. Papa never sees her again. She marries Nardo just to spite Papa and dies in 1913. He still hears her screams. The terrible voyage takes 24 days, confined to steerage. Seeing Etna in nightmares, Papa vows never to return to Sicily, but to succeed in America. Sometimes he breaks rules and goes topside for air, but is caught napping and humiliated by the rich. He vows to become rich and powerful enough to spit in their faces.

In this first installment, it is difficult to imagine why Papa keeps the manuscript so carefully hidden. Without reading it, one knows that he is a vain, domineering man. It shows the roots of Ma's meek acceptance of her fate and of Thomas' hearing of voices. Recall Dominick's vivid dream in which his grandmother is trapped under ice with babies and cries out to him.

Chapter 32 finds Dominick heading to an appointment with Patel in February, ready to endure mental pain in search of answers. He has narrowly avoided suicide, saved by wanting to read the rest of the manuscript. He knows that Papa now has a place in the therapy sessions. The air war in Iraq is going well but a ground invasion will still be needed. Dominick thinks about Papa's greed for money and power and the biblical epics that Ma used to take them to see as children. Film of burning oil wells seem enough like Armageddon, and Thomas' prophecies seem not so crazy after all. At Hatch, however, Thomas takes in CNN coverage without reaction. His fighting spirit seems as lost as his hand.



Before going into his session, Dominick recalls the night he hits rock-bottom—the third night after leaving the hospital, when all the well-wishers finally leave him alone. He is restless, feels powerless and invaded by Thad having watched him make love with Joy. He avoids the answering machine, dreading to hear the voice of Rood, his guide into the "black hole." Since early in his hospital stay, Dominick has been planning to leave this evil world, and has settled on an overdose on Percoset and Scotch. He wonders if he should leave a note—but to whom? He thinks about how much more Ralph has suffered. Standing before the bathroom mirror, he sees Thomas, Ma, and Papa in his face and regrets not finishing reading the long-lost memoir. He pours the capsules down the drain, goes back to bed, and phones Leo. Returning to the present, Dominick climbs the stairs to Patel's office, careful not to slip and set back his recovery. Kids race past him. Entering after three months away is excruciating.



# Chapters 33-36

## Chapters 33-36 Summary

Chapter 33 returns to the memoir, showing how from the brothers' arrival in New York, Vincenzo is trouble. They move to Three Rivers, CT, to work in a textile mill. Papa does the work of two and in 1916 becomes the first Italian boss. Vincenzo is fired, works as a greengrocer, attracting female customers. When he gets a young Irish girl pregnant, Msgr. McNulty demands that Papa deal with him. Unable to shame Vincenzo, Papa disowns him. When Vincenzo is killed by Sgt. O'Meara for having sex with his wife, Papa pays for the funeral but refuses to attend.

Chapter 34 picks up Dominick's session with Patel. Expecting commitment, she accepts him provisionally. Dominick has been reading the Book of Job and is also drawn to Cain and Abel. He has skimmed two of the books that Patel recommends and started reading Papa's story. He observes that Papa sees himself as "God's chosen," which makes him wonder about Thomas. Patel is struck by two words that Dominick repeats: grandiose and autopsy. She pushes him to think about what cadaver they are examining, asks if he thinks of himself as grandiose, and reminds him of his reference to Job's testing. Dominick bristles, wanting to talk not about books but Rood's face in the window, Joy lying about her pregnancy, and his near suicide. He studies Patel as she listens to Joy's taped confession. Afterwards, Patel says that everyone has a "museum of pain," a "sanctuary of justifiable indignation." She spells out the various exhibits in this metaphorical museum and urges him to continue listening to Papa's message.

Chapter 35 resumes Papa's story. Unable to sleep for two nights, he weeps over Pasquale being fired from the mill, taking up roofing, and buying an exotic monkey, Filippa, to whom he grows so attached that people call Papa the "monkey's uncle." Papa plans to separate them by marrying a pair of newly-arrived Sicilian virgins and works with Pasquale to build a palace. The two priests lecture Papa about ignoring Sunday Mass, and when McNulty mentions monkey gossip, Papa sends them away with profanity. McNulty curses the house, Pasquale falls from the roof and dies, and Papa vows never to go to church while McNulty remains. When Filippa bites Papa, he drowns her, despite his promise to Pasquale.

Chapter 36 opens with Dominick upset over Papa drowning the monkey for expediency's sake. He considers burning the memoir. He and Thomas resemble Papa in photographs, and he in failing to keep his promise. Patel argues that he is too hard on himself, trying to control the uncontrollable, and that he might share Papa's delusions of grandeur. He must accept limitations to heal. Patel assures him that he and Thomas are easily distinguishable and suggests that Thomas' gentleness and sweetness make it easier for Ma to love him. Dominick grows uneasy as she describes "stoic denial" gotten from mothers destroying male patients. Movies like Die Hard 2 kill off sensitivity. Patel suggests that Dominick examine if and how he has done this and not to abandon reading the memoir. Arriving home, Dominick recalls that only knowing he will care for



Thomas allows Ma to die. Patel has not yet figured out that he both loves and hates Ma. She had loved them both, but Thomas more, because of the traits in Thomas that Ray and Dominick hate. It hurts.

## Chapters 33-36 Analysis

Chapter 33 returns to the memoir, covering entries from 20-26 July, 1949. The SS Napolitano reaches New York and the Statue of Liberty makes Papa's heart race, but Vincenzo is irreverent and gets backhanded for it. They live in Brooklyn with their cousins and five brats. Papa cannot get work as a mason and becomes a night janitor at the New York Public Library. He practices his English. His brothers grow wild. All three answer an ad from the American Woolen Textile Company of Three Rivers, CT, and are hired as dyers. The ad specifies that Italians are welcome to apply; many industries at the time discriminate against them. Papa accurately records many racial epithets but oddly gives no indication that he understands them. Nabby Drinkwater is briefly mentioned as Papa's lazy partner, introducing the root of the tragic family. Trusting only Italians, Papa asks to have one of his brothers reassigned, revealing Papa's own prejudice. The bosses insult him and say he can work alone, meeting the two-man quota. Papa is determined not to be broken and within a week succeeds. Laughter behind his back ends. He rises in rank and in 1916 succeeds Bryce as foreman. It is a great day for Italy!

On 24 July, Papa complains to his journal about his daughter, "Signorina Stupid-Head," who urges him to nap instead of bringing an onion poultice to fight his cold. This not only shows his attitude towards his own child, but suggests his end may be coming. The story resumes. Now on salary, Papa augments his income with masonry jobs. Vincenzo is fired, but succeeds as a greengrocer at Hurok's Market, attracting female customers. When he gets a young Irish girl pregnant, Msgr. McNulty gives Papa a lecture about "Eye-talians" being oversexed and wants him to correct his brother, with scrawny Fr. Guglielmo along for moral support. As a former seminarian, Papa knows about priests' wandering hands and silently resents the sanctimony. Unable to shame Vincenzo or to strike him, Papa disowns him. Soon afterwards, Sgt. O'Meara catches Vincenzo having sex with his wife, shoots him in the groin. He dies nine days later. O'Meara is cleared and becomes a hero. Papa pays for the funeral but refuses to attend. He writes to inform his mother, but learns that she has died of malaria.

Chapter 34 picks up Dominick's first session with Patel after a three month break. He had skipped several sessions before being injured. She does not want to accept him back as a patient without seeing that he is committed to therapy. Dominick does not like the idea of four trial sessions. Dominick talks about reading his confirmation Bible, which he has accidentally found. He identifies with Job, to whom "shit happens." He is also obviously drawn to Cain and Abel, the first murderer and murder victim, brothers, one of whom gets all the credit as a "Mr. Goody Two-shoes."

Dominick mentions that Dessa has gotten him the titles that Patel recommends and that she and Ray have both been helpful since Ray is laid off at Christmas. Patel observes



that Ray has risen above his past failures towards the boys. Dominick has skimmed two of the books and thinks fairy tales should just be fairy tales. Mentioning that he has started reading Papa's story, Dominick again wonders if Angelo Nardi is his true father, but withholds this from Patel. Explaining how the memoir comes to be produced and how he had wanted to translate it for Ma, Dominick observes that Papa comes off as a "pompous asshole." He wonders why Ma had wanted Dominick in particular to read the story. He is glad that Ma never read it, because of the nasty things that her father, whom she worshiped, includes about her. Dominick sees in Papa's self-image as "God's chosen" a pre-figurement of Thomas. He also sees Papa working with a Drinkwater as had he and Thomas one summer—an interesting coincidence.

Patel is struck by the word "grandiose," which Dominick has in an earlier session applied to Thomas' belief in being chosen by God. This bears further examination. She explains that she is watching for such keywords as they talk. She asks about his repeated use of the metaphor "autopsy" for therapy sessions, and pushes him to think about what cadaver they are examining. When she asks if he thinks of himself as grandiose, Dominick bristles. He wants to talk not about books but Rood's face in the window, Joy lying about her pregnancy, and his near suicide. He claims to have weathered "the worst despair," and has begun thinking that there might be a world beyond.

Dominick studies Patel as she listens to Joy's taped confession. Afterwards, Patel acknowledges the betrayal but believes that Joy is struggling to become a better person. Dominick is most annoyed by the eavesdropping. Everyone, Patel then explains, has a "museum of pain," a "sanctuary of justifiable indignation." Some are more meticulous about pain and injustice than others, and Dominick is quite meticulous. She spells out the various exhibits in this metaphorical museum. Dominick remains polite but resistant for the rest of the session. She urges him to continue listening to Papa's message to him. Dominick drives away angry at the sarcasm in "The Dominick Birdsey Museum of Misery," and enjoys throwing Joy's cassette out the window.

Chapter 35 resumes Papa's pride-filled story, written 28 July-3 August, 1949. Parenthetical notes on his health show it declining rapidly. Writing this section requires him to break the Sicilian code of silence (*omertà*) to talk of Pasquale's shameful behavior and tragic death. Pasquale is not intelligent or lustful, but a hard worker, big eater, and private. He had been a happy, mischievous boy until his best friend, Filippo, dies in the same mining accident as Giacomo. Drinkwater gets Pasquale fired from the mill, getting him fired for drinking. Pasquale becomes a roofer and buys an exotic monkey that he names Filippa and comforts when her baby is stillborn. Pasquale and Filippa, who accompanies him everywhere, become the butt of crude jokes, and when Papa is called the "monkey's uncle," he moves to separate them subtly, not daring another disastrous head-on collision as with Vincenzo.

Rather than kill the monkey, Papa moves to get wives for himself and Pasquale and to build a "palace" together, on the lot that he buys on Hollyhock Ave. for \$340—becoming the first Italian to own property in Three Rivers. He writes to Brooklyn for Sicilian virgins, good cooks and housekeepers, dignified, devout, and humble, with large dowries. Papa





wants the elder, Prospertine, age 18; Ignazia is 17. Papa paints a glorious picture of domestic bliss—sans Filippa. Pasquale refuses, but Papa is sure that Ignazia will awaken his "male urges" and bring him to his senses. The girls' half-brothers urge hurrying the marriages before they Americanize and take jobs. Seeing no reason to hurry, Papa replies that they should build up their dowries. In the spring of 1915, the brothers resume construction.

Papa weeps to recall 12 Oct. 1915, when the two priests approach to lecture him about ignoring Sunday Mass. As he is now a prominent man, this encourages other Italians to sin likewise. Papa tries to be respectful, but refuses to return until the house is finished. He listens about pride and possessions, but when Msgr. McNulty mentions gossip about the monkey, he throws them off his property with profanity. McNulty curses the house, stalking away. Papa orders Pasquale to stop laughing at the serious matter of a priest's curse and throws a glob of cement at him. This frightens the monkey and starts a series of mishaps that end with Pasquale falling to his death. His last wish is that Papa care for Filippa. Out of respect for Papa, all of the Italians in Three Rivers attend the wake and funeral Mass, at which McNulty shows disdain. Papa vows never to go to church while McNulty is there. People decide that Filippa has the evil eye and children torment her. When Filippa bites Papa, he drowns her, despite his promise to Pasquale.

Chapter 36 describes a fruitful appointment with Patel. Dominick is upset over Papa drowning the monkey for expediency's sake and considers burning the upsetting memoir. They talk about how he resembles Papa not only physically (he tells her of Ma rescuing the album) but also in failing to keep a promise. Patel argues that Dominick has worked tirelessly on Thomas' behalf, but he sees only that Thomas is caged for a year, minimum. Patel reminds him that taking responsibility for circumstances beyond his control is counterproductive. His failure to appear at the hearing probably has little effect, despite what he may think. He does not agree that his dying mother would not want him to sacrifice his own well-being.

Patel considers Dominick's efforts a Papa-like delusion of grandeur, which she wants to explore. She challenges him to order the river at which he often gazes to reverse itself, and concludes that he must accept all of his limitations in order to be healed. Unsure about whether he wants to carry out his morphine dream and destroy Thomas, Dominick wails. Recovered, Dominick talks about being humiliated by his beloved brother, having to defend him while wanting to run away. Ma expects him to keep Thomas safe. Seeing a shrink now means that he, the strong twin, needs fixing. He frequently needs to look down to be sure he has both hands and wants to tattoo himself so people will not stare at him as though he were "the other one." Patel assures him that they are quite distinguishable by his hard work.

When Dominick grows nervous about all the notes that Patel has been jotting, she says that she is listing his fears: 1) becoming schizophrenic, 2) not being seen as a separate person, and 3) having too few distinctions between Thomas and himself. She points out that it is Thomas' gentleness and sweetness that make it easier for Ma to love him, and suggests that Dominick is the more masculine brother and Thomas more feminine. Dominick grows uneasy. She is not suggesting that Thomas is gay, but that Thomas'



vulnerability frightens him. He therefore acts tough. She often sees "stoic denial" gotten from mothers destroying male patients. Movies like *Die Hard 2*, which her grandson demands to see, help kill off sensitivity. This sharing is a human moment, which she says has also been professionally useful.

Ending the session, Patel suggests that Dominick examine if and how he has done this and not to abandon reading the memoir. It is a precious gift. Life is a river, beginning in the womb. On the way out, Dominick passes another "tough-guy" patient, a fellow "walking wounded," and, driving home, notices the violence in songs on the radio. At home, Dominick recalls the morning of Ma's death and how offering his promise allows her to let go and die. He has been over this earlier, but with less comprehension. Dominick knows that Patel has not yet figured out that he both loves and hates Ma—something that is just dawning on him. He sees that she had played girl-stuff with Thomas out of loneliness and sent Dominick to eat a special snack, claiming that it would just bore him. Ma had loved them both, but Thomas more, because of the traits in Thomas that Ray and Dominick hate. It hurts.





# Chapters 37-40

## Chapters 37-40 Summary

Chapter 37 returns to the memoir. Papa proudly moves into his house in 1916, goes to Brooklyn for Easter, and discovers that Prosperine looks like a monkey. When he sees high-strung, beautiful Ignazia, he refuses to be rejected. They marry in Brooklyn in a civil ceremony and take Prosperine home with them to serve as maid. Ignazia does not bleed after sex but swears that she is a virgin. When he beats her anyway, as a lesson, Prosperine threatens to castrate him if he ever hurts her again. Ignazia is not pleased to find herself pregnant, but takes whatever comes. Papa refuses to abandon work to attend his son's birth or to spend money on a doctor. At dawn, he finds Dr. Yates at work. His son is stillborn, but Papa baptizes him. A second baby emerges alive, a red-headed girl with a harelip—surely fathered by the Irishman that she had wanted to marry. He turns over the body to the coroner reluctantly, refuses to hold the daughter, whom Ignazia names after his mother, and refuses to let the priest bury his son or baptize the bastard.

Chapter 38 finds Dominick on a stormy morning reading the headlines about a changing world and thinking about the hateful things that Papa does to Ignazia and Ma. He wonders why Papa had gone to the trouble of making this document and why Ignazia has appeared to him in a dream. Reading the memoir confuses Dominick and makes him feel worse. Returning to the newspaper, he sees Ralph dancing in Indian dress as Swift Wolf, the tribal pipe-keeper, and is glad for him and his soon-to-be-wealthy tribe. Ralph then phones, warning him, anonymously, to have Thomas tested for HIV.

Chapter 39 resumes the memoir, as Prosperine tells about her teenage years in Pescara. She and her plain sisters are friends with beautiful Violetta D'Annunzio. They enjoy taunting Ciccolina, the deformed butcher woman, said to be a witch. Violetta is chosen to crown the statue of the Virgin Mary at the annual village parade, but falls from the ladder, smitten by the visiting artist Gallante Selvi, who hires Prosperine to care for his aged godmother—Ciccolina—and makes Violetta his model for a stained glass project. They become lovers and Violetta grows haughty. As Ciccolina treats Prosperine as a daughter, rumors spread that Prosperine has learned the "evil eye." Prosperine is shocked to see Ciccolina cleave a rabbit in half and watch each become whole. She later learns only to diagnose and cure the evil eye, but not how to inflict it.

Selvi's beating Violetta brings her and Prosperine together again. The evil eye fails to destroy Selvi, but seeing how a goat eating scraps of glass and wire dies, Prosperine powders these and adds it to Selvi's food and drink. He dies in agony. The women are nearly free when the doctor who pronounces Selvi dead of appendicitis eats poisoned remnants and his illness turns him suspicious. The women flee ahead of the police and settle in Sicily. A lawyer friend suggests going to America and provides fake documents. Prosperine emigrates as a Tucci while Violetta stays in Palermo and marries the lawyer. When Papa claims that Violetta is Ignazia, Prosperine denies it.



Chapter 40 returns to Sheffer's office, where Dominick demands that Thomas be independently tested for HIV; otherwise, he will go to the media. Dr. Richard Hume turns down the request but relents, shortly after Dominick mentions evidence of having been "Rodney Kinged" at Hatch. Next day, Sheffer tells him about a hushed-up assault on orderly Duane Taylor for raping young inmates and the likelihood that a quarter of the patients are HIV positive. Dr. Yup examines Thomas and finds evidence of rectal penetration, but blood tests come up negative. Thomas' testimony about Taylor and accomplice Edward Morrison is self-contradictory. Ralph slips Dominick a confidential memo from Hume to Dr. Hervé Garcia, suggesting that the public will approve of AIDS "weeding" the mental health population. Leo in his Armani suit impersonates a lawyer, demanding justice from Hume.

The PSRB transfers Thomas to the custody of his family. All agree that he should not stay with Dominick. Thomas wants to visit the Falls, a "holy place," fails to react to mention of Papa's life story, and acts paranoid at McDonald's. Pending an opening at Middletown Hospital, Dominick checks Thomas into Hope House, and at 2 AM learns that he has disappeared. Dominick knows that Thomas is dead. The drowning is ruled accidental. Dominick and Ray drink Scotch, as when Ma dies, and talk candidly. In their old room, Dominick dreams of the fates being reversed and in the morning vividly recalls at age four having to nap while Ma nurses Thomas through scarlet fever. The sickness helps young Dominick realize that they are not the same person and he can save himself.

## Chapters 37-40 Analysis

Chapter 37 returns to memoir entries for 5-12 August, 1949. It is filled with details of how Italian families negotiate a marriage. He discovers that his intended, Prosperine, is short, flat-chested, resembles Filippa, and is over 30. He rejects her, thinking that his dead brothers are haunting him. There is great furor and almost fighting before Papa sees Ignazia. She, however, has picked up the American notion of marrying for love, and she has chosen Padraic McGannon. She rejects Papa's proposal vehemently, which only makes him more determined and he continues the negotiations with Rocco, who insists he also take Prosperine as a general servant. Ignazia's tantrums are colorfully if somewhat stereotypically told. Ultimately, Rocco refuses the proposal, but Papa persists, even taking the next train back from New London, CT, risking his good-paying job. Papa describes himself as a mad man, refusing to be turned away and offers to pay for Ignazia rather than take a dowry. He agrees to take Prosperine as a housemaid. Both women glare.

Papa and Ignazia marry in a civil ceremony and ride the train to Connecticut, he convincing himself that Ignazia will learn to love him. He will get Prosperine a mill job to bring in some money to the house. Ignazia is not impressed by the house or the Sicilian garden. She turns from him in bed, in tears. She does not bleed but swears that she is a virgin. He believes her but beats her to teach her a lesson about treachery. In the morning, Prosperine orders him at knife-point never to hurt Ignazia again or be castrated. Back at work, everyone congratulates and teases the newlywed. Fear of



Prosperine keeps him from sleeping. He wonders how so special a person can suffer like this. Ignazia scowls at him except when asleep. She is not pleased to find herself pregnant, but takes whatever comes. She is furious when Papa takes her to have the child's sex predicted, and then stays to play cards. The players talk about needing to break women's spirits, like horses. Papa portrays himself at his lowest while describing this cultural oddity. Papa eventually finds Ignazia at home, soaking her feet and sobbing, while Prosperine menaces him while chopping vegetables. He openly calls her Monkey.

On 2 December, 1916, while in charge of a major dying project, Papa refuses to abandon work to attend his son's birth or to summon an expensive doctor. He throws Prosperine out, telling her to act as midwife. She quotes a proverb, "You'll save a penny and lose your wife!" The "Top Wop" (supposedly said affectionately) goes home at dawn, congratulated on his fine work, but finds Dr. Yates there, working on Ignazia. Expelled from the kitchen, Papa waits, listening to the screams and then silence. Handed a stillborn boy, Papa baptizes him, wondering about the baby's eternal fate and his own. A second baby is born alive, a red-headed girl with a hair lip—obviously fathered by the Irishman. The doctor needs to take the corpse to the coroner, but Papa will not give him up. He warns that another pregnancy could kill Ignazia; Papa does not respond to whether he wants her "fixed" or to give up sex.

Papa weeps only in his garden, away from the women. Baxter from the mill comes with Dr. Yates, the coroner, and a policeman to claim the body. The mill wants to avoid newspaper stories, he explains. Papa hands the body to Signora Tusia, the faithful midwife.

At dusk, a short and unexpected scene occurs. Prosperine brings Papa farina and wishes that the girl had died instead, predicting a hard life for her, female and with a rabbit's lip. He gets dressed and goes to work. Saturday morning, Papa refuses to hold the baby. They name her Concettina, after his mother. He refuses to let the priest bury his son or baptize his daughter, because (he says to himself) she is "made from sin." He sleeps all day and late at night Prosperine tells him her story.

Brief Chapter 38 pauses the action before introducing a new story line, allowing Dominick to reflect on the changing state of the world, the things he has been reading in the memoir, and fragmentary memories about his grandmother, Nonna. The headlines talk of the fall of the "Evil Empire" of the Soviets, against whom Ray's submarines had been built and whom children had been taught to "duck and cover." The Berlin Wall has fallen, the Ayatollah is dead, and Saddam Hussein has been driven into his bunker. All of the bad guys—except the one that Dominick sees in the mirror—are gone. Rodney King is in the paper, but with the cable knocked out, Dominick does not have to see the disturbing video yet again.

He thinks about Papa hitting Ignazia to show who is boss in his house and how Prosperine's knife balances the power. He wonders if Ma ever knows that she is a twin and thinks about the two gravestones, located far apart, his grandiose and hers tiny, and why Papa had gone to the trouble of making this document—surely not to guide



Italian youth, as claimed. Perhaps it had been to "stroke his ego," to exonerate himself. Ma used to take her twins to decorate Papa's grave but never mentioned Nonna's. He sees again the dream about his drowned grandmother beneath the ice with the limbo babies and wonder why she appears to him. Ma has told him only that she drowns in Rosemark's Pond, offering no detail.

Reading the memoir confuses Dominick and makes him feel worse. He hates the old man for mistreating his wife and daughter and refusing to go to a doctor while writing. Dominick forces himself to stop thinking and, returning to the newspaper, is glad that the Wequonnocs are starting construction on their casino. A picture shows Ralph dancing in full Indian dress. He will probably become a millionaire and tell Hatch to shove their job. Life has thrown its worst at Ralph, but there he is dancing and praying to his ancestors. The paper identifies him as Swift Wolf, the tribal pipe-keeper. Dominick dozes all day and is awakened by a call from Ralph, warning him anonymously to have Thomas tested for HIV.

Chapter 39 returns to Papa's memoir, to entries written in one sitting on 12 August, 1949. In it, Papa recalls pouring glass after glass of chianti for the terrible Monkey as she tells her tale her way—gradually and from the start. The long narrative is broken regularly by Papa commenting on aspects and grumbling about the pace and by Prosperine pausing for dramatic effect, making Papa beg her to continue.

The birth of the twins and survival of the one who has the rabbit's lip has reminded Prosperine of long-ago magic involving rabbits. She is 14, living in Pescara, not Sicily as the brothers claim, seeking to cheat Papa. Her father is a poor widow with three daughters, Prosperine, Anna, and Teodolina. Prosperine, as the eldest, is the surrogate mother. They work in his macaroni shop dawn to dusk and during the siesta roam the square, meeting beautiful Violetta D'Annunzio. They enjoy tormenting deformed old Ciccolina, the butcher woman, who is said to be a witch for hire. Prosperine and Violetta taunt her, Prosperine claiming to be Befana, the Santa Claus-like witch of Italian folklore. As they grow older, the four friends go to the docks to flirt with fishermen. Once as they watch horses mate sophisticated Violetta explains the action.

Violetta at age 15 is chosen to crown the statue of the Virgin Mary at the annual parade for the Feast of the Assumption and the blessing of the village. Rich girls are normally given this honor. Through her veil, Violetta eyes the famous artist Gallante Selvi who is visiting Pescara. Distracted by Selvi, Violetta slips from the ladder while crowning the Virgin, humiliating herself. When Selvi visits the macaroni shop to hire one of his daughters to care for his aged godmother while he is working for a year in Torino, Prosperine's father dispatches her, against her will, being the "homeliest and most responsible." Note that Selvi sends her wages to her father, planting the rage she will later express at being bartered away in marriage to Papa. Learning that the godmother is Ciccolina, Prosperine is fearful, knowing that she will recognize her mocking voice. Violetta accompanies Prosperine to the witch's house. As they near it, they find Selvi, raving, having seen a vision of the martyr, St. Lucia, which he intends to paint. He takes Violetta, unwillingly, as his model.



Ciccolina recognizes her tormentor but takes no revenge. Skinning rabbits is easy work. In the square, Prosperine's sisters avoid her, as does Violetta as the crowds come to admire her. As the laundress, Prosperine knows that Selvi and Violetta are "doing the stallion's dance." Prosperine hates her work and being betrayed by her sisters, but Ciccolina, whom Prosperine no longer finds repellent, hints that she will some day pass to her her "potent gifts." Meanwhile, crowds gather to watch Selvi paint Violetta, who is adored even by the self-serving priest. Once, when haughty Violetta experiences shooting pains in her leg, she attributes them to Prosperine learning the "evil eye," and rumors spread, and Prosperine is mistreated as a witch.

A month later, Selvi and Violetta disappear without a word, fail to return for her father's funeral, and people consign her to the ranks of sinners. That is when Prosperine sees the magic. Ailing Ciccolina and Prosperine wait on miserly Pomaricci the schoolmaster, who complains that he should get twice the meat for the price. Ciccolina splits a scrawny rabbit with her cleaver and the two halves each become whole and alive. Pomaricci flees, screaming about the devil's work, and Ciccolina teaches Prosperine to protect herself by saying "Benedicia" and making the sign of the cross. That night, Pomaricci dies and the women celebrate by eating two delicious fried rabbits.

Papa says that Prosperine should have thrown idiotic superstitions overboard when coming to America. She warns him against heresy, a word that makes Papa fear for his son, whom he has baptized; it may have cast him into hell. He sends Prosperine off to bed, but she first warns him never to have sex again with his wife, as it could kill her. He may come to her instead, repulsive as she finds the idea. Prosperine then reveals how she kills Selvi.

Prosperine begs Ciccolina to teach her powers, but is put off until Christmas Eve, the proper time for such revelations. While the church bells ring Mass, she talks about diagnosing and curing the evil eye, but not how to inflict it on enemies. Ciccolin dies and Selvi orders Prosperine to continue maintaining the house. He and Violetta will soon come to honeymoon. Their arrival is grand, but Prosperine alone is not deceived. She hears Selvi beat Violetta at night and Violetta treats her like a lowly servant girl. The women fight and fall into one another's arms, weeping. Violetta then reveals all of her sufferings, being beaten and burnt, called a whore, and forced to pose nude for his photographer friend. She is nearly suicidal. This male violence against women is by now a familiar theme.

After treating Violetta's wounds and putting her to bed, Prosperine vows to kill Selvi as she does rabbits in the marketplace, but must do so in secret if she is to remain free and care for her friend. The evil eye does not work, but seeing Selvi's tantrums when his "masterpiece" does not go well, and watching a goat die after eating ruined glass and wire, Prosperine finds her means. She and Violetta grind glass to add to his food. Selvi's slow, agonizing death is described in vivid detail. Prosperine fetches incompetent doctors and the priest to make them look innocent, while Violetta gives a diva's performance, mourning loudly. The death is ruled appendicitis, the priest insists on a lavish funeral, and the doctor eats the untouched, poisoned chicken. His bloody





diarrhea convinces the doctor to demand an autopsy, but the women flee before the police arrive to arrest them.

In Sicily they are constantly questioned about whence they have come. Both are afraid and Prosperine fights homesickness for the sake of safety, knowing that they must get further away from Pescara. A lawyer friend suggests America, the "Land of Dreams." He knows how to forge documents for criminals. Violetta earns these by giving sexual favors. One day Teodolina's husband appears bringing money from her father. Thus, Prosperine becomes a Tucci, a relative of the cursed Iacconi brothers.

Prosperine concludes by telling Papa not to worry about being murdered—unless he harms his wife. Violetta, she claims, changes her name, stays in Palermo, and marries the lawyer. When Papa recalls her saying that Violetta is buried in the Old Country, Prosperine says nervously that she dies after marrying. When he mentions her speaking of "our" escape, she claims he heard wrongly and denies that his wife is Violetta. Clearly, the whole truth waits to come out, including what Dominick is most interested in knowing: the circumstances of his grandmother's drowning.

Chapter 40 returns to Sheffer's office, where she is, as always, late. Dominick demands that Thomas be independently tested for HIV, feeling guilty for having so long accepted Sheffer's claims about Thomas' safety over his brother's horror stories. Papa's memoir has left Dominick worried and confused. If he shares through Ma an Irishman's genes, why does he look like photographs of Papa? Can twins have different fathers? At least Dominick now knows why Papa mistreats Ma: to punish her mother's sins. He sees why Ma accepts Ray's violence. When Sheffer arrives, she runs through all of the arguments about constant monitoring and heavy caseload. She knows that Dr. Farber will turn the request down because letting patients' families dictate care will cause chaos. When Dr. Richard Hume, Farber's supervisor, phones, he repeats all of the bureaucratic arguments, but comes around when Dominick mentions the groin injuries that he suffers during Thomas' admittance. For a second time, Dominick keeps Ralph's name out of discussion, although mentioning him would have kept him from relying on Thomas' ravings. Dominick wonders why Hume reverses himself.

The story shifts dramatically when Sheffer, shaken enough to resume smoking, reveals that the administration is hushing up an assault on the orderly Duane Taylor, whom Dominick has distrusted from afar. The official story is that the strangling is payback for black marketing, but actually it is for raping young inmates. Sheffer feels terrible about having told so many families that their inmates are safe. A quarter of the Hatch population may be infected. Dr. Yup, the fearless Chinese doctor who documents Dominick's injuries earlier, examines Thomas and finds that he has been raped. Dominick is at first denied permission to sit with Thomas during police interrogation, but Thomas will not talk without him present. One of the investigators is Avery, the "good cop" who long ago arrests Dominick and Leo. Dominick is glad that, nearing retirement, he is still decent with Thomas, whose story constantly changes and blends into his CIA plots.



The plot thickens when Ralph provides Dominick a confidential memo from Hume to Dr. Hervé Garcia, suggesting that the public will approve of AIDS "weeding" the mental health population. Dominick is glad that Ralph is attacking this Social Darwinism. Dominick is turned down by two attorneys and angrily rejects a third, who envisages a lucrative class action suit. Instead, he hires Leo in his Armani suit to impersonate a lawyer. After several appointments are canceled, they ambush Hume at a restaurant. Leo introduces himself as Arthur verSteege and hands Hume the memo, saying that they only want justice.

On 11 Apr. 1991, the PSRB transfers Thomas to the custody of his family, effective immediately. Settle is not available. Sheffer warns that freedom will be hard on Thomas' system, and this proves true as soon as the brothers walk out the gate. Thomas feels himself "a walking target" but is otherwise non-responsive. When he speaks it is to say that they are cousins of Penny Ann Drinkwater, that the Indian cemetery is a "holy place," and that he "enflesh[es] the word of God." Asked if he believes in God, Dominick gropes for an answer. They go to McDonald's, where they run into Leo. Thomas insists on a Happy Meal with coffee, traps himself in the bathroom (like on the New York City field trip), cannot sit by the window, where he would be a sitting duck, and insists that he has worked at this particular McDonald's. Leo goes along with Thomas' every whim, but Dominick wants to train him to function normally in public, which, recall, is also Patel's long-term goal.

Sheffer gets Thomas into Middletown on Friday and Hope House is willing to take him until then. Thomas had liked living there before. They drive over after dinner. At 2 AM, Dominick gets a call that Thomas has disappeared and the police are on their way. Dominick picks up Ray and heads over. Old schoolmate Jerry Martineau is on the case, optimistic about finding Thomas in one of his usual hiding places, but Dominick knows that Thomas is dead. He does not want to be the one to find his body. Ray is again despondent over riding Thomas so hard. The rescue squad finds him a half mile from where he jumps, around 4 AM—just as the phone call wakens Dominick. The death is ruled accidental.

Dominick and Ray drink Scotch, like when Ma dies, and start talking openly. Dominick regrets not taking it slowly like everyone recommends; Thomas is dead because Dominick is arrogant. Ray wishes he had made the effort to visit Thomas at Hatch, and acts fatherly towards Dominick. Drunk, Dominick sleeps in the "Dominick and Thomas Museum," falling asleep in the lower bunk (Thomas') and awakening in the top. In between, he dreams about being Thomas and in prison, telling Ma that Dominick has drowned.

In a somewhat confusing narrative, written in a child's style and with unclear sequences of tenses, Dominick vividly recalls being four, supposedly napping while Ma takes care of Thomas, who is sick with red dots and must live in the spare room a while. Ray takes Dominick to get a shot and gets mad when he cries. Ma has scarlet fever like this as a child and it kills many people. Dominick pretends he is Sky King and sneaks in to visit Thomas. Seeing him sick and asleep, Dominick realizes that they are not the same person and he can save himself.





# Chapters 41-44

## Chapters 41-44 Summary

Chapter 41 resumes the memoir, telling how Ignazia moves in with Prosperine and, fearing ground glass in his food, Papa buys meals outside, laments that as an honorable Sicilian he cannot get Prosperine deported, forbids baptizing the baby, and concealing baptizing the dead twin. Although he fears and hates Ignazia, he lusts for her and begins visiting Hattie at a reeking Hungarian brothel. Papa is happy when McNulty dies and Guglielmo takes over. When Guglielmo asks him to manage, gratis, construction of a parochial school, Papa thinks about how far he has strayed but cannot face going to confession until Nabby Drinkwater, his own age, drops dead at work. In the confessional Papa claims to have been sinned against more than he has sinned, but Guglielmo demands breaking omertà as a sign of faith. Assured that he has not damned his brother or his son, Papa tells his whole life's story in minute detail. Guglielmo tells him to cast aside bitterness and resentment, pardon all, and ask forgiveness of the living—particularly Ignazia. The harelip and red hair prove nothing except that God is testing his faith. Papa's penance includes recording his life in an orderly fashion.

Concettina Pasqualina is baptized and Guglielmo blesses the house and lifts McNulty's curse. They enjoy a fine meal. Papa allows Ignazia to socialize with neighborhood women, hoping that it will separate her from Prosperine who, after a fight, moves out. As Papa grows fond of Concettina, Ignazia's happiness almost makes him forget about Violetta. Papa can write little but assures Guglielmo that he is making progress. At the blessing of the school, when Papa is acknowledged and given a silver medal, he is overwhelmed.

Chapter 42 sees Dominick and Ray making funeral arrangements. Dessa and Ralph fail to show up. When Fr. LaVie talks about Ma and Thomas reunited in heaven, Dominick recalls their humiliating dress-up tea parties and the "worst day," when he fails to warn them of Ray's return. In the limo, Ray admits to planting mystery tulips and reminisces about fatherly things he has done, while Dominick recalls him tiptoeing up to catch Thomas dressed as a girl, breaking Ma's arm, beating Thomas, locking him in the closet, and taking Ma to the hospital. Dominick tries to calm Thomas from outside. When Ray releases him, Thomas is dazed. This must have triggered Thomas' problem. Ray makes Dominick and himself a team against Ma and Thomas. Now, in the limo, he realizes that his team has won.

The mourners come to Ray's house, the men drinking while the women serve. Ray sits alone, looking sick, waiting for everyone to leave, but they hang around, reminiscing, exaggerating, and rewriting history. In the garden, Dominick hears Thomas at the Falls telling him to trust God. Dessa arrives, delayed by a medical emergency with her mother. Realizing that Thomas is a suicide, Dominick describes Ray's bullying and admits his own jealousy, for which he has paid. When Ray declares his conscience



clear, Dominick details various tortures. When Ray quotes the probate judge's praise for adopting them, Dominick details the "worst time." Ray storms out and drives away.

Dominick and Dessa are left alone, looking through the old album and talking about him working on anger management. Dessa is glad. When he asks about "Dan the Man," Dessa asks if he talks about them in therapy. Patel says he must "renovate the past." As Dessa is leaving, Dominick tells her that he loves her and offers to visit Angela's grave together. She smiles sadly. Dessa goes there every week. Someone has planted tulips this morning.

Chapter 43 returns to Papa's writing. After the banquet everyone seeks his help. He begins an affair with Josephine Reynolds, the stenographer who minutes the Planning Commission on which he serves. When Signora Siragusa complains that Prosperine is causing trouble, Papa confronts Prosperine, leading to a fight in which Prosperine loses her front teeth and little Concettina accidentally has her fingers crushed in a door. Ignazia calls him a brute and curses the day she marries him. Papa does not chase the women, knowing that Ignazia has no money and will have to crawl back. Papa re-reads what he has written but cannot continue writing. Mid-week, Papa goes to reclaim his family, threatening to make trouble for Violetta. Learning that the women are going to New York on Saturday, Papa reaches the New London station early and befriends a policeman, alerting him to possible problems with women and arranging a signal. When the women run for the train, Papa yells that they are illegal immigrants and murderers. Afraid of losing Concettina, Ignazia remains, while Prosperine rides away, cursing.

Chapter 44 shows Dominick tying up loose ends, watching too much baseball, and trying to figure out whether to return to painting or to teaching. Patel has given him four goals: 1) inquire about his teaching license; 2) decide about his painting business; 3) acknowledge sympathy cards and gifts; and 4) clear the air with Ray. Not on the official list is finishing Papa's history. They have a marathon session over his public tirade, bringing out most of the Birdsey family secrets. Patel calls it a breakthrough, but Dominick still avoids Ray's pleas to "clear the air." When Dominick refuses to set a deadline, Patel cancels further appointments.

Answering sympathy cards is easier than reading them. Among the envelopes is a birth announcement for Tyffanie Rose, Joy's daughter. Duane Taylor is arraigned. Sheffer, who is guilty about Thomas and seeing Patel, invites Dominick to dinner. Patel grants Dominick an appointment before he finishes his list, where he talks about Ma and Thomas' weakness and the probability that Ma must conceive them by rape. The evening with Sheffer and her gay partner, Monica, goes better than Dominick expects. Home, he hears from Joy and a Dr. Azzi, who has amputated Ray's leg below the knee. With added guilt, Dominick resumes reading Papa's memoir, determined to finish it.

## Chapters 41-44 Analysis

Chapter 41 resumes Papa's memoir, written 13-15 1949. The story of Selvi's gruesome murder haunts Papa and he cannot accept the deformed, bastard baby. He forbids her



baptism. He resents that Ignazia moves in with Prosperine downstairs and insults her by no longer eating at home. Lusting for Ignazia (and wishing he could see her nude photographs), he begins seeing an unattractive whore. Lusty Vincenzo seems to laugh at him from Hell. He is pleased when McNulty dies and Guglielmo becomes acting pastor but is determined not to yield on the question of baptism, which friends are urging on him with increasing vehemence.

Guglielmo surprises Papa by not raising the question and, instead, asking him to manage, gratis, construction of a parochial school. He cunningly appeals to his talents, but wins him over by invoking Pasquale's death, accepting his and McNulty's fault, and reminding him of his early desire to be a priest. The school can be a bridge between his early spiritual training and the masonry that he has been forced to learn. Papa realizes how far he has strayed and agrees. In the memoir, Papa pauses to congratulate himself roundly on his success in supervising this project. Everyone else is incompetent or greedy.

Papa repeatedly declines confession and the "key to serenity," which is forgiveness, but Guglielmo has planted a seed. All week long at work, however, Papa thinks about the priest praying for peace upon his house. Wanting to ask Guglielmo two questions, Papa sits for hours watching people go to confession, but flees when he is the only one left. Guglielmo waits him out. It takes the sudden death of Nabby Drinkwater, who is Papa's own age, to bring Papa to the confessional. He is pretty sure that this particular Indian cannot go to Heaven and is skeptical about others.

Trembling and awkward, Papa maintains that he has been sinned against more than he has sinned and mentions—but refuses to talk about—living with two murdering women. That is family business, covered by omertà, and none of the church's. He is not there to confess, but to ask two questions that keep him from sleeping. Guglielmo says that God needs him to break omertà as a sign of faith; that is the only way to free himself from the shackles he himself has forged. Papa roars that McNulty's curse rather than he forges the shackles, killing Pasquale and bringing him a whore for a wife. He hopes that McNulty burns in hell. Rebuked, he wonders whether he has condemned the souls of his brother and son.

Papa talks candidly about Pasquale, whom he believes had been having sex with the monkey. Guglielmo repeatedly reminds him that he is in church and should watch his crude idioms. Papa says that Pasquale had never been "quite right," even as a boy, perhaps from sulfur fumes in the mind or their father's hitting him in the head. This must surely shock Dominick when he reads it. Guglielmo deals with Papa most in a very pastoral way, arguing that Papa has no concrete proof of immorality and should assume that Pasquale dies with no mortal sin on his soul. Town gossip and jokes mean nothing. The priest piously mentions St. Francis of Assisi as a lover of animals and rebukes Papa for a crude joke. At one point, Papa writes that he can hear the gears turning in the priest's head, seeking what to say.

Guglielmo turns abrupt: Papa must humble himself before God and put himself in a state of grace. He must accept that has not damned Pasquale to hell by throwing the



cement, for only God has that power. (Recall Dr. Patel's suggestions that Dominick accept his own limitations.) Papa's second question is not about the bastard daughter but about his dead son: has baptizing him with dirty dishwater and cooking oil damned the boy's soul? Guglielmo assures him he has acted as God's agent. The boy is free from limbo and safe with Jesus. Papa must tell Ignazia that to comfort her and then bring the girl to baptism.

At this, Papa sobs and in a pew rather than the confessional, tells his whole life's story in minute detail. For over an hour, sins flow from him like lava (a possible reference to Mount Etna), with Guglielmo asking questions to keep everything straight—and reminding him to confess his own sins rather than others'. When Papa is worn out, Guglielmo tells him to cast aside bitterness and resentment and imitate Jesus every day, pardoning everyone and asking forgiveness of the living—particularly Ignazia. The priest denies that the hair lip and red hair prove the mother's infidelity. Rather, it is God testing Papa's faith. Guglielmo assigns as penance, in addition to a month's rosary, recording his life on paper in an orderly fashion, without *omertà*, reflecting on God's forgiveness of all sinners. This will lead him to humility. Papa complains that he is too busy, but Guglielmo assures him it is his only road to peace. Papa's motivation for writing is thus established, and his struggles with *omertà* early in the manuscript are explained. In lieu of asking forgiveness, Papa eats pleasantly with the women. Ignazia is moved.

Concettina Pasqualina is baptized and Guglielmo blesses the house and lifts McNulty's curse. They enjoy a fine meal. Concettina's sweet disposition reminds Papa of Pasquale. He allows Ignazia to socialize with neighborhood women, hoping it will separate her from Prosperine. As Ignazia asserts her rights as lady of the house, the two women fight. Papa steps in with his macho manner and this only escalates the situation. When neighbors ask what is wrong, he downplays it.

A measure of peace comes when Prosperine moves to Signora Siragusa's to care for her. She comes over, uninvited, on Sundays, letting herself in while the family is at Mass. Papa grows fond of Concettina, singing to her as his mother had to him and his brothers. He sees similarity between their eyes. Ignazia's happiness with this makes him almost forget about Violetta. Papa is always too busy to write more than a page or two, but he assures the priest that he is making progress. When the archbishop comes to bless the school, Papa's cousins come from Brooklyn. Following Vitaglio's example, Papa thanks God for all of his blessings. Guglielmo seats Papa and Ignazia at the head table during the banquet and Papa is publicly acknowledged and given a silver medal. Concettina applauds. Papa is unable to give a speech.

This long chapter is so precise in its theological and spiritual writing that Papa's early training may be reflected. His long lapse from the church or simply his pent-up furor could account for Guglielmo's frequent need to focus him on such elemental aspects of Christianity as forgiveness and the need to be in a state of grace in order to receive forgiveness. Several times the quaking Guglielmo of old reappears, but he is on the whole an incisive and compassionate man. He leads rather than pushes.



Chapter 42 deals with Thomas' funeral and provides several revelations. It begins with Dominick and Ray making arrangements at Fitzgerald's Funeral home, from which Ma had been buried. Ray argues for a funeral Mass, on the grounds that Thomas had been religious, while Dominick declares that he had simply been crazy and it is over. They will cater a lunch at Ray's house. Dominick makes a short list of people who have been decent to Thomas and invites them. He leaves particulars on Ralph's machine and has to pass the word to Dessa through her boyfriend. Dan chitchats at length about losing a brother and tells him to "hang in there." Dominick wonders if he is still a twin.

Thomas' name and birth date are already inscribed on the headstone beneath Ma and Ray. Ma had figured that Dominick might remarry and want his own arrangements. This raises Dominick's usual jealousies. He wonders who has planted tulips at the grave, suspecting Dessa. She, however and Ralph, do not show up, and Dominick assumes that it is because he has betrayed both. Three priests at St. Anthony's, where Ray works so hard, are too busy to officiate, so an outsider, Fr. LaVie performs the rites in a goofy, hippie manner, and talks about Ma and Thomas being reunited in heaven. Dominick is again moved to jealousy. Ignoring the service, he recalls their special play times and wonders whether Patel, who is in attendance, can read on his face the secret of the "worst day," about which he has not spoken. He thinks about the humiliating dress-up tea parties of Mrs. Calabash and Mrs. Floon, while he keeps watch for Ray, the Big Bad Wolf. Dominick remembers every detail of that dreary day, including spitefully eating all five desserts before strewing the kitchen with sugar, flour, and whipped cream. Ray catches him in the act but only demands to know where Ma is and heads upstairs to the spare room. When the funeral ends, Dominick has no adequate farewell for Thomas. People offer condolences and the priest, collecting his fee, offers his life story (miraculous cancer survivor), while Dominick looks for an escape.

In the limo, passing Papa's ornate memorial, Ray surprisingly admits that he plants the mystery tulips. Dominick realizes that Ralph is in the cemetery, but keeping aloof. Ray reminisces about fatherly things he had done over the years, which makes Dominick resent him for denying the rest—especially on the "worst day," when he had tiptoed up to find Thomas dressed as a girl. Ray had broken Ma's arm as she defends Thomas and tells him to run. Ray catches him, beats him, and locks him in the closet. Dominick wants to defend his brother but is paralyzed with fear. He has to clean up his kitchen mess while Ray takes Ma to the hospital. Meanwhile, Thomas screams and whimpers in the closet. Dominick talks and sings through the door but cannot open it. When Ray unlocks it after 10 PM, Thomas is dazed and wants to go to bed. Dominick now believes that is what triggers Thomas' problem. Finally that night, over pizza, which Ray lightheartedly brings home, while Ma tucks Thomas in, Ray demands that Dominick believe that Ma had tripped carrying laundry. He declares that house business is no one else's business, and he and Dominick are a team, buddies who stick together. They shake on it. This invocation of the omertà haunts Dominick, who cannot imagine such things happening in his schoolmates' homes. Heading upstairs, Dominick realizes that Ma will always love Thomas more and Ray will hate Thomas more. There are two teams, fighting for survival. Now, in the limo, he realizes that his team has won.





Things get worse as the mourners reach Ray's house. Lamb depicts a typical scene: mourners speaking in hushed tones, the men drinking and kibbitzing while the women work in the kitchen and do not complain. Talk is about Three Rivers becoming a ghost town unless the Indian casino saves them and grumbling about the Indians paying no taxes. Dominick's wisecracks are not challenged in honor of his dead brother. To himself, he hopes that Ralph, after all that he has endured from white people, cashes in big. Ray looks unwell and uncomfortable. He listens to Sheffer and Patel without looking at them, knowing that they know that he has ignored Thomas for seven months. Jerry Martineau gives Dominick a picture of their old basketball team, with Thomas in the background, cheering like a normal kid. Dominick again pictures Thomas hanging from a tree and feels his weight as he carries him away. Sheffer and Patel talk rather woodenly with Dominick about Thomas' death not having yet sunk in; grief is a gradual process. Ray sits aloof, not eating, waiting for everyone to leave, but people hang around, reminiscing, exaggerating, rewriting history (particularly Ma's rescuing her album from the fire). Dominick is disgusted. Outside, he hears Thomas at the Falls, telling him to trust God. Dominick again feels like a betrayer. He walks to where Papa had written his confession and thinks about how his unborn grandchildren had been hidden from him. He again thinks about Angelo Nardi as a possible father. Weeping, he pictures Ma's dead twin and dead marriage. Dominick is becoming an emotional time bomb.

Dessa arrives, about to cry, squeezes Dominick, and tells of rushing her mother to the hospital after a fall. Dessa loves Thomas and had wanted to be there. She hugs Ray, for whom she has never cared, while he sobs in public for the first time. Surprised by this, until he admits to himself that Thomas had purposefully committed suicide, Dominick declares that Ray is crying about bullying Thomas to death. Everyone gawks. Dominick begins breaking omertà: releasing family secrets asks about being teammates, about how a hero in two wars cannot bring himself to visit his son at Hatch, while Thomas asks each time about him. Dominick admits his own jealousy of Thomas and says Thomas' stump is his constant penance. He and Ray embody all of the "bad guys" pursuing Thomas. When Ray declares that his conscience is clear, Dominick presses the matter viciously, describing specific tortures. Ray goes on the defensive, citing the probate judge's praise for adopting the twins. Now Dominick is sobbing, looking to escape, but fires back details of the "worst time." Ray storms out and drives away.

There is a mood shift. Leo, Angie, Dessa, and Dominick clean up as they had as newlyweds. When Leo and Angie leave, Dessa tells her how niece Amber had freaked out about Thomas' hand and developed phobias. She is seeing a specialist. She tells Dominick that the one thing for which he cannot forgive Ray is not being his real father. Everything else is secondary. Dominick is not pleased with her pop psychology. As they look through the old album, he nearly tells her about Papa's story, but shifts to telling her about seeing Patel, first to provide background on Thomas and later for help with his own problems, including anger management—the cause of their break-up. Dessa is pleased. She is evasive about her own situation. Many things are troubling her, including the recent death of Eric Clapton's son, whom she dreams of catching. When Dominick asks about "Dan the Man," Dessa asks if he talks about them in therapy. He admits that he does because Patel says he must "renovate the past." Finally, Dominick



tells her about Papa's story, that of a true bully. As Dessa is leaving, Dominick tells her that he loves her, knowing that she will not want to hear it, but he cannot help it. She nods. He offers to visit Angela's grave together. She smiles sadly. Dessa goes there every week. Someone has planted tulips this morning. The reader can assume it is Ray, whose ill-health and attempts at restitution are growing concerns of the novel. Dominick and Dessa's relationship must also be resolved.

Chapter 43 returns to Papa's self-serving writing of 16-17 August, 1949, which opens with him bragging about the fruits of the "victorious banquet": everyone seeks his help, he joins fraternal and civic organizations, his family attends Mass faithfully, and he assures Guglielmo that his family is at peace, even if he is too busy to write. In reality, sexual frustration drives him to an affair with Josephine Reynolds, the stenographer who minutes the Planning Commission on which Papa serves. He is too prominent to see his former whore.

The heart of the chapter is the crisis that befalls the household when Signora Siragusa reduces Papa's income, complaining that Prosperine is not working and is causing trouble among the borders. Siragusa wants no scandal in her house. Papa cannot imagine anyone wanting sex with Prosperine, but promises to straighten things out. When he confronts Prosperine on Sunday, she describes terrible working and living conditions and denies allegations of immorality. Ignazia steps in to halt the confrontation but merely postpones it until after a silent, tense meal. Papa demands that Prosperine show respect for his achievements, symbolized in the medal he wears every Sunday, and to act properly at Signora Siragusa's. Prosperine tells him what he can do with his prized medal and spits on it. Ignazia rushes in when Papa threatens Prosperine.

Rather than apologize, Prosperine bites Papa's hand and continues fighting as he violently holds her off. Ignazia and the girl scream as Prosperine brandishes a bread knife. Ignazia calls him a brute and helps dazed and bleeding Prosperine to a chair. Ignazia yells louder, so the neighbors will hear (defying omertà), and then rolls in a ball (prefiguring Dominick and Thomas' civil defense "duck and roll") to avoid being harmed, adding that marrying him and coming to this "prison of a house" is harm enough. She curses their marriage. Papa is amazed, for he has never hit her since that first night, has provided her the best, and accepted her child (paralleling Ray's self-justifications). He orders Prosperine out and storms upstairs, accidentally slamming the door on Concettina's little fingers, which he sincerely regrets. He watches from the window as the three leave with determination but does not chase them, knowing that Ignazia has no money and will have to crawl back to him. When Reynolds does not answer her phone, Papa reads over what he has written and tries to resume, but realizes he cannot do so until he has gotten rid of Prosperine.

By mid-week, Papa is fed up and goes to Signora Siragusa's to reclaim his family. Ignazia would sooner rip her heart out than go with him. When he threatens to make trouble for Violetta, Ignazia still refuses and declares that they are leaving town. He can get his American whore (Reynolds) to cook and clean for him. Surprised that Ignazia knows about her, Papa softens, saying that he loves only Ignazia and wants her back in his bed. She does not intend to die bearing him another child. Next day, Signora





Siragusa visits, saying that against her advice, tenants have lent the women money and they are planning to go to New York on Saturday. Perhaps it is Signora Siragusa's painful rheumatism that changes her, but she is clearly no longer the positive character that she is earlier in the novel.

Papa goes to the New London station early and makes friends with a dumb-looking policeman to prepare him to help return the women home. He arranges a signal for if he needs help, and the policeman's innocent, friendly nodding helps make his point with Ignazia. She is at first defiant, saying that she will tell the policeman the truth about Papa's abuse, but Papa counters by threatening to tell about her past as Violetta, get her deported, and take away her daughter. When the women run for the train, Papa calls for the policeman, saying they are illegal immigrants and murderers. Ignazia grabs Concettina and jumps back to the platform as the train carries Prosperine away, cursing. The family goes home, most likely to new horrors. Ignazia's drowning has yet to be explained.

Chapter 44 shows Dominick killing time on worker's compensation, tying up loose ends, watching too much baseball, and trying to figure out his future. He is not up to painting yet and has never loved the job. Competitors are trying to buy his equipment. Painting has let him escape teaching and can be rewarding, but he still sees Henry Rood's face. His lethargy faces "tough love" from Patel who, invoking Hamlet, tells Dominick that "to drown or not to drown" in indecision is the question. She has been rooting for him to return to teaching after he first mentions it, although he fears standing in front of teens who seem to have grown "coarser."

Patel reminds Dominick of goals he has set for himself: 1) inquire about his teaching license; 2) decide about his painting business; 3) acknowledge sympathy cards and gifts; and 4) clear the air with Ray. He lies to her about making progress and hears that because depression is "a crisis of energy," checking off completed tasks is energizing. Patel asks next about Papa's history, which he had earlier claimed to want to finish and get behind him. It is not on the list. He claims to be too busy reading her materials about grieving. She acknowledges that the circumstances of Thomas' death and their being twins makes bereavement harder, but as his advocate—not adversary—she feels obligated to help him take the painful steps towards health. Clearly, they have reached a point of crisis in therapy.

Patel turns to Dominick's relations with Ray. A few sessions back he tells her about his public tirade and reveals most of the Birdsey family secrets. Patel calls it a breakthrough in lifting his burden, and Dominick feels unburdened until he reaches his condo. There, hopelessness and exhaustion fill him and never depart. He decides, rather cynically, that he needs to do penance before "God the Stepfather," but cannot. He avoids Ray's pleas to "clear the air." Patel asks Dominick to set a deadline for doing this but gets no answer. Patel unexpectedly cancels further appointments until he completes his list.

This shocks Dominick into action. Answering sympathy cards is easier than reading them. Dominick writes as impersonally as possible. Among the envelopes is a birth announcement for Tyffanie Rose, Joy's daughter. They are in Portsmouth, NH, and



relations with Thad are complicated. Dominick wishes them good luck and keeps the the hospital picture of the baby with the weird name and the monkey face. This detail will soon become important, but in context is merely curious and, even to Dominick's mind, out of character. Finishing the pile, Dominick leaves himself a reminder to call the Department of Education and rewards himself with some baseball watching.

Awakening to the news, which by now is a regular motif, Dominick sees that Duane Taylor has been arraigned on 115 counts of aggravated assault on mental patients. He no longer looks cocky. Dominick hopes that he burns in Hell. He resolves to call Ray and finish reading the memoir—and then burn it. He is afraid to learn the final truths. Next day, Dominick mails the cards, visits the beach, catches a Bruce Willis testosterone movie, and listens to phone messages: Leo, Sheffer, and Ray—twice. A call to the Department of Education, which demands much to reinstate his license, makes him think that he will remain a house painter. Dominick's earlier horror of the classroom makes it odd that he even considers returning. Perhaps it is simply pro forma, to check it off the list.

Dominick calls Sheffer, who assures him that he has been a good brother. He simply thanks her rather than arguing, which has heretofore been his style. Realizing that she is beating herself up with guilt, Dominick tells her she has done all she could. She tells him that she is seeing Patel professionally, who agrees. Sheffer suggests they get together for dinner at her place, insisting that she is not hitting on him, because she is gay. This is quite unexpected. Partly because he accepts Sheffer's invitation rather than shrinking back, Patel grants Dominick an appointment before he finishes his list. He relates the old bus incident and figures that Ma conceives them through rape. She would not have fought and might not even have known what sex is. Dominick at the time hates her for doing nothing about the crazy old man fondling her, and still resents that after all he does to protect her and Thomas, she loves Thomas more. This appears to be the core of Dominick's problem.

The scene shifts to Sheffer's home, where peppy daughter Jesse instantly befriends Dominick, and introduces Sheffer's tough partner, Monica, who is in home repair. The evening is more pleasant than he expects, leaving a possibility that Dominick might have found a business ally. At his car, Sheffer reveals losing her eldest brother, her hero, to leukemia, but this cannot compare with losing a twin. Patel says that Dominick must get used to being a survivor and solitary twin. He is working on the arrogance that Sheffer had rightly mentioned at their first meeting. Dominick feels good having Sheffer now as a friend. The significance of this is underplayed at this point. Dominick sleeps but in the middle of the night finds the answering machine blinking. The first message seems trivial: Joy wants him to see the baby. The second is from an unknown Dr. Azzi, Ray's surgeon, who has amputated his leg below the knee. Azzi cannot be reached for clarification. Dominick feels guilty for not returning Ray's calls and humiliating him in public. He begins reading Papa's memoir, determined to finish it.



# Chapters 45-48

## Chapters 45-48 Summary

Chapter 45 concludes the memoir. Having rid himself of Prosperine, Papa orders Ignazia to his bed, forbids her to tell Guglielmo or he will reveal her crimes. Papa grows busier, more famous, richer, and politically powerful. Ignazia does her duties with contempt and withdraws from everything. Fearing that Ignazia will poison him, he searches the kitchen and find Prosperine and Ignazia in bed as lovers. Papa buys a police dog and gets Prosperine committed to an asylum, ending the battle. On 10 January, 1925, Papa finds the dog poisoned and Ignazia gone. The police find her body in frozen Rosemark's Pond. Concettina is hiding in a shack. She becomes Papa's silent housemaid. Papa ends his memoir hoping that God will save his soul.

In Chapter 46 Dominick meets Dr. Azzi, learns that gangrene is the starving of living tissues and feels sick, seeing Ray's covered stump. He thinks of Thomas and Ignazia drowning themselves to escape life—and Dessa fleeing him because she needs to breathe. Back home, Dominick is in a daze. As he stuffs the shredded memoir into a garbage bag, he thinks about Ma's bravery in surviving her mother's plan to drown her and in raising her boys. Like Papa, she never truly confesses. Patel discounts Dominick's theory that the twins are the product of incest and argues that Ray has been a constant in his life, bearing witness. She asks Dominick to consider the frustrating memoir as a parable bearing a lesson. When Dominick sees that he must let go of grudges, Patel applauds. Ma has done her best and given him personally her father's story to learn from and be set free.

Ray awakens bleary, not recognizing Dominick, asking for his sister Edna and football. In the hospital cafeteria, Dessa tells him of the joys of volunteering in the children's hospice. It has brought her back to church, so she cannot agree with Dominick that God is a practical jokester. Ray gets well enough to transfer to cheery Rivercrest Convalescent Home, but the staff gives up on trying to draw him out. Dominick takes Ray on outings to raise his spirits, including seeing *The Little Mermaid*. Ray makes two friends, forming "the Three Musketeers," and tries out his artificial leg. When Ray demands that Dominick shave him, the final barriers come down. Ray tells his life's story, admits his mistakes, but does not know who the boys' biological father is. It had been an "unspoken deal" with Ma not to discuss it.

In Chapter 47 Dominick meets Leo for racquetball before rushing home to meet Joy, who is in Three Rivers. Leo hopes for a promotion when Big Gene retires and reveals that Dessa and Danny are splitting up. Joy is waiting at the condo with Tyffanie, looking nervous. When she leaves, she hides a note advising Dominick to get tested for HIV. She has it but Tyffanie does not. She asks him to adopt the baby if she dies. Waiting for the results of his test is agonizing but ends well. Over lunch, Ray breaks his promise to Ma and reveals that Dominick's father is Henry Drinkwater. Dominick finds his father's



gravestone and then Ralph, who has always known and assumed that Dominick had, like Thomas. Dominick is again crushed by Ma's favoritism

At Dr. Patel's, Dominick wrestles with jealousy of Thomas. She believes that Ma withholds the truth to protect him until he can cope. Dominick agrees that Ma's motive is probably love, a sign of progress to Patel. She talks of diverse ancient myths about orphans searching for their fathers, who suffer much before stumbling on the truth. The universe then becomes theirs. In the lobby, Dominick learns that Princess Evil Eye—named Prosperine—is dying in the hospital. He rushes there, borrows two pet rabbits from Dessa, and shows them to the old woman, begging forgiveness. She pets one and crosses herself, and Dominick leaves without looking back.

Chapter 48 Dominick ties up threads, worldwide, local, and family. He and Dessa remarry and adopt Tyffanie, and learns from Aunt Minnie that he and Thomas are a product of true love. When Ray has a stroke, the house becomes a battered women's shelter. Dominick finally treasures Papa's gift, embraces love and forgiveness and sees that "God exists in the roundness of things."

## Chapters 45-48 Analysis

Chapter 45 resumes the memoir with entries for 17-18 August 1949. Papa is pleased to have rid himself of Prosperine and orders Ignazia to his bed at least on Saturdays and Sundays. She will not necessarily get pregnant and, if she does, it is God's will—and she may prove stronger than the American doctor says. He uses her Old Country secrets to keep her from talking to Guglielmo, even in confession, and forbids her to talk to American neighbors.

Papa grows even busier, more famous, and richer. For thwarting unionization, he is promoted to nighttime supervisor of Plant No. 2. His political fortunes rise, with both parties wooing him. Still, he resents being treated like a dumb immigrant by Mayor George B. Shanley, recalling the shame inflicted on him during the voyage across the Atlantic. Papa is treated far better outside his home than in. Ignazia performs her duties with contempt in her eyes. She withdraws from contact with Americans out of shame because of her English and is indifferent to Italy. She stops visiting Signora Tusia and refuses to attend the various banquets to which Papa's fame gets them invited. He stops asking her. She stops answering the phone and doorbell.

Papa begins again fearing that Ignazia will poison him and considers beating the truth out of her. He is too proud to seek Guglielmo's advice. He sneaks home one night and searches for anything "murderous" in the kitchen. He smells Prosperine's pipe tobacco before he sees her, clinging to Ignazia in bed as lovers, and flees her attack with scissors. Papa weeps for shame, recording the details of his wife's perversion—a last vestige of omertà. He forces Ignazia to have sex all night, orders her to sleep with him all the time, rebukes her perversion, and taunts her with the possibility of pregnancy. Finally, Papa buys a police dog to track Prosperine into the woods seeking his vendetta,



and chains it in the yard as a guard dog when he fails. He nails shut the first windows and back door.

Papa agrees to rally the Italian vote for Shanley in exchange for hunting down Prosperine, who he claims might be a witch and gets her committed to the "crazy hospital." The mayor makes arrangements with Dr. Henry Settle at Three Rivers State Hospital. The names of the two facilities there are thus explained. Prosperine is delivered in a straitjacket, cursing. Papa signs her in as a relative, spits in her face to avenge his medal, and never sees her again. For 26 years, Papa takes pleasure in winning this battle.

Guglielmo is elevated and transferred to Bridgeport, CT, but Papa is too busy to attend the installation. When Signora Siragusa dies, Papa is a pallbearer, stricken as though she were his mother. Shanley blames Papa for losing the election by publicly sympathizing with the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. The "Swamp Yankees" (WASPs) flock to the ballot box in vengeance. Papa is indignant to be belittled after all the work he has done.

On 10 January, 1925, Papa finds the dog poisoned, a sparrow in the house (an Italian omen), no heat anywhere, and Ignazia gone. His first thought is, tellingly, to keep the pipes from freezing. The police find Ignazia's body at the bottom of frozen Rosemark's Pond. Concettina is found hiding in a shack. Papa claims now to love her. The newspapers pick up suspicious details, making Ignazia's fate a "guessing game," but Papa is sure there is no kidnapping, no struggle. Concettina never says what she sees at age eight and Papa still does not know. After the funeral, Papa turns down many offers of help around the house. That is Concettina's job. She is a good Sicilian, able to keep secrets. Papa ends his memoir saying that Guglielmo, wherever he is, gets what he wants and he hopes that God will save his soul.

Chapter 46 opens with Dominick dreaming of floating in inner tubes with Thomas, with Ma, Penny Ann, and many strangers waving to them. A siren blares. Dominick lurches awake at the sound of the phone. Busy Dr. Azzi wants to meet at 7:15. Dominick is annoyed that Papa's memoir leaves more questions and suspicions. The only revelation is that Ma had fought to prevent her mother from dragging her into the lake too. Dominick had wept at the conclusion and torn up the pages. He urges himself not to be Papa.

At the hospital, Azzi explains gangrene as the starving of living tissues and outlines the course of therapy, including a nursing home. This image recurs throughout the chapter: life being starved to death. Ray looks small and gray, sleeping thanks to drugs, as Dominick forces himself to enter. The covered stump makes his stomach lurch. Dominick thinks of Thomas and Ignazia drowning themselves to escape—and Dessa having to flee because she needs to breathe. Touching Ray's hand, Dominick finally gets it and weeps for Dessa. Later, stuffing paper scraps into a garbage bag, Dominick thinks about Ma hearing Papa cry in the garden but not daring to comfort him. She must have felt desolate when he died, but proved brave enough to raise her boys. Dominick wonders if Ma had loved Papa as much as she has claimed and how she had



conceived him and Thomas. Like Papa, she never truly confesses. The mystery seems impenetrable, but part of it is about to be revealed.

First, Dominick consults Patel. She discounts his logical theory that he and Thomas are the product of incest. She assures him that there is no scientific evidence linking father-daughter incest to schizophrenia or SIDS, but encourages him to research it if he wishes. She is never doctrinaire. Furthermore, she argues that Dominick is not fatherless, because, for all his faults, Ray has been a constant in his life, bearing witness. These words stick. She asks Dominick to consider the frustrating memoir as a parable bearing a lesson. Once he has characteristically tried to joke this away, Dominick sees that he must let go of grudges. Patel applauds. Ma has done her best and given him her father's story to learn from and be set free.

Having portrayed himself as a disoriented patient, Dominick talks from the other side of the bed. When Ray awakens, he does not recognize Dominick or that he is in a hospital. He asks if his sister Edna has come to see him, wants to watch a football game—in May—and, flipping through the channels, offers a high school cheer. Sitting with Dessa in the hospital cafeteria, Dominick admits that there must be a God, ironic rather than merciful, a practical jokester: Ray is "Stump II: the Sequel." Dessa disagrees: God challenges rather than jokes. Morphine has turned Ray into a cheerleader as it had turned Dominick into a killer. Dessa reveals that she has resumed going to church after starting to volunteer in the children's hospice. She tells of a brave, giggly six-year-old, babies needing to be rocked, and her favorite, Nicky, a boy that an enzyme disorder has immobilized. She sees God in Nicky's beautiful, comprehending eyes. The AIDS children are the hardest, because they cannot stand to eat. Dominick again reflects on the surgeon's words about starving tissues. Dessa knows that this sounds depressing, but it is a precious miracle, giving her peace. It also fulfills her promise to Eric Clapton's kid, who in her dream she failed to catch. Dominick observes that when Dessa mentions meeting Dan, he does not want to punch him and sees this as a fruit of therapy. Dessa is sorry she had not called Dominick when Sadie dies; she had been their dog, not just hers.

Ray becomes lucid and within 12 days is on crutches and transferred to cheery Rivercrest Convalescent Home. Dominick gets to know some of the wheelchair-bound geezers, the "sentries," the oldest of whom, "Princess Evil Eye," watches him constantly. She is over 100 years old. Ray is sullen at first and progresses only to "semicooperative." After two weeks of trying to draw him out, the staff leaves him alone. Dominick visits every day, having sold his painting equipment and started the process of regaining his teaching credentials. He runs errands for Ray and takes him for drives to raise his spirits. When Dominick suggests going to a movie, Ray oddly wants to see *The Little Mermaid*. Dominick is a nervous wreck maneuvering him in the theater. Believing that Ray is like the feisty mermaid who wants what she cannot have, Dominick sees in Ray's scowl courage.

Ray makes two friends, Stony and Norman and, as they become "the Three Musketeers," his spirits rise to the point that he tries his paid-for artificial leg. When Ray





demands that Dominick shave him, it feels odd, because their family had never touched, but the act of shaving Ray breaks down the final barriers. It makes Ray talkative.

Ray tells about losing his father and older brother to influenza in 1923, the year of his birth, and at ten losing his mother to rheumatic fever. On her deathbed she reveals that she is his grandmother and that his sister Edna gives birth to him. Dominick thinks of the pictures of "Ma Kettle" on Ray's bureau. Ray and Edna drift around. She means well but is a drunken tramp. They live on "Tavern Row" in Evanston, OH. Ray drops out of school and joins the Navy. He returns only once, to bury Edna. In World War II he serves in France and Italy and patriotically reenlists for Korea. After that, he sells Fuller Brush, which introduces him to Ma. During the vacuum demonstration, Ma wails about how full her hands are with twins. Ray likes her, even finding her mouth kissable, and had come to like Italians while stationed in Italy. He gets a kick out of her two hellions.

Ray goes on to admit making mistakes, especially with Thomas. After the funeral, Dominick had not accused him of anything of which he had not accused himself. Having grown up without a father, Ray had assumed that toughening them up was good and he had been pigheaded. He had realized neither boy liked him. Dominick interrupts to say they had been afraid of his temper. Ray acknowledges this. He had hated Ma's running interference, and finding Ma and Thomas playing dress-up had made him snap. Ray admits he has failed them both. Dominick wants to lash out, but recalls Patel saying that Ray had always been there. Ray admits Ma had been a good woman. Finally, Dominick manages to ask about his biological father. It had been an "unspoken deal" not to discuss that. Dominick's most urgent question remains unresolved.

Chapter 47 opens with Dominick meeting Leo for racquetball before rushing home to meet Joy, who is visiting friends in Three Rivers. Dominick avoids telling Leo why he cannot have a beer in order to avoid a lecture. Leo babbles about what Big Gene will mean for his career. Dominick sees him as the "Rodney Dangerfield of Constantine Motor," getting no respect from his father-in-law. Knowing that Leo will get shot down again, Dominick encourages him. Before they part, Leo reveals, confidentially, that Dessa and Danny are splitting up amiably and he is moving away. Her parents do not know yet. Dominick has been hoping for this for years but cannot get elated. He pictures her fixing up the farmhouse and staying there. Had he not sold his painting equipment, he could help her. Dominick forces himself, for mental health's sake, to suppress foolish ideas of getting back together with Dessa.

Joy is waiting with Tyffanie, looking nervous. When she asks insensitively if Thomas' death has made life simpler, Dominick is able to let it pass without anger. Over lunch, Joy talks about babies, but he refrains from holding or sniffing Tyffanie, who now is beautiful, like Joy, a flirt at just six months. Tired of small-talk, Dominick asks the meaning of this meeting, which he is sure is a mistake. When Joy leaves, Dominick discovers that she has left many items and finds a note: Joy is HIV-positive but the baby is not. Thad has gone off to Mexico to seek a cure for his full-blown AIDS, while Joy drives east. She is moving to Three Rivers soon and has arranged for a job and daycare. Joy still loves Dominick but wishes that they had not met, so she would not have wrecked his life. She urges him to get tested and, if he turns out negative,



consider taking Tyffanie if Joy dies. She does not want a bad person raising her. This might be what God wants, giving him a replacement for Angie. Dominick vomits.

Dominick describes the agony of waiting for the test results. He visits Ray as usual. Seeing Princess Evil Eye, he wonders why that old nuisance lives while innocent children die, reiterating the theme of theodicy. That this old crone might be Prosperine after all these years seems remote, but the reader cannot help considering it. She is introduced, however, among other old folk who are clearly stage extras. Ray sees that something is bothering Dominick. Dominick hits bottom with crying jags the night before the results are due. God has finally gotten around to dealing with him for being a "son of a bitch brother." Thomas' disease had been just a preview of coming attractions for his HIV. Remembering goofy Fr. LaVie from the funeral, Dominick phones him. LaVie has just read an article about surviving twins. Dominick tells his whole story in random order, concluding with "God must really hate me." LaVie feeds him theological pap, telling him to hang on. When he finally gets through to the testing center, he is told he is "non-reactive"—which she has to explain means good. Ready to celebrate life, Dominick drives to the hospital to find Dessa and offer to hold kids. She hands him Nicky.

Throughout his life, Dominick has fantasized about meeting his father and escaping Ray. There had been no deathbed confession from Ma. He never imagines how the truth comes out, in the same booth in which he had sat with Thomas on the eve of his sacrifice. During Ray's first foray out on his new leg, they stop at Friendly's for lunch. Ray is feeling his oats, scoffing at the approaching Hurricane Bob and the fall of communism. Building submarines had just been a job. Everything blows over. As they eat silently, Dominick thinks about promising Joy to help all he can, but his life is up in the air. She should look to support services. Joy does not want Tyffanie adopted by perverts. She cries and hangs up on him. Ray interrupts Dominick's thoughts. He has realized that being deceived about his own real parents had scarred him, so he is breaking his promise to Ma and revealing the truth. Dominick is not to hate her or himself. The man dies 4-5 months before the twins are born, in Korea. Ma reads about it and confirms it with his cousin. He is a "Heinz fifty-seven" racial variety and in those days Papa would have disowned or killed her if he had learned. Dominick's father is Henry Drinkwater.

Dominick finds his father's gravestone and then drives to the Wequonnoc Tribal Council office at the reservation on Rte. 22. Construction is underway on the casino. He finds Ralph in a handsome office. Ralph is surprised at the news about Dominick's father, but claims always to have known that they are cousins and had assumed that Dominick had. Dominick asks for help understanding. Ralph quotes his Aunt Minnie before Penny Ann dies that the school's other set of twins are their cousins. Ralph is Asa's son, Nabby is theirs, making Dominick a Wequonnoc/African/Sioux mix. Ralph had hated the hypocritical Burdseys in school for denying their blood and had wanted to kill them while working for Dell Weeks, as privileged white boys. When Ralph tells Dominick that Thomas had known the truth, Dominick recalls Thomas' remark at Penny Ann's grave and is again crushed by Ma's favoritism. Ralph assumes that Dominick is out for casino money when he asks about becoming a Wequonnoc, but Dominick wants to be what he has learned he is. Ralph tosses him an oval stone, the kind used at birth. Wequonnocs



pray to roundness, thanking the Great Creator for the circle of life. That is Dominick's first lesson in his other culture.

At Dr. Patels' Dominick tells of fighting hard not to be pathetically jealous of Thomas. Knowing that he needed to know, why would Ma withhold the truth from him but share it with Thomas? Patel ventures a guess that it is from wanting to protect him. Ma had realized that Thomas would not react in anger but had assumed that Dominick would rage at learning that he is of mixed race. At 41, this is confusing him, but earlier it might have devastated him. He now has tools to deal with it. As a youth he might have turned to alcohol, drugs, or self-destructive violence. Dominick agrees, but rejects Ma's right to withhold the truth. Patel agrees but wants him to consider that Ma's motive might have been love. She could not have wished to make his life miserable. Dominick agrees, a sign of progress. Patel talks of diverse ancient myths about orphans searching for their fathers, but the knowledge always eludes them and fate hurls trials in their paths. Eventually, the orphan stumbles upon the truth and finds peace through his own efforts. The universe becomes his. Dominick has perhaps earned his right to his father. Dominick fingers the oval stone. When Dominick visits Ray, he is angry to be disturbed. The sentries are watching the building storm. They tell him that Princess Evil Eye—Prosperine—has gone to the hospital with pneumonia. She has been preparing to die.

Dominick watches television for news on the storm and sees what is happening in Russia. He wonders how Prosperine could be alive or how, incoherent, she could recognize him if she is his aunt. He realizes that she recognizes Papa. Against the television reporters' advice, Dominick ventures out into the hurricane and reaches the hospital. Dessa is not there, but he borrows two pet rabbits and takes them to Prosperine Albrizio's room. She is a "do not resuscitate." Although she appears unconscious, he asks for forgiveness, to be made whole. Prosperine closes her eyes after he shows her two rabbits. He returns one to its box and holds close the other. She opens her eyes, sees two made one, and pets it. She crosses herself and Dominick leaves without looking back.

Chapter 48 rapidly and satisfyingly wraps up the threads. The hurricane blows through, Soviet Communism falls, there is no evidence that Thomas and Prosperine ever meet at Settle, where she is imprisoned until 1992. Hume and fellow administrators are cleared of negligence charges, Hatch's remaining inmates are transferred, and Three Rivers State Hospital closes. The Wequonnoc Nation may regain its property. Electric Boat shrinks. The Wequonnoc Moon Casino and Resort flourishes, expands, and reinvigorates the local economy. Dominick, now a member of the tribe, starts dating Dessa and gets excited about UConn women's basketball.

Dominick proposes without planning, Dessa asks a week to think about it, but crawls into bed while he sleeps and accepts. The wedding is small. Leo gets the General Manager's job, thanks to Thula and her daughters flexing "feminist muscle," and dropping the fake promotions, drives sales forward. Angie and Leo conceive another child in middle age. Aunt Minnie arrives, joins the Tribal Council Elders, and provides Dominick missing details about his mother, including that Connie and Henry truly love



one another. The boys are a product of real love. Ralph and Dominick warm to one another. Ralph is a fine leader and an ethical man. He forgives Dominick everything.

Ray returns home for 3-4 good years before having a stroke, which returns him to Rivercrest. The old house stands vacant until Dominick offers it as a battered women's shelter. It is named for Concettina T. Birdsey. Joy dies after a long battle and becoming friends with Dessa, who takes to Tyffanie instantly. They adopt her at age six. At their last session, Patel offers an analysis of Dominick's dreams about trading places with Thomas. Dominick wants to be both strong and sweet, integrated. Both agree that his therapy is finished.

Dominick grows wealthy, has the family he has always wanted, and feels that the universe is his. He teaches American history at the Wequonnoc School, quite differently from the way he had been taught it. He finally treasures Papa's gift. Dominick has learned much about love and forgiveness and that "God exists in the roundness of things."



# Characters

## Dominick Birdsey (b. 1950)

The novel's angst-filled narrator, Dominick is a high school teacher turned house painter, who candidly describes himself as a son of a bitch. The novel describes his lifelong struggle to deal with his mother's clear preference for his identical twin, Thomas, and having to be his brother's keeper.

Dominick is born six minutes after his identical twin Thomas, on New Year's Day, 1 January, 1950. Illegitimate, they receive their mother's surname, Tempesta. Within years they are adopted by Ray Birdsey, an angry pipefitter at Electric Boat. Ray is tough on both boys, but focuses his rage particularly on Thomas, leaving Dominick to try to draw it off. As the novel opens, Dominick is cohabiting with Joy Hanks, having in 1986 been divorced from Dessa for less than a year after being together for 16 years. He still yearns for Dessa and blames his own temper for losing her. As his Ma dies of cancer years before, Dominick grows increasingly pessimistic and blasphemous, which bothers his religious mother. He admits that he lets things eat away inside him until he explodes.

Every Sunday Dominick checks paranoid schizophrenic Thomas out of the Three Rivers State Hospital, where he has lived on-and-off for twenty years, and treats him to lunch. Dominick blames himself for missing signs of increased agitation the day before Thomas amputates his own right hand as a protest against President George W. Bush's Operation Desert Shield. As next of kin, Dominick supports his twin's decision not to allow surgeons to reattach the hand, which puts him further at odds with Ray. Much of the novel details Dominick's efforts to rescue Thomas from the Hatch Forensic Institute, a ghastly maximum-security unit, to which he is sent for a mandatory 30-day psychiatric evaluation. This is extended for a full year. At Hatch, Dominick meets Thomas' quirky but dedicated caseworker, Lisa Sheffer, and his perceptive Indian-born psychologist, Dr. Rubina Patel. While helping Patel interpret Thomas' thought, Dominick becomes her patient. She helps him understand his own inner makeup.

Dominick frequently reflects on his childhood, youth, and early adulthood. As a child, when Ray is bullying, Dominick fantasizes about television's Sky King being his biological father. He recalls with shame times when he gets his "goody-goody" brother into trouble on purpose, and constantly resents having to stick up for him. After high school, Dominick wants a reprieve from his family, but Ma convinces him to room with Thomas at the University of Connecticut. That summer, Dominick has his first sexual encounters but has no interest in a relationship. At UConn, Dominick grows concerned at Thomas' inability to apply himself and tries, unsuccessfully, to help. Thomas' dependence on No-Doz worries him.

During the summer, they work together with Dominick's high school friend, Leo Blood and an old classmate, Ralph Drinkwater, who always looks at the twins suspiciously. Dominick meets Dessa, a wealthy Greek-American determined to escape her father's



financial clutches. Thomas humiliates himself and Dominick on the job and quits. Dominick decides to room with Leo the second year, devastating Thomas, and leading to his first stay in psychiatric care. The roommates are arrested for smoking marijuana and the story that Leo tells the police leads to him and Dominick fighting and being, for a while, estranged.

Dominick and Leo marry the Constantine twins and both have babies. Dominick and Dessa's, Angela, dies of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Devastated, Dessa goes on a cruise and Dominick has a vasectomy. Learning of this, Dessa leaves him, to escape his "toxicity." Dominick suffers an "anxiety attack" while teaching, resigns, and takes up house painting. Leo introduces him to Joy a month after his divorce and she moves into his condo, but he still loves Dessa—and never tells Joy about his vasectomy.

The issue is forced when Thomas falls from a ladder after being shocked to see the client commit suicide. Joy announces that she is pregnant and only after learning about the operation admits who the father is. She moves out, leaving Dominick feeling betrayed and suicidal. He is saved only by needing to finish reading his maternal grandfather's self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings." Much of the novel consists of transcriptions and Dominick's interaction with the troubling thoughts it produces. When he finishes reading, Dominick shreds it, but comes to appreciate that knowing why he is so angry—like Papa—helps him find healing.

Thomas' suicide frees Dominick from his burden, while leaving him adrift as an "untwinned" twin. As Dessa's relationship with another man falls apart, she and Dominick become close and eventually remarry. Joy returns, HIV-positive, and asks him to adopt her daughter when she dies. He and Dessa do so, and Dominick returns to teaching, for the Wequonnoc Nation, of which he becomes a proud member when Ray reveals the family secret: Joseph Drinkwater, of mixed African/Wequonnoc Indian blood, who dies in the Korean War months before the twins' birth, is his father. Ma had told gentle Thomas the truth but withheld it from Dominick, who might have grown self-destructive. With the help of his psychologist, Dominick sees that Ma may have loved Thomas more, but had also loved and been concerned for him.

## **Thomas Joseph Birdsey (1949-92)**

Narrator Dominick Birdsey's identical twin, born six minutes before Dominick, on New Years Eve, 31 December, 1949. Thomas in 1990 is a paranoid schizophrenic, having lived on-and-off for twenty years in the Three Rivers State Hospital. He is able to function when properly medicated (8 mg. of Haldol per day to quiet the voices in his head) and manages morning concessions in the patients' lounge. He is addicted to reading the newspapers, and President George W. Bush's Operation Desert Shield has him convinced that America is heading to Armageddon.





During a severe episode, Thomas believes that cutting off his own hand will help stop the madness. Dominick misses the signs during their regular Sunday lunch. After being reprimanded for praying out loud in the Public Library, Thomas amputates his right hand, fulfilling Matthew 5:29-30, Jesus tells his disciples to cut off body parts that offend in order to avoid burning in hell intact. A former Boy Scout, Thomas controls the bleeding, emergency personnel arrive quickly, and orthopedic surgeons stand ready to reattach the hand. Thomas, however, demands that it is his religious right to decline. As next of kin, Dominick supports the decision. During their mother's fight with cancer, Thomas prays to St. Agatha for her and believes Kellogg's adds carcinogens to Special K as part of a Soviet plot. He also believes that John Lennon's song, "Instant Karma" is written specially for him to inspire him to do good for the world.

Most of the novel consists of Dominick wrestling with the fact that Ma prefers Thomas, who is in every way the opposite of him, a "goody goody boy" who wears turtleneck dickeys and is at odds with rough Dominick. Thomas begins showing signs of mental illness during his first year of college in 1969, and it becomes clear in March 1970, that his "brain dropped him to his knees." Over 20 years he is subjected to shifting diagnoses, new medications, and a variety of psychiatrists. He has some reasonable periods between bad spells. Thomas has twice before Kuwait suffered "perservation" as he spirals down, dwelling on abortion and then the hostages in Iran. In 1977/78 they decide that he is not manic-depressive and take him off lithium in favor of Stelazine, which in high dosage leaves him paralyzed. Switched to Haldol in 1983, Thomas is released and briefly holds a job at McDonald's. He finds a "bride-of-Frankenstein" girlfriend, Nadine, a fellow "holy roller," whom he meets at a Bible study group. She talks him off medications as a "test of faith." Thomas cracks up at work and is returned to the hospital. Nadine and another "high-on Jesus buddy," Chuckie elope to Nashville, TN.

After high school, where Thomas earns passing marks while Dominick excels, Thomas applies only to the University of Connecticut, half-heartedly supposing he will become a teacher like Dominick, from whom he is not ready to be separated. Thomas is too distracted to study at UConn, however. He resists making friends and resents Dominick being able. At the end of the year, Thomas tries frantically to catch up, begins taking massive quantities of No-Doz, and grows paranoid. He destroys their portable typewriter when a prankster steals a key; in fact, Thomas had hidden it. He drops out in his third semester, but is not drafted when he fails the psychological part of the draft physical. He closes down, no longer eating or talking.

After his rash act, Thomas is placed in the Hatch Forensic Institute, a ghastly maximum-security unit, for a mandatory 30-day psychiatric evaluation. Only at the end of the period does Dominick obtain a visitor's pass to see him. No one believes Thomas' complaints of being raped, because the facility is under surveillance 24 hours a day. This constant surveillance deepens Thomas' paranoia. An anonymous tip inspires Dominick to demand HIV-testing, which the administration resists, and Dominick's doctor determines that Thomas has been raped anally, but is not infected. A scandal results in the politically-motivated Psychiatric Security Review Board (PSRB), which sentences Thomas to another year at Hatch, releasing him after seven months.



Dominick gets Thomas into a low-security halfway house but he escapes overnight and is found drowned at the Falls, a favorite place. It is ruled accidental, but Dominick is sure that Thomas drowns himself on purpose, to escape the evil world.

At the end of the novel, Dominick learns that their biological father is Henry Joseph Drinkwater, of mixed African/Wequonnoc Indian blood, who dies in the Korean War months before the twins' birth. Ma had told gentle Thomas the truth but withheld it from Dominick, who might have grown self-destructive. With the help of his psychologist, Dominick sees that Ma may have loved Thomas more, but had also loved and been concerned for him. For most of the novel, Dominick has a love/hate attitude towards Thomas, whose protector he has to be throughout his life—against school bullies and their stepfather Ray—which only intensifies when he promises Ma on her deathbed to watch over him. Dominick's inability to fulfill this Quixotic quest troubles him, and when Thomas dies, he must deal with being an "untwinned" twin.

## **Domenico Onofrio Tempesta (1880-1949)**

Seen only through his own self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," Domenico ("Papa") is Dominick and Thomas Birdsey's maternal grandfather (and Dominick's namesake). Daughter Concettina (Connie, most often simply referred to as "Ma") portrays him in stories as a "stern-faced paragon of accomplishment," proud to be the first Italian to own property in Three Rivers, CT, after immigrating from Sicily in 1901. She adores him, while admitting harsh treatment in her youth. Truly troubling facts come out when, suffering terminal cancer, she entrusts the memoirs to Dominick, who has them translated.

From them, Dominick learns that late in life Papa writes about his life to fulfill a priest's penance years earlier. He sometimes dictates and sometimes writes himself in a mixture of standard Italian and Sicilian dialect, rich in folk sayings. He guards the work against Ma's prying eyes and when he dies, having penned the final wish that God will save him, Ma gathers the papers, strewn by the wind, but never reads them. Papa has ceased being a church-goer and declares that she may burn his memoirs, but Ma summons a priest and preserves the papers. Papa and Ignazia are buried across the cemetery from one another, she beneath a modest stone and he beneath a monumental one, with grief-stricken angels and the motto, "The greatest griefs are silent."

Papa is the oldest of the Tempesta brothers. Seeing a miracle makes clear to the local priest that he is called to the priesthood. He enjoys his years of training—except being hazed by richer students—and is sorry to be recalled to the village to take over the job at which brother Vincenzo fails scandalously. Another brother, Pasquale, works in the sulfur mines with their father. When the father is killed in an accident, Papa becomes head of the family and zealously defends the legacy of greatness that falls on his shoulders. After an argument with his uncle, a business rival, Papa takes Vincenzo and Pasquale to America to seek their fortunes, leaving their bitter mother behind.



In Three Rivers, CT, Papa alone prospers. Both brothers bitterly disappoint him and die tragic deaths. He becomes disenchanted with the church. He arranges a marriage with relatives in Brooklyn, NY, choosing not the eldest sister, Prosperine, who is so ugly that he calls her Monkey, but beautiful Ignazia, an emotional fireball. The marriage is rocky from the start, because Ignazia does not hold by his Old World authoritarianism and fierce temper, and Prosperine, their housemaid, is her sister's defender. From Prosperine, Papa learns about the sisters' murdering another tyrannical husband in Italy and fleeing to America. He stores this information to use against them later. The situation worsens when Ignazia gives birth to twins, a stillborn boy, whom Papa baptizes, and a red-haired, harelipped daughter, whom he rejects as being the bastard of an Irishman whom Ignazia had wanted to marry. Told that another pregnancy will kill her, Ignazia moves out of Papa's bedroom.

Things get better when Papa finally goes to confession and receives writing his story as penance. The baby, Concettina, is baptized, the family resumes going to Mass, and Papa begins rising to prominence in church and society. A fight with Prosperine, however, changes everything. He again grows suspicious of being poisoned and catches the two sisters together in bed as lovers. They run away, but Papa uses the threat of getting Ignazia deported to force her back. He rapes her whenever he feels like it, taunting her with the possibility of getting pregnant. When she can take no more, Ignazia drowns herself and nearly drowns Concettina with her. Instead, the girl becomes Papa's servant for life. He dies not knowing that she has gotten pregnant.

## **Raymond Alva (Ray) Birdsey (b. 1923)**

Narrator Dominick Birdsey and his identical twin brother's stepfather, Ray is a World War II and Korean War Navy veteran with a volatile temper. As boys, the adopted twins obey Ray instantly, but not their mother. He works nights as a pipe fitter at Electric Boat, forcing the boys to tiptoe and whisper all afternoon until he is picked up for work. When Thomas amputates his own right hand, using Ray's souvenir Gurkha knife, Ray is fishing and when he learns about it from Dominick gets angry that the newspaper calls Thomas' act a "sacrifice to end the standstill over Kuwait." He blames it on his late wife's "namby-pamby stuff" as a child. Throughout the novel, Dominick daydreams about who his biological father might be, including television's The Rifleman, Lucas McCain, or Sky King. He wants it to be anyone but Ray.

Ray is more a screamer than a hitter, telling the twins that they are "human garbage." Thomas chewing on things drives him crazy and he stalks the boy to catch him doing it. He wraps Thomas' fingers in duct tape, forcing him to eat like a dog. His worst offense comes when he catches his wife and Thomas enjoying a dress-up tea party. He breaks Ma's arm when she tries to defend Thomas and locks the boy in a closet while taking Ma to the hospital. Afterwards, he forces Dominick to accept that they two are a team in a battle for survival with Ma and Thomas. This leaves Dominick scarred for life and convinces him that this event is the beginning of Thomas' psychological problems.



Only late in the novel, when Ray has had a gangrenous leg removed, does he mellow and open up to Dominick. A few signs of humanity emerge earlier, such as his depositing \$350 a month into a savings account with Thomas and Dominick as beneficiaries, and all admit that Ray works like a horse. Forcibly retired from Electric Boat and looking shockingly old, Ray tells Dominick his story. Ray loses his father and older brother to influenza in 1923, the year of his birth, and at ten losing his mother to rheumatic fever. On her deathbed she reveals that she is his grandmother and that his sister Edna gives birth to him. Dominick recalls a picture of "Ma Kettle" on Ray's bureau. Ray and Edna drift around. She means well but is a drunken tramp. They live on "Tavern Row" in Evanston, OH. Ray drops out of school and joins the Navy. He returns only once, to bury Edna.

In World War II he serves in France and Italy and patriotically reenlists for Korea. After that, he sells Fuller Brush, which introduces him to Ma. During the vacuum demonstration, Ma wails about how full her hands are with twins. Ray likes her, even finding her mouth kissable, and had come to like Italians while stationed in Italy. He gets a kick out of her two hellions. Ray admits to making mistakes with the boys, but insists that he had only meant to toughen them up for life. Dominick sees that what his psychologist has told him is true: Ray had always been there for the twins, bearing witness. Having had the truth of his own ancestry withheld from him, Ray breaks his promise to his dying wife and tells Dominick that his biological father is Henry Joseph Drinkwater, who dies in the Korean War before they are born. At the end of the novel, Ray shows a sensitivity and compassion that is hard to imagine for most of the book, and Dominick becomes a loving caregiver through his strokes and hospitalizations.

## **Angela Birdsey (1983)**

Dominick and Dessa Birdsey's baby daughter Angela dies of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) in May 1983, at three weeks and three days old. Up late grading papers, Dominick discovers her body, stiff in the bassinet. Dessa becomes a zombie and Dominick is "Management Central," dealing with officials and neighbors. Dominick has blanked out most of the funeral, except for Thomas contemplating whether some enemy were warning him that he would be assassinated. On his dead baby Angela's first birthday, with Dessa sailing to Greece and Sicily, Dominick gets a vasectomy and tells no one. He drifts away from Leo and Angie. Angela's death convinces Dominick that there is no God. Every time he sees little girls, he thinks of Angela.

## **Concettina Pasqualina (née Tempesta) Birdsey (1916-87)**

Seen mostly through her late father's self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," but also through the select memories of her son, narrator Dominick Birdsey, Concettina (Connie, most often simply referred to as "Ma") provokes most of the conflict in the novel by giving preferential treatment to Dominick's twin, Thomas, throughout their childhoods. When diagnosed



with terminal cancer in 1987, Ma entrusts to Dominick her scrapbook and her father's manuscript. She dies before he can get it translated from Italian for her to read.

Ma is the daughter of Domenico and Ignazia Tempesta. Outsiders remember her as a quiet, pleasant woman and an avid reader. Her great passion in life is her photo album, which she rescues at great risk from a house fire when her boys are ten. She declares that nothing else matters. A religious woman, Ma is pained by Dominick's bitterness as she fights cancer. She is afraid of dying, but accepts God's will. Camera-shy and self-conscious about her harelip, Ma is missing from the photographs. She recalls her father, who dies before she gives birth to the twins, unmarried, aged 33, as extraordinarily strict with her. She finds him dead over his memoirs, which she never reads. After grueling and futile treatments, Ma dies with Ray and Dominick keeping vigil. In Ray's absence, Dominick gives her permission to let go of life, promising to take care of Thomas, a schizophrenic.

Dominick always wonders why Ma puts up with their stepfather Ray's temper, aimed primarily at her favorite, Thomas. She is normally passive, accepting brutal abuse. Fondled on a bus by a crazy tramp, she does nothing, causing young Dominick's blood to boil, and forbids the twins to mention it to Ray. Since she does not want her boys to go to Vietnam, she stands up to Ray over funding college for them. When the dropout Ray refuses, Ma takes a maid's job at Howard Johnson's. When Ray's pride convinces him to "cough up" \$4,000, she is relieved "to be spared the outside world." Ray's worst offense is when he catches Ma and Thomas playing dress-up. When she tries to defend Thomas, Ray breaks her arm, and while he takes her to the hospital, he keeps Thomas locked in a closet. Dominick believes that this is the beginning of Thomas' mental problems.

Only in her father's memoirs does the full tragedy of Ma's life grow clear. Her beloved "Papa," whom she admits to Dominick earlier often treats her with great cruelty, describes her as too homely to marry because of her harelip. Ma is also a twin, but her unnamed brother is stillborn and Papa rejects her because of her red hair, assuming that she is conceived by her mother's Irish lover in Brooklyn, just before the marriage. A sensitive priest eventually convinces Papa to baptize her and for a while he even comes to like her. His mistreatment of Ignazia continues to grow, however, eventually driving her to suicide. She tries to drag her daughter into the icy water, but Ma fights her off. She becomes Papa's loyal and silent slave until he dies in 1949, as he pens the final words of his memoir.

Ma gives birth to the illegitimate twins that Papa never suspects she is carrying in 1949/50 (three minutes before and after New Year's). Their father is Henry Joseph Drinkwater, who dies in the Korean War months earlier. She meets Ray when he comes selling Fuller Brush. She breaks down, wailing about how full her hands are with twins. Ray likes her, even finding her mouth kissable, and has come to like Italians while stationed in Italy. He gets a kick out of her two hellions. They marry—and fight. Ma tells gentle Thomas about his paternity, but withholds it from volatile Dominick, worrying about his reaction. She unburdens herself to Ray as she is dying, but swears him to silence. Ray breaks his promise because he believes Dominick has a right to know.





When Ray is institutionalized after several strokes, Dominick donates the family home, built by Papa, to become the "Concettina T. Birdsey Women and Family Shelter."

## Leo and Angie (née Constantine) Blood

Narrator Dominick Birdsey's best friend and his ex-wife Dessa's younger sister, née Athena Constantine, Leo and Angie marry at the same time as Dominick and Dessa, but despite a rocky road, have remained together into the present day. Angie is rather glossed over in the novel. Dessa describes her Athena as more the "goddess of obnoxious behavior" than goddess of wisdom, Athena, for whom she is named. Angie, four years younger than Dessa, gets away with murder. She is jealous of Dessa and competitive, does not bother with makeup or dresses, but lives in jeans and sweatshirts.

A "professional bullshitter" with the slickness of Leave It to Beaver's Eddie Haskell, Leo has worked nine years for his father-in-law, who treats him as the "Rodney Dangerfield of Constantine Motors," giving no respect and holding back his career. If Leo had any self-respect, he would have quit long ago. Leo's goal in life is to act in the movies and television, but has gotten only minor commercial roles. He buys a \$1,500 Armani suit for auditions, sure that his big break is coming. A consummate sexist, Leo divides women into those who enjoy giving blow jobs and swallowing and those who do not. When he is caught in adultery, the marriage survives only through counseling. Their children are Amber and Shannon. Leo is an excellent father, but father-in-law "Big Gene" never forgives his adultery, even while putting him on the payroll.

Leo and Dominick are friends since the summer of 1966, when Leo at 16 is chip-toothed, paunchy, and already looks middle-aged. He brags of knowing musician Sam the Sham. Nicknamed "Cool Jerk," he makes life miserable for the summer school teacher and fellow students, passes algebra by cheating, but gets caught in a prank in the fall. His mother, a city councilwoman, takes him to a "specialist." Dominick's twin, Thomas, disapproves of Leo and tries to keep Dominick away from his influence. Dominick, however, enjoys the forbidden pleasures of X-rated movies and drinking to which Leo introduces him. After Dominick and Dessa's marriage falls apart, Leo convinces him to join the Hardbodies gym, where Dominick meets Joy Hanks. When Thomas is institutionalized, Leo touchingly asks to be put on his visitors' list.

In the summer after their first year in college, Leo works with Dominick, the still-resentful Thomas, and Ralph Drinkwater for Public Works. Ralph introduces Leo and Dominick to marijuana. During their second year they room together and get caught smoking dope. During the police interrogation, Leo weaves a combination of truth and bullshit as a self-protecting smoke screen, "bagging" Ralph and their ex-boss Dell, knowing that the homophobic police will follow that trail. Leo and Dominick fight after their release and finish the year in cold tension.

At the end of the novel, Leo is unexpectedly named general manager when Gene retires, drops all of Gene's cheesy sales gimmicks, and drives sales to the point that he





is honored by Isuzu as a top regional manager. Leo and Angie in middle age are again expecting a baby.

## Ciccolina

Seen only through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," Ciccolina is "a bowlegged old butcher-woman burdened with a hunchback and breasts that hung from her like two big sacks of semolina." She is half-blind from cataracts and "afflicted with an ugly tumor that stuck out on her forehead—a knob the size of a baby's fist that had darkened to the color of an eggplant." She mumbles to herself and curses young Prosperine and Violetta D'Annunzio when they tease her in the plaza of Pescara, Italy. The girls are both repelled and drawn, like a magnet. Every morning Ciccolina drags her cart of "scrawny hares and half-bald hens" to butcher for customers. There are rumors that Ciccolina is a witch available to perform small acts of revenge. People say that she can both cure and inflict the "evil eye," and most avoid her. When Prosperine is hired by Ciccolina's godson as her housemaid, she treats the girl decently and eventually as her own daughter. She refuses to teach her to use the evil eye against people, but only how to identify it and guard against it.

## Dessa Constantine

Narrator Dominick Birdsey's ex-wife from whom, in 1986, he is divorced after being together for 16 years, Dessa remains the love of his life. As the novel begins, she runs the day care center at Electric Boat in Groton, CT. Dominick blames his temper for losing her. Dessa begins living with a moderately successful, ex-hippy potter, Danny Mixx. She has always loved Dominick's schizophrenic identical twin, Thomas, and visits him at Shanley Memorial Hospital, when Thomas amputates his own right hand. She and Dominick run into one another in the parking lot, awkwardly. Their black Labrador, Sadie (Dominick prefers Goofus), has forgotten Dominick.

Dessa Constantine works at the Dial-Tone Lounge when Dominick first meets and falls in love with her. Dessa is more experienced sexually than Dominick, but has been abused by earlier partners. She appreciates Dominick's shyness and feels safe, and forgives him the one time he cannot control himself and rapes her. She hates being ogled at Dial-Tone but cannot afford to quit, because she needs to prove her independence to her father, who is generous but always attaches strings.

They marry and have a baby, Angela, who dies of AIDS. Dessa withdraws from everyone and everything. She and Dominick do not fight and he cannot bring himself to console her when she talks to their dead baby at night. As Angela's birthday nears, Dessa quits her job and sails to Greece and Sicily. Dominick is happy to have commitments that keep him from being alone with her. She returns, celebrating her return to life, only to learn that Dominick has had a vasectomy. She busies herself



around the house and vents about Dominick's toxic anger. She loves him but cannot breathe. He begs and promises, but Dessa packs up and leaves.

Dessa's relationship with Mixx declines and he moves away. Dominick dares not hope to get Dessa back, but he has made progress in psychiatric analysis and they gradually grow closer together. They remarry and she befriends Dominick's ex-girlfriend Joy Hanks, who is dying of AIDS. Joy's daughter takes to Dessa, and she and Dominick adopt Tyffanie Rose after her mother's death. Thus they have the family they had wanted but had not thought possible.

## **Diogenes (Gene) and Thula Constantine**

The Constantines are the ex-inlaws of narrator Dominick Birdsey and current in-laws of his best friend, Leo Blood. "Be Gene" the loud, gorilla-hairy, owner of Constantine Chrysler Plymouth Isuzu and a string of strip malls in Three Rivers, CT. During the recession, the dealership is not doing well, so he runs garish promotions. He is second-generation Greek-American, while his wife Thula is an immigrant. The Constantines are into hand-painted murals, which adorn their opulent "shack" on Bayview Terrace, surrounded by orchards. Gene is beginning to hire women and minorities for appearance sake, but mostly hires in the family. Gene always favors Dominick over Leo, embarrassingly, at family get-togethers, as he had favored Dessa over Angie. After the divorce, Gene treats Dominick like the "Invisible Man" when they meet, even though Dessa had left him, not vice versa. When Thomas Birdsey commits suicide, the Constantines pay for six Greek Orthodox memorial masses and send a huge arrangement of flowers to the funeral home. Dessa arrives only after the funeral, having had to take her mother to the hospital after Thula suffers a fall. Dominick worries about Thula. When Gene retires, he unexpectedly makes Leo, whom he has always mistreated, the general manager.

## **Billy Covington**

Four years older than the Birdsey twins, Billy stays at their house after school because "he doesn't have a nice daddy like you boys." He dresses up in Superman pajamas. As a teenager, Billy is their paperboy and by the time they are teens has joined the Air Force. He is killed during a bombing raid near Haiphong and Dominick thinks about the Vietnam War—and lusts for Billy's fiancée's breasts and his black GTO. Ma damns the war in Ray's presence and is determined that college will keep her boys safe.

## **The Drinkwaters**

A number of Drinkwaters populate the novel. All are people of mixed race, black, Wequonnoc Indian, and white. All are considered "colored" (black) by white society and discriminated against.



The first, Nabby Drinkwater, appears only in "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," as a lazy, sneaky Indian who gets Pasquale Tempesta fired from the mill. When Nabby dies suddenly on the job at age 42, Tempesta ("Papa"), also 42, begins his return to the church. Previously, Nabby's constant talk about his sexual exploits leads Papa to the Hungarian whorehouse. Nabby has a "colored wife and four half-colored children," but never talks about his family.

Henry Joseph Drinkwater is never seen. He dies in the Korean War in 1950. At the end of the novel, it is revealed and confirmed to be narrator Dominick Birdsey that he is his and identical twin Thomas' biological father. This is a truth for which Dominick has long searched. Henry truly loves their mother but dies before they are born.

Penny Ann and Ralph Drinkwater are the same age as Dominick and Thomas, the only other set of twins in school and, growing up in the 1950s, are treated as blacks. Penny Ann stays back in third grade when Ralph goes into fourth grade and enters Dominick and Thomas' class. Penny Ann is "a big baby," who cries every recess, smells, coughs, eats crayons, and steals. Dominick dislikes her and tells a lie to get her in trouble on the day she disappears. Her body is found at the Falls a week later. Dominick begins having nightmares about her. Dominick is selected to read an essay at a tree planting ceremony in Penny Ann's memory. Joseph Monk, a former neighbor, is arrested for murder/rape.

Ralph pals with a bully, Lonnie Peck, who is constantly in trouble, and grows more ferocious after Penny Ann's death. Dominick is afraid of him. They do not see one another again until tenth grade, when, as an Indian, Ralph challenges the sarcastic history teacher, Mr. LoPresto, about Manifest Destiny and is sent to the office. Dominick sides with Ralph and mentally confronts LoPresto, but in fact does nothing. Ralph drops out of school and begins drinking.

During the summer, Ralph and the Birdsey twins work full-time for Public Works. Ralph is tougher and cockier than ever, but also the best worker, focused and steady. He watches the twins, disconcertingly. Ralph gives Dominick no openings for small talk about the past. He is dark-skinned and sports an Afro. Ralph is great at "Graveball," a made-up game to kill time when supposedly maintaining the cemeteries and eventually shares marijuana with his co-workers. He reads Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, a reproach of American racism.

At the end of the summer it is discovered that he has been living secretly with his supervisor, Dell Weeks and his invalid wife, and has for years been the subject of the Weeks' child pornography operation. He turns them in. Ralph next appears as an "operations engineer" (janitor) at the Hatch Forensic Institute, and cleans up after Thomas on the night of his admission for psychiatric evaluation. He passes to Dominick an anonymous test to get his brother tested for HIV and a classified memo that reveals the administration knows about widespread rapes by orderlies.

Finally, as the media report on the Wequonnocs' construction on a new casino, Ralph dancing in full Indian dress, is identified as Swift Wolf, the tribal pipe-keeper. When



Dominick learns about his paternity, he seeks out Ralph, who had always through that Dominick had known—as had Thomas—but had avoided the non-white part of his blood. When Dominick convinces him otherwise, Ralph begins his education as a Wequonnoc. Ralph has become a fine manager and honorable man.

## Steve Felice

A rare light character in the novel, Felice is narrator Dominick Birdsey's roommate at Shanley Memorial Hospital, when Dominick shatters his leg in a three-story fall. Felice is a fiftyish, flatulent man eager to socialize, a purchasing agent at Electric Boat, worried about layoffs. He knows "Big Ray," Dominick's stepfather, who has visited 3-4 times while Dominick is unconscious. Felice talks about getting married soon in Utah and his fiancée knowing Dominick from somewhere. The fiancée turns out to be Nedra Frank, who years before had disappeared with the Italian manuscript that she had been translating for Dominick. Getting it back helps Dominick discover the past and heal his spirit.

## Mrs. Fenneck

The Children's Librarian at the Three River's Public Library who feels guilty about reprimanding Thomas Birdsey for praying out loud shortly before he amputates his right hand as a sacrifice to God. Fenneck calls 911 and a month later visits Thomas' identical twin, the novel's narrator Dominick, at home to ask written absolution for the event. She complains about what librarians must put up with, handling derelicts, the homeless, and the deranged like Thomas. In no mood to listen to drivel, Dominick angrily writes her out an absolution, and puts her out the door. When Thomas commits suicide seven months later, Fenneck sends a condolence card, still seeking "forgiveness or dispensation" for that day. Her husband has died. Still bitter, Dominick sends a generic thank-you.

## Nedra Frank

A graduate student in the Department of Romance Languages at Yale University, Frank appears to be about 40, with hair tightly pulled back and fingernails chewed, but she has nice breasts, according to narrator Dominick Birdsey, who hires her to translate his maternal grandfather's memoirs. Frank looks down on Papa's "peasant Sicilian" mixed it with standard Italian, pompously declares herself a scholar, above translating such material, but needing money for her car, she takes on the project.

Frank turns out to be a "supercilious bitch," failing to answer Dominick's calls until one snowy evening she shows up at his house. She compulsively carries her doctoral thesis everywhere, fearing thieves. She looks down on Dominick for being a house painter and telling time by what is on television and talks incessantly, about coming late to feminism after being "daddy's little girl" and then a "slave to a chauvinist husband," and starting her Ph.D. program after three years of therapy. When he reacts with nervous laughter to her sexual advances, Frank flees, claiming harassment, withdraws from the doctoral



program, and disappears with Papa's memoir. Twenty years later, Frank shows up, dressed like a cowgirl, as the fiancée of Dominick's hospital roommate, Steve Felice. She tosses the memoir on the bed, narrowly missing Dominick's shattered leg.

## Anne Generous and Patty Katz

Swimming instructors at the YMCA, Anne is married to a sailor and Patty is a junior at JFK High School. Narrator Dominick Birdsey fantasizes about having sex with Anne, who urges him to see Patty. When Patty eagerly but inexpertly masturbates Dominick, he pictures ejaculating into Anne's mouth. Patty has never done anything like this before and is conflicted. She thinks, however, that she loves Dominick. He is not interested in dating, just sex. By the end of the summer, he is no longer attracted to Anne either.

## Joy Hanks

As the novel opens, Joy is narrator Dominick Birdsey's live-in girlfriend, but spends much time with her gay friend Thad, whom Dominick cannot stand. She has an unusual "system" for where things are stored, "zilch follow-through," two failed marriages and an arrest for shoplifting behind her, and still owes \$8,000 to MasterCard. She and Dominick meet at a Hardbodies gym, where she works, ogled by young executive clients. She is short, blond, in great shape, and 15 years younger than Dominick. He hopes that her beauty can help him forget his ex-wife, but it does not work and Joy realizes it. A psychiatrist, Dr. Grork, treats her until money runs out. Her uncle sexually abuses her in junior high, she marries Ronnie at 18, giving up a chance to play Cinderella at Disneyland, and begins sleeping with her second husband, Dennis, while the first is at sea. Dominick knows that she will eventually cheat on him too. She looks forward to getting out of debt, marrying, and buying a house.

Dominick never tells Joy about his vasectomy, since she claimed to be taking the pill and neither wants children. Sometimes with Joy, sex is not something shared but a service she renders. Both are surprised to find her pregnant. She is overjoyed at the thought of motherhood, until Dominick lowers the boom, while lying badly injured in a hospital. Unable to face him again, Joy sends a tape in which she describes her miserable youth and determination to give her baby a better life. She admits that Thad is the father. She moves out and returns to California, hoping that Dominick will not hate her.

Joy returns to the story after baby Tyffanie Rose's birth. Dominick thinks the hospital picture looks like a monkey but keeps it. Somewhat later, Joy visits Dominick to show him Tyffanie Rose and leaves behind a note in which she advises him to be tested for HIV. She has the disease from Thad, who has full-blown AIDS and has fled to Mexico for treatment. Knowing that she has no right to ask, she nevertheless asks Dominick to adopt her daughter if and when she dies. She holds on until Dominick and his ex-wife Dessa remarry. She and Dessa become close friends and the papers are prepared before Joy dies. Dominick and the baby are both HIV-negative.



## Jerry Martineau

The Three Rivers deputy police chief, Martineau is a high school friend of narrator Dominick Birdsey, a comedian type able to mimic anyone. When twin Thomas Birdsey amputates his right hand as an act of martyrdom, Martineau cuts through red tape to retrieve Thomas' blood-spattered Bible from evidence while recovering in the hospital. This pays back Dominick for consoling his basketball teammate when Martineau's father, a cop, blows his brains out in the woods while they are in school. At Thomas' wake, after his own suicide, Martineau brings Dominick a team picture in which they are both young and skinny and Thomas in the background is cheering like a normal kid.

## Msgr. McNulty and Fr. Guglielmo

Seen only through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," the dog-faced, anti-"Eye-talian" pastor at St. Mary of Jesus Christ Church in Three Rivers, CT, McNulty several times clashes with Domenico ("Papa"). First, he demands that Papa control his sex-addicted brother Vincenzo. Next, after Papa becomes prominent and parishioners imitate him in skipping Mass, he demands that he set an example. When Papa orders him off his property and throws a clump of wet cement at him, McNulty curses Papa's house. Soon afterward, brother Pasquale falls from the roof and dies. After the funeral, Papa swears never to go to church while McNulty is in charge, and writes an (unanswered) denunciation of him to the Vatican.

McNulty is verbally and physically abusive to his young, timid, easily embarrassed assistant, Fr. Guglielmo, who succeeds him after World War I upon McNulty's death. Guglielmo, the parish's first Italian pastor, quickly grows into an excellent leader. Papa remembers Guglielmo's trying to talk sense into Vincenzo and appreciates how Guglielmo ceases to cringe in his role. Rather than argue dogmatically with Papa about baptizing his unwanted daughter, Guglielmo puts him in charge of building a parochial school. This feeds Papa's pride and the sudden death of a worker Papa's age brings him to the confessional. Guglielmo handles Papa's two nagging questions about his brother and dead son with such firmness and compassion that Papa pours out his soul. Guglielmo includes in Papa's penance writing down in good order the story of his life. Papa loses contact with Guglielmo, who is elevated and transferred to Bridgeport, CT, before the memoir is finished.

## Angelo Nardi

A courtroom stenographer in Palermo, Italy, Angelo is "a handsome fella" back in the late 1940s, hired by Domenico Onofrio Tempesta ("Papa") to transcribe and type his memoirs. A recent immigrant, Angelo can barely speak English. He eventually gets fed up, is fired and rehired, and finally disappears to Chicago. Narrator Dominick Birdsey for years suspects that Angelo is his biological father, until he learns the truth.





## Dr. Rubina Patel

An Indian-born psychologist, Patel is assigned to Thomas Birdsey's case when he is moved to the Hatch Forensic Institute. Thomas' caseworker, Lisa Sheffer, declares her "very cool." Patel is middle-aged with salt-and-pepper hair worn in a bun, and wears saris of varying bright colors under her lab coat. She studies anthropology in London and psychology in Chicago under Dr. Bruno Bettelheim. She is a follower of Jung's "collective unconsciousness." Patel enlists narrator Dominick Birdsey, Thomas' identical twin, to help her understand his mind. Her office is stripped to the essentials and features the impish Indian goddess Shiva with waving arms. She offers clients tea. The office is in a two-story strip mall on Division St., along with a Blockbuster Video, a Chinese take-out, a locksmith, and Miss Patti's Academy of World Dance, and seeing the dance students makes Dominick yearn for his late daughter, who dies of AIDS. Quickly Dominick, who is a jumble of anger and frustration, becomes her patient as well. With playful eyes, a constant smile, infinite patience, parables and myths—and when necessary doses of "tough love"—Patel helps Dominick achieve a normal, happy life. Dominick calls her "Queen of the Metaphors."

## Henry and Ruth Rood

The nasty, alcoholic customers whose house on Gillette St. narrator Dominick Birdsey is painting, the Roods plague Dominick to complete work throughout his various nightmares. Dominick cannot paint while dealing with the aftermath of his twin Thomas cutting off his own hand and being institutionalized for observation, but Rood telephones repeatedly, harassing him. When finally Dominick, with an injured hand pulls down the shutters to strip at home, Ruth says it is not a good time, but he persists. As he is removing the third-floor shutters, he sees Henry inside blow his brains out. The fall from the ladder puts Dominick out of commission, Henry's "evil eye" haunts him and ultimately Dominick ends his painting career. Ruth is a twitchy, nervous school teacher who looks like Morticia Addams. Henry has been writing an exposé of something for eleven years and becomes "despondent" by having the house scaffolded. Dominick is sure that Henry vindictively leaves a big mess for Ruth to clean up.

## Tyffanie Rose

Joy Hanks' and Thad's biological daughter, Tyffanie Rose is adopted by Dominick and Dessa Birdsey after they remarry and Joy dies of AIDS, contracted from her supposedly-careful bisexual lover. Before she dies, Joy asks her ex-lover, Dominick, whom she first claimed is the baby's father, to adopt her and fills out the papers. Monkey-faced at birth, Tyffanie Rose grows up pretty like her mother and takes instantly to Dessa. She is HIV-negative at the time.



## Lisa Sheffer

A Forensic Treatment Specialist (FTS) for Unit 2 at the Hatch Forensic Institute, Sheffer becomes Thomas Birdsey's social worker and eventually his twin Dominick Birdsey's friend. Sheffer is small, in her early 30s, with a flat-top haircut, earrings around one ear, a powerful handshake, and a traffic cop's style. A Jewish/Italian mixture, she has a seven-year-old daughter, Jesse (by a "sperm-donor"). Dominick quickly evaluates her as a disorganized "goofball," and is ready to go over her head to her superiors. When she provides the roster, he calms down. Sheffer tells him about the political ramifications of his brother's case and counsels him as a fellow "Don Quixote" codependent. She advises that Dominick to make a "leap of faith" and accept that Hatch may not be a bad place for Thomas while he is under court-mandate observation. While it is not Club Med, Hatch is decently run and humane. Off the record, she admits that Hartford is trying to avoid negative publicity and advises him to get his bruises documented in case he later needs "leverage" with the State of Connecticut. When it is discovered that orderlies have been raping patients and that a quarter of the inmates may be HIV-positive as a result, Sheffer is devastated at having misled families about Hatch's safety. Sheffer is the "queen of the unexpected emergency," a bundle of nervous energy, late even for Thomas' funeral. Late in the novel she reveals that she is gay and introduces Dominick to her partner Monica.

## Signora Siragusa

Seen only through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," Signora Siragusa is the Tempesta brothers' landlady when they first arrive in Three Rivers, CT. She reluctantly allows Pasquale to keep a pet monkey, but only in the basement. After Papa he learns about Prosperine murdering a man in Italy with powdered glass in his food, Siragusa provides him meals. She argues with Papa that he should baptize his surviving twin. Later, crippled with age, she takes in Prosperine, Papa's nemesis, but complains that Prosperine is negligent in her chores and intimates that the ugly woman is having sex with male borders.

## Ignazia (née Tucci) Tempesta (1897-25), a.k.a. Violetta d'A

Seen mostly through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings" and in narrator Dominick Birdsey's haunting nightmare, beautiful Ignazia begins life as Violetta D'Annunzio, the daughter of a fish merchant in Pescara, Italy. She becomes friends with Prosperine Tucci and her sisters. A year older than Prosperine, Violetta points out to the girls what a male and female horse in the meadow are doing together. Chosen despite her poverty to crown the statue of the Virgin Mary at the annual parade for the Feast of the Assumption, Violetta is distracted by the famous artist Gallante Selvi, whose model she becomes for



a triptych of St. Lucia. Soon Violetta is Selvi's mistress and grows haughty from fame and wealth. When Prosperine, by then her housemaid, sees evidence of Selvi beating her, she renews their friendship and cooperates in poisoning Selvi to death.

They flee Pescara for Sicily when the crime is discovered and eventually emigrate to Brooklyn, NY, Violetta calling herself Ignazia Tucci. Ignazia marries Papa when he refuses ugly Prosperine and nearly dies giving birth to twins, the boy still-born and the daughter red-haired and harelipped. Papa rejects the girl, Concettina, as being the child of Ignazia's Irish lover in Brooklyn. Ignazia is entirely devoted to her daughter. Once she nearly flees her marriage, but fear that her Italian past might be revealed keeps her in her "prison home." Eventually unable to take the strain, she drowns herself in a frozen pond. Concettina, aged 8, fights her mother's attempt to take her into death and becomes the widower's housemaid until his death. Dominick dreams about the grandmother whom he never meets drifting beneath the ice, surrounded by the souls of babies in Purgatory and calling out to him.

## **Pasquale Tempesta (1882-1915)**

Seen only through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," Pasquale is the youngest Tempesta brother (and thus narrator Dominick Birdsey's great uncle). In his native Sicily, Pasquale is forced into the sulfur mines as his father's assistant when Domenico ("Papa") is sent to seminary. Papa recalls him never being right in the head, perhaps from the sulfur fumes or perhaps repeated blows to the head by his violent father. Emigrating with his brothers to America, Pasquale is passive and does not want to leave Brooklyn, NY, for Three Rivers, for fear of meeting savage Indians. Pasquale works briefly in American Woolen and Textile Company mill until being fired for drinking. Pasquale has a pet monkey that town gossips claim is his unnatural lover. Domenico believes that he has seen proof. Pasquale works alongside Domenico in building a two-family house, but dies in an accident before it is finished. His death deepens Domenico's hatred of the church.

## **Vincenzo Tempesta (1883-1908)**

Seen only through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," Vincenzo is the middle Tempesta brother (and thus narrator Dominick Birdsey's great uncle). From the start he is the family trouble-maker, causing sexual scandal both in his native Sicily and in Three Rivers, CT. His earlier misbehavior results in Papa's being pulled from seminary in Rome to assume his work duties and his latter adventures get him killed by a police sergeant who interrupts Vincenzo having sex with his wife. This ends seems inevitable when Vincenzo, first glimpsing the Statue of Liberty, jokes about having sex with anyone who resembles her. Vincenzo never learns English and mocks Papa for trying. When they move to Connecticut, Vincenzo soon gets demoted at American Woolen and Textile Company and then fired for running a numbers game. He becomes a greengrocer at



Hurok's Market, using his good looks and antics to draw in female customers. Soon Vincenzo is having sex with women of all nationalities. Msgr. McNulty talks to Papa about "Eye-talians" being oversexed when Vincenzo impregnates a young Irish parishioner. When Vincenzo is caught having sex with a policeman's wife, he is shot in the groin and dies as a result of infection. Humiliated for his family, Papa pays for Vincenzo's funeral but does not attend. He often feels that Vincenzo is laughing at him from Hell.

## **Thad (The Duchess)**

The bisexual half-uncle and secret lover of narrator Dominick Birdsey's live-in girlfriend Joy, Thad lives with Aaron, a rich architect, who is closer to Dominick's age. Thad is a massage therapist who wants to become a caterer, using his lover Aaron's money. Thad, whom Dominick derides as "The Duchess," delivers Joy's farewell note when Dominick reveals that a vasectomy makes it impossible for him to be the father of her baby. She admits that Thad is. They go to California, where Thad finds out he has full-blown AIDS and heads to Mexico for a cure, leaving Joy and daughter Tyffanie to return to New England. Thad has infected her, but it does not spread to the baby.

## **Prosperine (The Monkey) Tucci/Albrizio**

Seen only through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," Prosperine is the great nemesis of Domenico ("Papa"), narrator Dominick Birdsey's late grandfather. He nicknames the ugly woman "Monkey" and frequently calls her that to her face. Prosperine grows up in Pescara on the Adriatic coast of Italy the daughter of a poor widow charged with caring for her younger sisters Anna and Teodolina. Her best friend is the beautiful Violetta D'Annunzio, with whom she enjoys tormenting deformed old Ciccolina, the butcher woman, who is said to be a witch for hire. As they grow older, the friends go to the docks to flirt with fishermen; being ugly, Prosperine does not bother.

Prosperine becomes Ciccolina's housemaid and eventually learns from her how to identify and defend against the evil eye—but not how to use it against others. When Ciccolina dies, Prosperine is retained as the housemaid of artist Gallante Selvi and Violetta, now his haughty artist's model and mistress. When Prosperine sees evidence of Selvi beating Violetta, their friendship is restored, and Prosperine conceives a means of poisoning Selvi to death secretly. They flee when the crime is discovered and eventually emigrate to the United States. Prosperine takes the surname Tucci. When their sponsor tries to pawn Prosperine off as a beautiful young virgin, Papa recoils and takes instead beautiful Violetta, who is renamed Ignazia Tucci. Prosperine accompanies them to Three Rivers, CT, to keep house, but fights constantly with Papa, defending Ignazia, moves out, but sneaks in at night and is caught making love with Ignazia. Papa arranges for her to be sent to the "crazy hospital" for life.



At the end of the novel, a 100-year-old invalid glares at Dominick from her wheelchair at a rest home. Nicknamed "Princess Evil Eye," she goes to the hospital with pneumonia, where Dominick finds her in a bed identified as Prosperine Albrizio, a "do not resuscitate," patient. Dominick shows her two rabbits and then conceals one, while begging her forgiveness so he can be made whole. Seeing "Papa" in Dominick's features, she pets the rabbit and crosses herself. This hearkens back to her training in witchcraft during her youth.

## The Tusias

Seen only through the self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," the Tusias are Domenico Onofrio ("Papa") Tempesta's tenants in his newly-built home early in the 20th century. Salvatore is the local barber, who gives Papa free shaves daily and haircuts on demand in lieu of part of the rent. The unnamed wife, mother of two, helps deliver the twins and argues to have the surviving one baptized. As Ignazia Tempesta withdraws from contact with the world under Papa's domination, she breaks off even with Signora Tusia.

## Delbert (Dell) Weeks

The burly Public Works foreman under whom Dominick and Thomas Birdsey work in the summer of 1969, Weeks has a shaved head, silver tooth, and a filthy mouth. He cannot stand his superior, dispatcher Lou Clukey, a straight-arrow Navy veteran, and thus draws for his crew the worst jobs. Weeks favors narrator Dominick Birdsey and Leo Blood, sending them on errands and telling them bigoted jokes, and relentlessly persecutes Thomas Birdsey, nicknaming him "Dickless." Like many racist bigots, Dell lives in a black and Hispanic neighborhood, in a pigsty, with his fat, sorry-looking, middle-aged wife who suffers MS and can no longer drive. While visiting to look at the car, Dominick and Leo discover that Ralph Drinkwater also lives there, secretly. The living room is strewn with gay pornography. Soon afterwards, the Weeks are arrested for child pornography, turned in by Ralph. Dell is sentenced to 15 years at Somers Prison and his wife to six months at Niantic, suspended.



# Objects/Places

## Three Rivers, CT

Three Rivers is the primary location for the novel. It is a New England town, incorporated in 1653 after the Wequonoc Nation wars with neighboring Nipmucks, Pequots, Narragansetts, and white settlers. The white population grows steadily and legally, while the Indian reservation shrinks and their numbers dwindle. The small Indian cemetery contains graves of both assimilated Indians and warriors down through Vietnam. At the Falls on the Sachem River, young people party and take risks. There are suicides and accidents, including Penny Ann Drinkwater in the 1950s and Thomas Birdsey in 1992.

The novel pictures Three Rivers in 1992, the 1950s and 60s, and in the first decades of the 20th century. In the present day, 1992, narrator Dominick Birdsey travels around town between his condo, his boyhood home on Hollyhock Ave., his house painting clients' house, his psychologist's office in a strip mall, Constantine Motors, owned by his ex-in-laws and employing his best friend Leo Blood, and spends much time at Three Rivers State Hospital, visiting his brother Thomas and Thomas' caseworker. Three times he is in Shanley Memorial Hospital, once as a patient and twice as a visitor. Key events take place in a Friendly's restaurant and in the Three Rivers Public Library. With Electric Boat in nearby Groton, CT, laying off large numbers of workers, Three Rivers is in economic decline. Landmarks like the Loew's Poli movie house, which Dominick remembers fondly from his youth, are boarded up. The town looks to the opening of the Wequonoc Nation Casino and Resort to generate jobs and wealth.

In the 1950s and 60s, Dominick recalls a very non-Leave It To Beaver life in the tension-filled house, a trip to the movies and a soda fountain with Ma and Thomas and events at River Street Elementary School and John F. Kennedy High School. Reading his maternal grandfather's memoirs, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," written in 1949 in the old man's final days, he finds it depicts Three Rivers as a thriving industrial town, concentrating on the manufacture of textiles at American Woolen and Textile Company, and shows the eras discrimination against minorities, particularly Italians. The local Roman Catholic church, dominated by an Irish monsignor, holds this attitude until a young Italian priest succeeds him. Tempesta prides himself on all of the "firsts" he achieves as an immigrant Sicilian, particularly building himself a splendid Old World palace, the house in which the narrator grows up.

## Easterly Beach

Down Rte. 22 from Three Rivers, CT, Easterly Beach is the destination of narrator Dominick Birdsey and pal Leo Blood on the night of the first lunar landing in June of 1969. They drink beer the whole way, roaring along fast and recklessly in Leo's '66





Skylark convertible. At the Dial-Tone Lounge, Dominick meets and falls instantly in love with a beautiful waitress, Dessa Constantine, who complains about nightly "grab-ass" by rowdy sailors while she is on the job. Later, while they are dating, Dominick goes to the Dial-Tone and waits for her until 1 AM. Unable to take "no" for an answer, he rapes and afterward feels great guilt.

## Groton, CT

Home to the U.S. Navy's submarine fleet and the submarines' builder, Electric Boat, Groton is some nine miles from Three Rivers, where Dominick and Thomas Birdsey live. In their youth, in the 1950s, the threat of Communism is intense and Groton is a "guaranteed target" for a Soviet nuclear attack. The children instinctively "duck and roll" when their television set explodes and decades later, Dominick assumes that position when suffering trauma.

## USS Nautilus

America's first nuclear-powered submarine, the Nautilus is built by Electric Boat in Groton, CT, where Thomas and Dominick Birdsey's stepfather, Ray, is employed. The twins are photographed with First Lady Mamie Eisenhower at the launching, 24 January, 1954. Their mother says that the gala event and the newspaper article showing them in sailor suits is the high point of her life. The Nautilus at the time is billed as "America's best hope for containing Communism." Nautilus is a symbol in the novel for the paranoia of the Cold War days.

## Operation Desert Shield / Desert Storm

Seen only on television and in the newspapers, Operation Desert Shield is a multinational buildup of forces in the Persian Gulf beginning in August 1990, as a response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Its immediate purpose is to protect Saudi Arabia against attack, with a longer-range goal of preparedness for war with Iraq—"Operation Desert Storm." Narrator Dominick Birdsey views it as Vietnam II, and his brother Thomas' psychiatric caseworker, Lisa Sheffer, foresees it as another "war that keeps on giving" psychological casualties. Operation Desert Shield demonstrates America's "selective amnesia." Operation Desert Shield's most direct effect on the novel is that it inspires Thomas literally to follow Jesus' words in Matthew 5:29-30: if one's right hand offends, cut it off to avoid burning in hell intact.

## Pescara

Described in "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," Pescara is a town on the Adriatic coast of Italy. There narrator Dominick Birdsey's beautiful grandmother, Ignazia, begins life as Violetta D'Annunzio, the daughter of a fish merchant. She is friends with an ugly girl Prosperine and her sisters.



Violetta is chosen despite her poverty to crown the statue of the Virgin Mary at the annual parade for the Feast of the Assumption, which is described in some detail. After poisoning Violetta's abusive husband, she and Ignazia flee to Sicily and onwards to America.

## **Psychiatric Security Review Board (PSRB)**

After Jimmy Lane, a psychiatric patient at Westwood on a day pass on a supervised hike, snaps and kills a college student on Avon Mountain, the State of Connecticut reacts against the "NGRI—not guilty by reason of insanity" defense and constitutes the powerful and conservative PSRB, giving it the power to put people like Thomas Birdsey in the Hatch Forensic Institute indefinitely. The press clamors for this. As expected, the PSRB remands Thomas to Hatch for a year after his 30-day evaluation, but releases him when brother Dominick threatens to go public with evidence of abuse at Hatch.

## **Shanley Memorial Hospital**

The medical facility to which Thomas Birdsey is taken for emergency treatment after he amputates his own right hand. There he is given skin grafts by Dr. Ellis Moore, who files a Physician's Emergency Certificate with the judge of probate, stating that Thomas is "dangerous to himself and/or others." This sends him back to Three Rivers State Hospital for mandatory observation. Later in the novel, narrator Dominick Birdsey, Thomas' identical twin, undergoes intricate surgery to piece together a leg shattered in a three-story fall, and his stepfather, Ray Birdsey, has a gangrenous leg amputated. Dominick's ex- and future wife Dessa Constantine volunteers in Shanley's children's ward. The hospital is named for Three Rivers' early-20th-century Mayor George B. Shanley.

## **Three Rivers Public Library**

Lamented by Children's Librarian, Mrs. Fenneck, as the daytime home of derelicts, drug addicts, and patients at the State Hospital, including Thomas Birdsey, the Public Library is where he dramatically amputates his right hand and throws it away, causing panic among the other patrons. Emergency personnel rush him to the hospital and save his life but not his hand.

## **Three Rivers State Hospital Settle Building**

The mental institution where Thomas Birdsey has lived on-and-off for twenty years, the hospital is located on the southern border of town off the John Mason Pkwy. It is a sprawling property, once the hunting and fishing grounds of the Wequonnoc Indians. In the summer of 1969, Thomas and Dominick trim the grass at the Indian graveyard.



The hospital consists of an outpatient facility, Settle, and a ghastly maximum-security unit, the Hatch Forensic Institute. Settle regularly deposits patients at the Public Library to pass the time. Thomas manages morning concessions in the patients' lounge and is addicted to reading the newspapers. At Settle, Thomas' doctors constantly change his drugs. After he cuts off his hand, Thomas is locked up for a mandatory 30-day evaluation in Hatch and getting Dominick a visitor's pass takes nearly that long. It seems inevitable, given public pressure, that Thomas will be kept there for at least a year. Thomas' complaints of being raped are discounted by his case worker, who insists that the facility is under surveillance 24 hours a day and is not a "hell-hole."

Tipped to a hushed up story of rapes by an orderly, Dominick pressures the administration into testing Thomas for HIV. He comes up negative, but shows signs of anal rape. An orderly is charged but the administration is exonerated of malfeasance. A quarter of the patients may have HIV. Three Rivers, which houses the twin's great aunt Prosperine, closes.

## **University of Connecticut (UConn)**

The college to which both Birdsey twins apply and where Ma convinces Dominick to put off independence and room with Thomas. In Crandall Hall, Thomas' late-night wandering earns him the nickname "Lurch," after the character in *The Addams Family*. Dominick makes friends easily and studies in the library to avoid his brother's scowls at noise. Dominick worries that if Thomas does not begin applying himself he will flunk out, breaking Ma's heart, angering Ray, and probably getting sent to Vietnam. At the end of the year, Thomas tries frantically to catch up, begins taking massive quantities of No-Doz, and grows paranoid. UConn puts Thomas on academic probation. In their second year Dominick rooms with his old friend Leo and Thomas drops out mid-semester. At the end of the novel, Dominick and his ex- and future-wife Dessa Constantine root for the famous UConn women's basketball team.

## **Yale-New Haven Hospital**

The medical facility in which Concettina Tempesta Birdsey—"Ma"—receives chemotherapy and radiation treatments and finally dies, Yale-New Haven is located down I-95 from Three Rivers. Dominick visits 2-3 times a week, sometimes taking Thomas on Sundays until he suffers a psychotic episode on the ride home.



# Themes

## Sex

Sex is woven throughout *I Know This Much Is True*, but rarely takes center stage. Narrator Dominick Birdsey grows up in the innocent 1950s and reaches puberty as the Beatles and free love arrive. He recalls one summer when his revulsion at the thought of his parents doing what the other boys say parents do evolves to reading whatever erotic literature he can find. His early involvement with females is strictly for sexual gratification; he wants no relationships. His best friend, Leo Blood, both as an adolescent and as a middle-aged man, boasts of his sexual prowess and nearly ruins his marriage by having extramarital affairs. Caught in one, he has to undergo therapy. When Dominick meets Dessa Constantine, she teaches him how to make love patiently and the couple enjoys free use of the Constantine mansion while the parents are in Greece. At one point, Dominick cannot control himself when Dessa is too tired after work and he forces himself on her. Weeping, she calls it rape, and Dominick grows deeply guilty.

Dominick's rage causes Dessa to divorce him and he hooks up with much younger Joy Hanks, hoping that her beauty, ogled by customers in the gym where she teaches, can help him forget Dessa, but it does not work and Joy realizes it. Sex with her seems like she is rendering a service. In analysis she reveals that her uncle sexually abuses her in junior high, she marries Ronnie at 18, and begins sleeping with her second husband, Dennis, while the first is at sea. Dominick knows that she will eventually cheat on him too. Joy has a close bisexual friend, Thad, whom Dominick does not like. She accuses him of homophobia, rather than allowing that it could be a personality clash. He and his male lover are supposedly being careful, but Thad transmits HIV to Joy while impregnating her. Dominick treats another gay character, Lisa Sheffer and her partner, with due respect and friendship. A minor plot element shows a married couple taking in a homeless Indian when his mother abandons him and starring him in child pornography. Ralph turns them in and they are convicted. He goes on to straighten out his life wonderfully.

A large part of the novel is occupied by Dominick's maternal grandfather's self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings." In it figure flirtatious Violetta D'Annunzio, who explains to her young friends what two horses are doing in a meadow and later becomes an artist's model and mistress, lusty Vincenzo Tempesta, who makes love to women of all nations in Three Rivers, CT, before getting shot in the groin when caught with a police sergeant's wife, and Pasquale Tempesta whom everyone believes is having sex with his pet monkey. The memoir's author readily admits to raping his wife regularly as punishment, taunting her with the possibility of another pregnancy, which doctors say will kill her. Depiction of sex is livelier and more graphic at the start of the 20th century than at its end.



## Anger

Anger pervades *I Know This Much Is True*. Narrator Dominick Birdsey early on admits how badly his anger, which he holds in until it bursts in fury, has damaged his life. It has cost him his marriage to Dessa, whom he still dearly loves. It tarnishes memories of his late mother, whom he knows always loves his identical twin, Thomas, better for reasons he cannot understand. He both loves and hates Thomas, a paranoid schizophrenic for whose welfare he has been responsible throughout their lives, particularly after Ma dies. When Thomas cuts off his own right hand to protest the building war in Iraq because Jesus commands him to, Dominick is angry at how people stare at him, how the media hounds him, and how little he can do to help Thomas in an uncaring bureaucratic system. In the course of helping Thomas' psychologist, Dr. Rubina Patel understand Thomas' mindset, Dominick begins therapy, concentrating on anger management. She explains to him many things in layman's terms, which help the reader understand anger.

A major locus of Dominick's anger is his stepfather, Ray Birdsey, a high school dropout, veteran of two wars, hardworking husband, who demands obedience and flies into furies whether he gets it or not. He looks for reasons to hound the twins, particularly defenseless Thomas. He inflicts punishments bordering on torture on Thomas, claiming it is to toughen him up for the world. Dominick throughout his life mentally challenges Ray but never opens his mouth, which instills profound guilt in him and feeds his anger. Even when Ray tries in old age to make amends, Dominick cannot let bygones be bygones. Only in the end does he understand and embrace forgiveness.

More anger is depicted in "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings." Written in 1949 at the end of the maternal grandfather's life, this memoir constitutes part of Domenico's penance when he returns to the Catholic Church after a long and anger-filled estrangement. Domenico ("Papa") is angry at everyone and everything: God, the church (personified in hateful Msgr. McNulty), his younger brothers who prove unworthy of the family dignity, his beautiful wife Ignazia who disdains him from the start, and particularly her red-haired harelipped sister, whom Dominick calls The Monkey. Prosperine hates Dominick with equal passion. The battle climaxes in 1925, when Dominick gets Prosperine committed to a "crazy hospital" and Ignazia drowns herself to escape the evil of the world. The memoir, which Dominick shreds after reading—in anger—helps him see the critical need for forgiveness in order to heal. He ends up being grateful to Papa for opening his dark soul and showing him the way.

## Religion

Religion provides a steady undercurrent for *I Know This Much Is True*. Narrator Dominick Birdsey has lost his faith. It becomes more acute as his mother dies of cancer years before, turning into outright blasphemy, which bothers her intensely. She is afraid to die, but accepts God's will in everything. Her side of the bedroom is hung with religious artifacts. As a boy, Dominick had never been pious like his identical twin,



Thomas, and once purposefully gets him in trouble by offering Halloween candy during All Saints Mass. When stepfather Ray converts to Catholicism and becomes a leading layman, Dominick sees it as hypocritical, because Ray continues to batter his wife and children physically and psychologically. His faith bears no fruit.

Later, in adulthood, when his paranoid schizophrenia is developing, Thomas finds a "bride-of-Frankenstein" girlfriend, Nadine, a fellow "holy roller," whom he meets at a Bible study group. She talks him off medications as a "test of faith." Thomas cracks up at work and is returned to the hospital. (Nadine and another "high-on Jesus buddy," Chuckie elope to Nashville, TN.) Voices tell Thomas that the Communists are going to ban the Bible in the U.S., so he begins memorizing it. He sees George W. H. Bush's ramp-up to war in Iraq as fulfillment of Revelation's Armageddon (and a likeness between Saddam and Satan). Since Jesus in Matthew 5:29-30 tells his disciples to cut off body parts that offend in order to avoid burning in hell intact, Thomas (after being reprimanded for praying out loud in the Public Library) amputates his right hand. He is Jesus' new Simon Peter, a rock upon which to build. Thomas cries out that he is being crucified as guards take him to his cell in a psychiatric hospital. Several times, Thomas tries to convince his brother to turn to God, but Dominick at most begins to accept there might be a God—not caring, but joking.

In "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," which chronicles his maternal grandfather's life and times, Domenico ("Papa") as a boy sees a statue of the Virgin weep, which is taken as a sign of priestly vocation, and he is sent off to seminary. He does well and enjoys it, and is angry when he must go home and become a stone mason. When he and his brothers emigrate to America, Papa has several run-ins with the prejudiced Irish monsignor, and after McNulty curses the house Dominick is building and brother Pasquale falls to his death, Papa vows never to return to church while McNulty is there. He returns only after a compassionate, pastoral Italian priest succeeds McNulty, helps him through his fears that he has damned his brother and still-born son (whom he baptizes in dishwater) to Hell. Papa becomes a pillar of the church, but like Ray, continues to torment his wife and sister-in-law. By the time he dies in 1949, Papa is again estranged from the church.

Although she refuses to discuss her Hindu religion with patients, Indian-born Dr. Rubina Patel shares a few myths whose themes seem therapeutic, explains the Ganesh statue in her office, and when Dominick is hospitalized after a fall, sends him a statuette of Shiva, god of destruction, which brings renovation. At the end of the novel, Dominick is introduced to the spirituality of the Wequonnoc Nation, when he finds that his biological father is of that blood. Ralph Drinkwater, a tribal leader, tosses him an oval stone, the kind used at birth, explaining that Wequonnocs pray to roundness, thanking the Great Creator for the circle of life. Dominick in large measure embraces this new culture.





# Style

## Point of View

*I Know This Much Is True* by Wally Lamb is told through the eyes of two narrators. In the 1990s, Dominick Birdsey, forced his entire life to take care of his mentally-troubled identical twin, Thomas, has his life shattered when Thomas cuts off his right hand as a religious protest against the growing Iraqi war. Divorced from a woman he still loves because of the toxic anger that Dominick readily admits, grieving years after losing a baby to AIDS, working as a house painter after he washes out as a teacher, and living with a woman who drives him crazy, Dominick does not need this additional burden, but he undertakes fighting a politically-motivated bureaucracy, which consigns Thomas to a high-security mental institution. Meanwhile, he begins psychotherapy, seeking to control himself and understand the scars left by his and Thomas' childhood and youth.

Many revelations emerge from reading his maternal grandfather's self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings." Dominick and Thomas' late mother entrusts it to Dominick as she is dying, having told him little about the man who treats her so badly in her own youth but whom she fervently loves. Domenico ("Papa") writes the memoir in 1949, as his life is waning. Beginning in Sicily, Papa brags at every turn, pointing out his every achievement but also oddly breaking *omertà* (the Sicilian code of silence) to talk about shameful family secrets. Why becomes clear when he reveals that writing this is part of his sacramental penance when he returns to the church. From the pages Dominick sees a true monster, eclipsing his cruel stepfather Ray—and himself. Papa's memoir is integrated into Dominick's larger quest for understanding and ultimately helps him see what he must do to be healed.

## Setting

The lion's share of *I Know This Much Is True* is set in Three Rivers, CT, pictured in the early 1990s, the 1950s and 60s, and in the first decades of the 20th century. In the present day, narrator Dominick Birdsey travels around town between his condo, his boyhood home on Hollyhock Ave., his house painting clients' house, his psychologist's office in a strip mall, Constantine Motors, owned by his ex-in-laws and employing his best friend Leo Blood, and spends much time at Three Rivers State Hospital, visiting his brother Thomas and Thomas' caseworker. Three times he is in Shanley Memorial Hospital, once as a patient and twice as a visitor. Key events take place in a Friendly's restaurant and in the Three Rivers Public Library. With Electric Boat in nearby Groton, CT, laying off large numbers of workers, Three Rivers is in economic decline. Landmarks like the Loew's Poli movie house, which Dominick remembers fondly from his youth, are boarded up. The town looks to the opening of the Wequonnoc Nation Casino and Resort to generate jobs and wealth.



In the 1950s and 60s, Dominick recalls a very non-Leave It To Beaver life in the tension-filled house, a trip to the movies and a soda fountain with Ma and Thomas and events at River Street Elementary School and John F. Kennedy High School. Reading his maternal grandfather's memoirs, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," written in 1949 in the old man's final days, he notes it depicts Three Rivers as a thriving industrial town, concentrating on the manufacture of textiles at American Woolen and Textile Company, and shows the era's discrimination against minorities, particularly Italians. The local Roman Catholic church, dominated by an Irish monsignor, holds this attitude until a young Italian priest succeeds him. Tempesta prides himself on all of the "firsts" he achieves as an immigrant Sicilian, particularly building himself a splendid Old World palace, the house in which the narrator grows up.

The early entries in Papa's memoir are set in Sicily, where he grows up and in Pescara, Italy, a town on the Adriatic coast of Italy, where his wife and sister-in-law grow up before fleeing the law to Sicily. Shipboard life during Papa's miserable Transatlantic voyage to America in steerage aboard the SS Napolitano is vividly depicted, as are Dominick and Thomas' ruined school trip to New York City. The Italian immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn, NY, in this same era are also sketched.

## Language and Meaning

I Know This Much Is True incorporates reflections of a deeply embittered college-educated man seeking to understand his dysfunctional family and deliver his paranoid schizophrenic twin brother from a brutal and politically-motivated bureaucracy. It is filled with narrator Dominick Birdsey's intense fear, angst, frustration, and rage. His mentally afflicted brother has become a "holy-roller," quoting scripture as his motivation for cutting off his right hand, and railing against conspirators, including President George W. H. Bush, the CIA, the FBI, and even the manufacturers of Special K cereal. He is Jesus' new Simon Peter, determined to warn the world of Armageddon.

Balancing Thomas is Dr. Rubina Patel, an Indian-born, Chicago-trained psychologist, who speaks in parables and myths about the twin's situation. Frequently needing help with American idioms, she explains the scientific jargon that she uses in understandable terms. Quirky caseworker Lisa Sheffer defends the hospital's good intentions until she learns that the administration knows of orderlies raping patients and giving them HIV.

Author Wally Lamb fills his pages with cultural references to the 1950s and 60s, drawn from the "duck and cover" at the height of the Cold War to children's television series and movies and on to the Beatles, ushering in the sexual revolution. The divisiveness of Vietnam plays a central role, as Dominick and his mother clash with Ray, a patriotic veteran of two wars. Later, Dominick frequently tunes into CNN and reflects on the fall of Soviet Communism and America's tragic entry into the Middle East conflict.

A major portion of the text is given over to "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings." Dominick's maternal grandfather pens it in



1949, in the closing months of his life. It is self-serving throughout. Dominick's mother, the author's misused daughter, bequeaths it to him while dying of cancer. He hires someone to translate it from Italian as a gift to his mother, who has been unable (perhaps unwilling) to read it. The translator comments at length about the mixed quality of the text (literary Italian and Sicilian patois combined, filled with folk sayings) and remarks that she must leave some things in the original. Lamb captures nicely such a translation. The Italian words can generally be understood in context, but help create a certain atmosphere. Papa writes it because it is part of his penance when he returns to the church. In it he has to force himself to overcome omertà (the Sicilian code of silence about family matters). The result is a fine picture of Old Country and immigrant life early in the 20th century. Reading it, Thomas is repulsed and horrified, but also finds the key to his own healing in granting and accepting forgiveness.

## Structure

*I Know This Much Is True* by Wally Lamb consists of 48 numbered chapters. There is no structure above the chapter level. The chapters vary greatly in length. In the table of contents, each chapter's often enigmatic opening words (incipits) are quoted: 1) "On the afternoon of October 12, 1990..."; 2) "One Saturday morning..."; 3) "When you're the sane brother..."; 4) "The maximum-security Hatch..."; 5) "Thomas and I are going..."; 6) "I read the note..."; 7) "Thomas and I meander..."; 8) "When my brother and I graduated..."; 9) "'Come in, come in..."; 10) "Thomas and I have been to three..."; 11) "It was musical chairs and months-old..."; 12) "Any sane man would have..."; 13) "The Indian cemetery that abuts the sprawling..."; 14) "Dr. Patel had warned me she might..."; 15) "'Hold these, please," Dr. Patel said, handing..."; 16) "Ma was thrilled to have us back home..."; 17) "'Mr. Birdsey, tell me about your stepfather.'"; 18) "The summer Thomas and I worked..."; 19) "Dell Weeks never drank before noon..."; 20) "Ray jerked my brother around..."; 21) "It was after two the next afternoon..."; 22) "I was outside in front, waiting..."; 23) "When my stepfather warned me not..."; 24) "The next day, Dessa and I drove out..."; 25) "'Almond, peanut butter, or crunch?"; 26) "Beep!"; 27) "The thump outside woke me up."; 28) "GOD BLESS AMERICA!"; 29) "Leo approached my stepfather, holding..."; 30) "'Carry the corpse,' the monkey says."; 31) "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta,..."; 32) "Rain drummed against the car roof."; 33) "The hellish voyage aboard the SS Napolitano..."; 34) "Dr. Patel said it was lovely to see me again"; 35) "For two nights now, no sleep."; 36) "'So he drags her to the bridge, shoves her..."; 37) "I left Signora Siragusa's boardinghouse..."; 38) "I closed the door on the pounding rain, the wind"; 39) "That was the night the Monkey told me..."; 40) "Sheffer was late, as usual."; 41) "My wife and I never discussed..."; 42) "Ray and I sat side by side in the..."; 43) "After that victorious banquet..."; 44) "I spent the next several weeks tying up..."; 45) "And so, by digging that poor..."; 46) "Thomas and I float below the Falls, easing..."; 47) "Leo's racquet scooped low for the shot"; and 48) "There's more, of course."

Set primarily in the 1990s, the novel frequently flashes back to the 1950s and 60s as anguished narrator Dominick seeks to understand his and paranoid schizophrenic twin brother Thomas' troubled past. Always clearly marked, the flashbacks are intertwined



with the present. Dominick frequently discusses memories and feelings with his psychologist. After Chapter 30, he reads and meditates on his paternal grandfather's self-serving memoir, "The History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings," which is set in the first decades of the 20th century. In its troubling pages, again with Dr. Patel's help, Dominick finds how to heal himself. As healing proceeds, the tone of the novel brightens, and the conclusion is filled with hope.



## Quotes

"I know what I know about what happened in the library on October 12, 1990, from what Thomas told me and from the newspaper stories that ran alongside the news about Operation Desert Shield. After Mrs. Fenneck's reprimand by the study carrel, Thomas resumed his praying in silence, reciting over and over Saint Matthew's gospel, chapter 5, verses 29 and 30: 'And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from he... and if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee: For it is profitable for thee that one of they members should perish and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.' Thomas removed from his sweatshirt jacket the ceremonial Gurkha knife our stepfather had brought back as a souvenir from World War II. Until the afternoon before, it had hung sheathed and forgotten on an upstairs bedroom wall at the house where my brother and I grew up.

"The orthopedic surgeon who later treated my brother was amazed at his determination: the severity of the pain, he said, should have aborted his mission midway. With his left hand, Thomas enacted each of the steps he'd rehearsed in his mind. Slicing at the point of the right wrist, he crunched through the bone, amputating his hand cleanly with the sharp knife. With a loud grunt, he flung the severed hand halfway across the library floor. Then he reached into his wound and yanked at the spurting ulna and radial artery, pinching and twisting it closed as best he could. He raised his arm in the air to slow the bleeding." Chapter 1, pgs. 5-6.

"When you're the sane brother of a schizophrenic identical twin, the tricky thing about saving yourself is the blood it leaves on your hands—the little inconvenience of the look-alike corpse at your feet. And if you're into both survival of the fittest and being your brother's keeper—if you've promised your dying mother—then say so long to sleep and hello to the middle of the night. Grab a book or a beer. Get used to Letterman's gap-toothed smile of the absurd, or the view of the bedroom ceiling, or the indifference of random selection. Take it from a godless insomniac. Take it from the uncrazy twin—the guy who beat the biochemical rap." Chapter 3, pg. 47.

"She cocked her head just like that wooden bird on her desk. 'Mistake how, Domenico?' she said. 'Go ahead. I'm listening.'

"'Because he always goes to Settle after an episode. He's practically a fixture over there. He has a part-time job there.'

"She sat there, mute. Waiting.

"'And because ...'

"'Yeah? Because what?'

"'Because right about now he must be scared out of his mind, okay? Look, the guy has no defenses. Zip. Zero. And it's not a "twin thing." It's ... I've just always had to run interference for Thomas, okay? Putting him in this place is like throwing a rabbit in with the wolves.'

"She took a deep breath—let it out slowly, audibly. 'Coffee and newspapers, right?'

"'What?'

"'His job? He was telling me about it. We talked for over an hour last night.'

"'Listen to me,' I said.



" 'Oh, I'm listening. It sounds like I'm listening to myself talk, actually. My old self.'

" 'What's that supposed to mean?'

" ;Oh, nothing. Personal observation, that's all. It's irrelevant.' I just sat there, trying to figure out what the fuck she was talking about. 'I was in a nine-year relationship with a substance abuser, that's all. So I know all about running interference. Being someone else's main line of defense. I call it the Don Quixote complex. Makes you feel noble to defend the defenseless. Plus, it's a great avoidance tactic. You don't have to deal with your own stuff, right? But, listen, I'm way over the line here. I just thought I recognized a fellow Quixote, that's all. I'm sorry.'

" 'Yeah, well, thanks for the free psychoanalysis,' I said. 'But this is about my brother, not me. Or you.'

" 'Ouch,' she said. 'Fair enough. Really—I'm sorry. Let me give it to you straight, paisano. They've placed your brother in a forensic hospital because he's seriously mentally ill and because he's committed a serious crime.' Chapter 9, pgs. 148-149.

" 'The vasectomy's a symptom, not the problem,' she said. 'The problem is your anger. What you did was just one expression of the anger you've felt through this whole thing—the blame you put on me.' I asked her how she knew what I felt inside, and she said she could feel it. That it seeped out of me like radiation. That I was practically toxic.

"It was a morning for metaphors. She still loved me, she said, but our marriage had become like a game of One, Two, Three, Red Light. Every time she made a half-step's worth of progress, my anger would catch her and send her back to the starting line.

'When I was away, I could feel myself getting stronger, day by day,' she said. 'Really, Dominick. I thought to myself that I was finally through something. That the worst of it was over. Then I got off the plane and saw you in the airport lounge, and I was back at the starting line again. I get short of breath when I'm around you. It's like you rob me of oxygen. So I'm going. I have to go because I have to protect myself. I have to breathe.'

"I told her I could do better. Promised her I'd go back to the support group if that was what she wanted. I begged her. Followed her all the way down the stairs and out to the car, begging. Making promises. But there all that soft luggage was, waiting in the backseat and the opened trunk of the Celica. All those tan bags she'd bought for her trip to Greece. 'Come on, Sadie,' she called, and that stupid dog of hers climbed in the front seat and Dessa got in and they left.

"They just left." Chapter 14, 220-221.

"I could tell by Thomas's thickening voice, by the way his words kept catching in his throat, that he was about to surrender to fullout sobbing—the kind of snorting, sore-throat wailing that Ray had been able to draw from him ever since we were kids. I wanted to save my brother from that. Didn't want him to hand Ray that satisfaction. So I put my own neck on the chopping block.

" 'My GPA is 3.2, Ray,' I said. 'Why don't you tell me what's wrong with that?'

"He looked over at me. Took the bait. "Well, why don't you tell me what a goddamned GPA is then, Mr. Smart Ass?' Ray said, turning to me. 'After all, I only went as far as my third year of high school. I only fought in two wars, that's all. I'm not a walking encyclopedia like you and Smarty Pants over there. I'm just the working stiff that puts food on the table.'

"I stared him down. 'It's a grade point average,' I said. 'Four points for an A, three for a





B, two for a C. I made the dean's list, Ray.'

" 'I made the dean's list, Ray,' he mimicked back. 'So who does that make you? King Farouk? Does that mean my shit stinks and yours doesn't?'

" 'No. All it means is that I made the dean's list.'

" 'Gee, that's great,honey,' Ma said wearily. 'Congratulations.'

"Ray told her to shut her trap and stay out of it. He put down Thomas's grade report and picked up mine, then proceeded to discredit my accomplishments one by one. B-plus in psychology? Big deal! That stuff was a bunch of happy horseshit as far as he was concerned. A-minus in probability? He didn't even know what that was, for Christ's sweet sake. He laughed with particular disdain at the A I had earned in art appreciation. 'Kids your age are over there dying for their country,and you're sittin' in some nice little classroom, "appreciatin" paintin's on a wall? And I'm paying for it? I never heard of anything so goddamned pathetic.'

" 'So what is it you want, Ray?' I said.'You want the two of us to go over there and get our heads blown off by the Viet Cong? Is that what would make you happy?'

" 'Don't say that,honey,' Ma said. Ray leaned forward and took hold of me by the front of my T-shirt. Pulled me up to a standing position. 'Don't you dare talk to me like that, buddy boy,' he said. 'Understand? I don't care how many A's you got on your lousy—'

" 'Let go of me, Ray,' I said." Chapter 16, pgs. 259-260.

" 'Other people go to the library and get BOOKS, right? Check out BOOKS. But not my STUPID FUCKING ASSHOLE BROTHER! Not HIM! He goes to the library and cuts his fucking hand off for Jesus! And you want to know something? I got fucking CONNIE CHUNG calling me up! I got some stupid bloodsucker from New York wants to be his fucking BOOKING agent! And I can't—'

" 'Dominick?'

" 'You want to know what it's like for me? Do you? It's like ...it's like ...my brother has been an anchor on me my whole life. Pulling me down. Even before he got sick. Even before he goes and loses it in front of... An anchor!...And you know what I get? I get just enough rope to break the surface. To breathe. But I am never, ever going to. ...You know what I used to think? I used to think that eventually you know, sooner or later—I was going to get away from him. Cut the cord, you know? But here I am, forty years old and I'm still down at the nuthouse, running interference for my fucking ...Treading water. It's like ...like ...And I hate him sometimes. I do. I'll admit it. I really hate him. But you know something? Here's the really fucked-up part. Nobody else better say anything—nobody else better even look at him cross-eyed or I'll... And the thing is, I think I finally get it, you know? I finally get it.'

" 'Get what,Dominick?'

" 'That he's my curse. My anchor. That I'm just going to tread water for the rest of my whole life. That he is my whole life! My fucking, fucked-up brother. I'm just going to tread water, just breathe ... and that's it. I'm never going to get away from him! Never!'

Chapter 17, pg. 280.

"And then Ma's in the dream. Alive again, up in the cedar tree, holding a baby ...

"A movement beneath the ice distracts me and when I look down,I see my grandmother, alive, under the ice. Ignazia.... I recognize her from the brown-tinted photograph in my mother's album. Her wedding portrait—the only picture of her I've ever seen. We make



eye contact, she and I. Her eyes beg me for something I can't understand. I run after her, slipping and sliding across the ice. "What do you want?" I shout down. "What do you want?"

"When I look up again, the cedar tree's in flames....

"I awoke to a car horn's blare. Jesus! Jesus!

"A rock ledge rushed past, headlights crisscrossed in front of me. I veered to the right and drove over an embankment, unsure how far I'd fall.

"There was an ugly scraping sound beneath me, I remember the wail of my own Oh, no! Oh, no! My head bounced against the roof. Barreling toward that tree, I held out my hand to stop the collision....

"I was out for a little while, I guess. I must have been. I remember pulling my hand back inside the busted windshield. Remember the pain, the pulsing blood.

"That same cedar tree grew in a pasture, not the river. A half dozen Holsteins stood staring at me, griping from the far end they'd run to when I'd come flying over their bank. Disturbed their peace. I grabbed a paint rag, pulled the tourniquet tight with my good hand and my teeth. I got out of the truck. Sat down in that frost-dead field.

"The mist had stopped—had made way for a bright, hard-edged moon. Crumbs of windshield glass glittered in the hair on my arm. In the moonlight, my blood looked black.

"Up on Route 22, I saw a vision: the steady flow of gamblers in cars, driving to the Wequonnocs' casino. "What do you want?" I had yelled through the frozen river to my dead grandmother. "What do you want?" Chapter 14, pgs. 452-453.

"The guy in the medicine cabinet mirror scared me a little looked both familiar and strange. Looked nothing like Henry Rood had looked.... I held up my two hands, wiggled my fingers a little. Saw Thomas, whole again. Saw Ma without the split in her lip. And I could see Domenico, too—that stern face in the tinted portrait on my mother's bureau. The resemblances were scary. Undeniable. We were all, in a way, each other....

"Maybe we were damned or something. Cursed. Was that it?... Funny: I was never going to finish Papa's manuscript after all. I'd lost that damned thing, had gotten it back again, and then had put off reading it for weeks. Months, now, really. Had only just that week started reading it. I'd purposely avoided reading it—his 'history of a great man from humble beginnings.' Unfinished business. A loose end. Well, so what? Fuck it, man. Couldn't keep the Grim Reaper waiting.... It was strange, though. Or it was the Percoset or something. I could see their faces in my face....

"I couldn't do it.

"Poured that little cascade of capsules down the sink instead of down my throat. Turned the water on and washed away my big suicide. I hobbled back into the bedroom. Eased myself back down on the bed.

"Called Leo. And by some miracle, it was Leo who answered. 'Hello? ... Hello?'

"It felt like one of those dreams where you can't run, can't scream. 'Dominick? Dominick, is that you?... Hold on, man. I'm coming right over.'" Chapter 32, pgs. 551-552.

"I kissed my son's small hand, covered him again with the cloth. Picked him up and held him close to me.

" 'Aieeh!' Ignazia wailed and then the second one bleated its complaints to the world. From the pantry doorway, I held the dead firstborn and watched Yates cut the cord of the one that lived.



" 'Girl!' Prosperine croaked.

" 'Capiddi russo!' Tusia's wife announced. 'She's a redhead, all right,' the Yankee dottore said. 'She's got a harelip, too.' Ignazia strained to see her. 'Oh oh oh,' she whimpered, staring at that squalling thing, hungry for her, with love in her eyes.

" 'Bambina mia ...' I held my son tighter. 'Bambina mia,' Ignazia kept chanting. 'Bambina mia.' She kept kissing its face, its head, its tiny broken mouth. At that moment it was clear to me: she had not been vergine when she married me. She had opened her legs not only to her husband but to that Irishman she loved. Her belly had filled up with not one but two bambini. And now it was clear: she had no love for the dead boy that had been mine. She loved only the flawed, living girl—the child of that goddamned redheaded mick.

"After he had finished with Ignazia, the dottore came out into my cold, brown garden. We needed to talk, he said.

"Talk then, I told him. I was still holding the dead boy.

"Why didn't I give that poor child to the women inside so that they could clean it up? He was going to have to take him to the city coroner when he left. It was the procedure in cases such as these. Ignazia and I would get him back for the burial. He presumed I was going to call a priest, right?

"No coroner, I told him. No priest.

" 'Well, what you do about the religious business is your own decision, Mr. Tempesta, but the law's the law concerning the coroner. Say, you should look on the bright side of things. You were lucky this time.'

" 'Lucky?' I asked. Was he mocking me? Spitting on my loss? 'What I'm saying is, you could have lost the both of them, and your wife to boot. This little fella here had breached. He was blocking the birth canal. It was a tricky business making things come out as well as they did. Don't worry about that harelip of hers. There's no cleft palate, far as I can tell. She'll be okay. She won't talk funny.'" Chapter 37, pgs. 637-638.

"Ma had gone upstairs to tuck Thomas in, to go to bed herself, and Ray and I had sat at the kitchen table, eating pizza pie.

" 'She fell,' he said.

" 'What?'

" 'Your mother. She tripped and fell on the stairs bringing laundry down. Landed the wrong way. You understand?'

"I looked at him. Waited.

" 'What goes on in this house is nobody else's business,' he said. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the top of the table. 'You understand me?' he asked again.

"I nodded.

" 'All right then,' he said. 'Good. Things just got a little out of hand tonight, that's all. Just forget about it. This kind of thing happens in every family.'

"Did it? I tried to picture the kids in my class being dragged, kicking and screaming, down the stairs. Ladling soup onto the kitchen floor.

" 'And if those two ever play that game again—if you ever get wind of that again. Well...' He stood up. Went over to the sink. 'But they're not going to play it anymore. It's not going to ever come up again....But if it does, you come to me. Okay?'

"I asked Ray if I could go to bed, please.

" 'Okay?'



" ' Okay,' I said. Sure, Ray. I'll sacrifice them to you. Survival of the fittest.

" ' Good,' he said, nodding his approval. He lit a cigarette. ' Good. Because you and I are on a team, all right? We're buddies, you and me. We stick together. Right?'

" I nodded. Looked at the hand he was offering. Shook it.

" And I climbed the stairs knowing, somehow, that in my two man struggle, Thomas would always win: that Ma would always love him more than she loved me. That Ray would always hate him more than he hated me. Like it or not, we were two teams.

Thomas and Ma versus Ray and me. Survival of the fittest....

" And now, here we sat in the back of the undertaker's limousine. The winning team—the victors in our good suits, riding away from the cemetery. No fingerprints. No autopsies.

They were both in the ground now. Mrs. Calabash and Mrs. Floon...." Chapter 42, pgs. 763-764.

" In the covers, all around the bed, lay the ruined pages of my grandfather's manuscript. I had finished Domenico's " history" somewhere in the middle of the night. For all its ugly revelations, it had provided none of the answers I'd both sought and dreaded. Only more questions, more suspicions, and one bleak revelation I had not gone looking for: that my grandmother, in her despair, had tried to take my mother with her. That when Ma was an eight-year-old girl, she had had to fight her mother for her life....

Confessions, penance, family secrets: in a fit of frustration and freedom, I had gotten to the last page of Papa's history and wept. Had yanked the pages from their binder, balled them up, ripped them. Had made confetti of all my grandfather's excuses, his sorry excuse of a life.

" I stumbled toward the bathroom, my bare feet padding through the wasted pages. She cooks, she cleans, she knows how to keep secrets.... I stepped into the shower and made the water hot, hotter, as hot as I could stand it.... He'd died a failure: that much was clear. All that confession, all that eleventh-hour contrition: too little, too late. ...

Humble yourself, they'd told him his whole life, but he'd never quite gotten the hang of it. He'd held grudges, played God with people's lives. He'd had that strange woman thrown into the asylum and had just let her rot in there.... Rot. Gangrene. This is your old man calling. You home yet? Give me a jingle, will ya?

" I showered, shampooed. Stood there and let the water run over me. And when I finally stepped out, I faced myself, dripping wet and naked.

" Don't be him, Dominick, I told my eyes. Don't be him, don't be him...." Chapter 46, pg. 839.

" ' I been thinking about something,' Ray said. ' It's been bothering me.'

" ' Oh, yeah?' I said. I took a sip of coffee. I thought we were talking about his leg.

" ' Do you remember a conversation we had a couple of weeks ago? About your father?... How I said she never told me who he was?'

" I nodded. Held my breath.

" He had had a similar kind of thing pulled on him, he said—the way his family had tricked him into thinking Edna was his sister instead of his mother. That was what he'd been thinking about ever since that conversation we'd had. Our situations were different, of course, but similar in other ways. It had pulled the rug out from under him when he'd found out the truth, he said; he'd had a right to know who his own mother was, for Christ's sake. Having the wool pulled over his eyes like that—well, in one way



or another, he'd paid for that the rest of his life. He'd always felt inferior to other people, he said. Ashamed. And mad—mad at the whole world. Not that my situation and his were the same. Well, in a way they were. They were the same but they were different.

" 'What ...what are you saying?' My heart raced; my breathing went shallow. Now that the moment was finally here, I was afraid to know.

" 'I had promised her, you see? Your mother.... She only told me a couple months before she passed away. I didn't know anything about it before then. We didn't talk about that kind of thing. I was just as much in the dark as you were. But after she got sick, it weighed on her. She needed to tell someone, so she told me. Made me promise not to say anything. But I don't know. It's different now. There's money involved. ... She couldn't have seen that coming.'

"What was he talking about?

" 'She was kind of ashamed of it, you see? Of what she'd done. Of course, nowadays, they have babies out of wedlock all the time, all colors of the rainbow, and nobody even thinks anything about it. But it was different back then. For the Italians, especially. People didn't like them, see? They resented them. They'd come over here in droves, up from New York to work in the factories.... People used to say they were smelly, greasy, all sexed-up—the same kind of thing you hear about the coloreds.' He looked around, hastily, for blacks. 'The Italians needed someone to feel better than, I guess. Lots of them were prejudiced as hell when it came to the coloreds. The Indians, too. Her father, for instance. He would have murdered her if he'd known.'

"I was listening without really hearing him. He'd just mentioned Domenico. He was about to tell me that my grandfather was my father." Chapter 47, pgs. 875-876.

"I teach American history now, at the Wequonnoc School—a different kind of history than Mr. LoPresto used to teach. My students balk at tests, complain that I give too much work, and learn, I like to think, what I have learned: that power, wrongly used, defeats the oppressor as well as the oppressed. More than anyone, it was my maternal grandfather, Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, who taught me that. I have come, finally, to a kind of gratitude for Papa's legacy—that troublesome document by which he tried and failed so miserably to prove his 'greatness' to 'Italian youth.' God—life—can be both merciful and ironic, I have come to believe. Papa approached his true worth only when he rolled that rented Dictaphone equipment onto the porch, sent home the stenographer, and retreated to the backyard to face his failures. Until he had humbled himself. Papa, I treasure your gift.

"I am not a smart man, particularly, but one day, at long last, I stumbled from the dark woods of my own, and my family's, and my country's past, holding in my hands these truths: that love grows from the rich loam of forgiveness; that mongrels make good dogs; that the evidence of God exists in the roundness of things.

"This much, at least, I've figured out. I know this much is true." Chapter 48, pg. 897.



## Topics for Discussion

How does rabbit imagery pervade the novel? What is its symbolism and how does it serve to unify the work?

What role do monkeys play in the novel? How is it connected to the derisive stereotype of the Italian organ grinder and how is it linked to animal perversity?

How are the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm portrayed in the novel and linked? How are hawk/dove confrontations depicted?

How is the influence of politicians and media celebrities over the mental health industry depicted? Why or why not is it a fair depiction?

What is the role of popular culture in the novel? Discuss how at least three icons are depicted and how they add atmosphere to the story.

Discuss Dr. Patel's use of myth in treating Dominick Birdsey. What is the value of myth? How, specifically, does the myth of the searching twin help him?

Discuss Ray Birdsey's imagine in the novel. How do his mellow revelations at the end of the novel make you rethink his earlier depiction? How would you rate him as a human being?

How is the Apollo 11 moon landing woven into the story? How does it help create atmosphere?