

An Invisible Thread Study Guide

An Invisible Thread by Alex Tresniowski and Laura Schroff

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Plot Summary

An Invisible Thread, The True Story of an 11-Year-Old Panhandler, a Busy Sales Executive, and an Unlikely Meeting With Destiny, by Laura L. Schroff, and Alex Tresniowski, tells the true story of an unlikely friendship that had ramifications that neither could have foreseen.

The reader is introduced to a young poor boy by the name of Maurice. He is begging for change on the street when a young business woman walks past him. Like most of the people that he approaches, she brushes past him as if he doesn't exist. Then, inexplicably, for some reason, she turns back toward him. She asks him if he's hungry. He is. She asks him if he wants to go across the street to the McDonald's for a hamburger. He does.

Laura learns that the boy's name is Maurice, that he lives in the projects not a block from her own high rise luxury apartment building. She gives him her business card and tells him to call her if he needs help or anything. Then she gives him some spare change and walks away. The boy, unknown to Laura, tosses her card in the garbage.

A couple of days pass and Laura can't get the boy out of her mind. What was he doing? Was he still hungry? Why wasn't he in school? Deciding that the boy might never call her, she decides to try and find him, herself. She doesn't have to look hard as he's back on the same street corner as before. He agrees to go get another hamburger. Laura notes that this time he doesn't bolt his food down like last time. Thus, begins a Monday only routine of getting a meal together.

After a few weeks, Laura suggests that they go to a nicer place to eat. She doesn't stop to think that he might not have anything to wear, or have the means to clean himself up. Still, he does the best that he can, and they eat at the Hard Rock Cafe. She notices that he only eats part of it, and when she asks if he's still hungry he says that he is, but that he wants to take the food back for his mother and grandmother. Laura is moved by his kind heart, and she tells him that he should go ahead and eat all he wants, that she will order a couple of meals when they leave so he can take his family some food back.

Meanwhile, Laura's co-workers are worried about her involvement with this street boy. They are worried that it might be perceived as something inappropriate. Laura assures them that everything is completely appropriate and that the boy has never tried to hustle her or place her in a dangerous situation. They urge her to just give him money and walk away, but she refuses to do so.

The reader learns that both Maurice and Laura have some things in common. Both of them have had bad and abusive fathers in their lives. Laura's father terrorized she and her four siblings until they left home. Maurice's father had been a drug dealer, and had routinely beat up on his mother. Finally, he left and never came back.



Laura invites him to her apartment for a homecooked meal, which he has never experienced. This is driven home to her by the fact that he does not know how to set the table, and is fascinated by the fact that she's cooking something from a recipe. Later, she is appalled by the fact that he has never been shown how to do some of the most simplest of actions, such as blow his nose, or how to eat with utensils.

She asks how he eats when he isn't eating with her and is astounded to learn that he knows when the free charity meals are served at the mission, and he gets free breakfast at school. Other times, he panhandles for enough change to get a meal. Laura tells him that she will make him a lunch to take to school and he asks if she can put it in a brown bag like the other kids do. He tells her that it lets them know that he has someone that cares for him. He asks her if she will go with him to the Parent Teacher Openhouse the next evening, and she agrees.

When she meets Maurice's teacher, Kim, she learns more about Maurice. She finds out that while Maurice is intelligent, he misses a lot of school, and because his hygiene isn't great, the other kids pick on him, which results in a lot of fights. Kim urges her, that if she's going to be in his life, to take it seriously because he's been disappointed by too many people coming into and going out of his life. Laura assures him she's in it for the long haul.

When they return to the apartment, Laura scolds Maurice for skipping school or coming in late. He breaks into tears and Laura learns that he misses school a lot because he doesn't have a watch or a clock. They make a detour to the store where Laura buys him both items. Maurice begins going to school on time and making better grades. Because she's started doing his laundry for him, and giving him second hand clothes from some of her friends (who had children his age), he's not picked on by the other children.

She wants to take him to a Mets game, but feels as if she should get permission from his guardians. She sends a permission slip with him to have his mother sign it. He never returns it, so Laura takes her friend Lisa, and they go into the projects. They both realize that they are in a part of the city and viewing a reality that they did not even know existed. Maurice's grandmother signs it as Darcella, Maurice's mother is too strung out on drugs to sign. Rose, the grandmother, says that Maurice has told them all about her and they are grateful for her involvement.

A long series of new adventures take place for both Laura and Maurice. Laura takes Maurice to her sister's house in the country and he is awestruck by the space and the fact that each child has his or her own room. The reader also learns more about Maurice's father, as well as Laura's father. Maurice's father had met his mother in a gang, and they'd lived hard and fast, high and drunk for most of their early married lives. When the children were born, Morris, the father, was done with domestic life and left. Laura tells of many occasions of finding her mother beaten bloody, or her brothers, and being told that they shouldn't tell anyone about it. They suffered in silence for decades.

Laura tells Maurice that she'd like to take him to her sister's house in the country for Christmas if it would be okay with his family. He laughs and tells her that in the projects



they know what Christmas is, but none of them ever celebrate it or expect it will happen to them. This makes Laura extremely sad and she tells him to make his first ever Christmas list. He tells her that the year before he'd gone to the Salvation Army Christmas program and he'd been allowed to pick a gift from under the tree. It was a white stuffed teddy bear. The Christmas that he spends with Laura and her sister and their family in the country is the best Christmas he's ever had, and he tells her so. He also tells her that he's gotten her a present. Surprised, she opens up the gift to find the white stuffed teddy bear. She understands what it means and it causes her to cry. He tells her that he loves her and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

Laura finds out that her mother is dying of uterine cancer, and goes to be with her. Her mother apologizes for the trouble they'd experienced when Laura was growing up. Bitter, Laura throws back her mother's words at her about God not giving someone more than they can handle. Later, her mother makes a recovery and manages to live without Nunzie, Laura's father, for the rest of the novel. Nunzie later dies alone in his house of heart failure.

Maurice's father, Morris, returns to the house. He has AIDS and is dying. He apologizes to Maurice, who is now 16 years old. They make amends and he tells Maurice that he just didn't know how to be a good father, he just was never shown how.

Laura meets a man named Michael, and Maurice is happy for her. He is glad that there is someone in Laura's life that will take care of her as she deserves. The reader learns that Laura has been married once before, but her first husband, shortly after marrying Laura was found cheating on her.

Laura moves in with Michael and moves out of the city. She still makes trips into the city to visit with Maurice, but it isn't like it used to be. Maurice's mother is arrested for possession and intent to sell, and spends two years in jail. In the meanwhile, because of her conviction, Maurice's family loses their apartment. He lives on the street, unknown to Laura, for several years. Still, he refuses to join a gang, opting instead to work for a messenger service riding a bike. Later, he finds a way to buy jeans wholesale, and resell them for a profit. Unfortunately, the people that work with him in the business are former and current gang members and he is caught in the crossfire at one point.

Maurice drops out of school, moves to North Carolina, meets someone and has his first child. He's kept in touch with Laura during all of this, but she only knows some of the details. She is very upset when he tells her that he's going to be a father. Because of his and his shame at not living up to Laura's expectations, he breaks off contact with her for another year. Laura's husband leaves her, and she moves back into the city. Maurice has moved back, himself, as his mother is dying of AIDS. He's been fairly successful with his business, having severed ties with the gang members. He's in his own place and, now in his late 20s, has several children. He and Laura make amends.

At the end of the novel, Maurice has started his own construction business and has five children. They live in a home much like Laura's sister's home in the suburbs. He's a

good father, unlike his own, and he enjoys having Laura come visit. They both reiterate that both of them have lived better lives for having known one another.



Introduction-Chapter 1

Summary

Introduction

A very brief introduction sums up the evils of Maurice's world very clearly. It opens on action, when he is 6 years old, with a strange woman chasing his father's girlfriend with a hammer. He doesn't recognize that the strange woman is his mother because he hasn't seen her in months and the drugs have taken their toll. She doesn't recognize her own son because an undiagnosed case of ringworm has shriveled him. But it is in that meeting, when mother and son are reunited, that Maurice feels happy. He knows his mother has come back for him.

Chapter 1

After the brief introduction, the author, Laura, tells of an ordinary day on Sept. 1, 1986. She is 35 years old, and a successful ad agent for USA Today. She was supposed to bring a client to her front row seats at the U.S. Open, but weather had other plans. As the weather breaks, she goes for a walk. She's on 56th Street in New York City, near Broadway, when a boy asks for some spare change.

At first, she walks right by, ignoring him because after living in NYC for a while, she's learned how to ignore beggars. But after walking past him, she stops, turns around, and comes back to ask him if he wants McDonald's. He agrees. She asks if she can have lunch with him, and he agrees to that, too. This, Laura says, begins a ritual where she takes him out to eat every Monday for the next three years.

Analysis

In the introduction, instead of easing the reader into the story, Schroff speaks of the sickness, violence and drugs that are Maurice's normal life. It's a prediction of what is to come. This might not be the worst part of his life.

The book takes a gentler tone in the first chapter, as readers follow Laura's daily life. She explains how she's a very busy woman. Although she's very successful, she still feels that something is missing. She's not romantically attached, and there's no mention of friends in the first chapter.

The world she has created for herself is full of deadlines, and she thrives in it. She sets goals and meets them. It's only by an act of unpredictable weather that her plans – and her life – is changed.

When she meets Maurice for the first time, she didn't have any current plans. She only wanted to get out and about for the day, and get some exercise. Meeting Maurice wasn't



in her plan. Her plan was simply to ignore him like she generally ignored the homeless. This demonstrates the theme of *Life Is What Happens When You're Busy Making Plans*. Through an unlikely set of circumstances, Laura decides to do something out of her ordinary routine, and it makes the difference to both Maurice, and herself. Additionally, this entire scene demonstrates the theme of *Routine*. As a result of this chance encounter, a ritual of meeting each Monday ensues.

Likewise, a very subtle symbol is introduced in this first chapter as well. The setting is New York City, downtown. This represents the amalgam of where dreams either live, or they die...with no in between. With Laura and Maurice meeting, quite literally, there is the dream meeting the dreamless.

Discussion Question 1

What is New York City symbolic of?

Discussion Question 2

What prompted Laura to stop and give money to the boy, when she'd so many times just walked by?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of *Life Is What Happens When You're Busy Making Plans*.

Vocabulary

clatter, nuisance, scuffed, micromanage, pattered



Chapters 2-3

Summary

Chapter 2

Laura takes Maurice to McDonald's and treats him to a Big Mac, fries, and chocolate shake. She has the same.

They are from different worlds, and have nothing to talk about. She opens up so that maybe he'll trust her a bit. She points out the ritzy apartment building where she lives. He thinks it's a hotel, like the welfare hotel he lives in.

This chapter takes an abrupt turn into Maurice's family life, flashbacks that Laura doesn't learn about while they are in the McDonald's but probably learns much later in their relationship. The reader is abruptly thrust back into Maurice's past, when he was five years old.

The reader learns that Maurice's father is named Morris Jr., although it's pronounced Maurice. He had met Maurice's mother, Darcella, when they were in the same gang. They had three children all together. Maurice has two older sisters, Celeste and La Toya (the name changes between La Toya and La Tonya in the book).

Maurice and Darcella, who nicknamed each other Junebug and Red, lived a life of drugs and violence, of which their children were the main victims. Darcella left Maurice because of his infidelity. He tracked her down, pleading for her to come back. A fight erupted. Maurice, 5 years old at the time, was struck by his father. In retaliation, Darcella came at Red with a knife.

Back in the present, Laura and Maurice, Jr. take a walk through Central Park. She buys him ice cream, and gives him a few quarters so he can play Asteroids at an arcade. As they part, she gives him her business card to call her if he ever needs anything.

She reveals two things to readers that she didn't know at the time: that Maurice had immediately thrown out her card, and that he had a razor in his pocket.

Chapter 3

The next day Laura tells her coworkers how she took the homeless boy out to lunch. Valerie, Paul and Lou tell her she did a good deed and then go back to work as if what Laura had told them was of no more importance than getting something out of the vending machine. She realizes that this has been her own attitude, too.

(Flashback)



Laura thinks back to how she got to this lofty position. She wanted to get out of her Long Island neighborhood and see the world. She thought the way to do that was to be a stewardess. She never got that job, but she did work in an office for a travel company. This allowed her to get ridiculously discounted airfare throughout the world.

It also opened a door. She was able to land a job selling advertising at a travel magazine. All of this led to living in a chic apartment, with expensive clothes and possessions, but still feeling empty. Back in the present, Laura realizes that despite all of her success and money, there is something missing. She can't quite place what it might be though. All she knows is that she feels an inner restlessness. Laura decides she isn't going to wait for Maurice's call. She is going to go out and find him.

Analysis

Chapter 2

The apartment building that Laura lives in and Maurice's welfare hotel are on the same street, just a block apart. This is not terribly surprising, since it is New York City, and there's a world on every street. However, it shows just how close they are physically, even though their lives are far apart. The author is suggesting that every day there are people around each individual, who are in need of some decency and kindness.

Sitting across from each other at a McDonald's, they couldn't be closer physically, but they are both further apart than either of them know at the time. Readers, at this point, know little about Laura's home life, but presumably it is not filled with the drugs and violence that Maurice deals with daily.

Laura analyzes her own actions in this chapter. She is coming from a life of privilege – a life she worked hard for, granted, but it is still a life of privilege. She questions her own motives. Was she taking a few hours out of her day for this boy as a diversion? Was it just something to alleviate some guilt so that she could go back to her insulated life and feel like she had done a good deed?

These questions go unanswered as she returns to her life of privilege in the Symphony apartment complex. She feels that her life has changed, even though all she did for Maurice was offer a brief reprieve. The two apartment complexes, themselves, are symbolic of both Maurice and Laura's lives. The Symphony, just by its name, suggests privilege and abundance, whereas Maurice's apartment building suggests scarcity, poverty, and lack.

The theme of Routines is evident in this chapter as Laura becomes aware that she lives only a few blocks away from where Maurice lives in abject poverty and violence. She realizes that she has been oblivious to the poor living conditions of some of the people around her. She says that living in the city, she, like other city dwellers, have had to build up an emotional armor to protect themselves from seeing and becoming involved in others' misery. But now, of course, that misery has a name and a face. She is beginning to see how very wrong her self-imposed numbness has been.



Chapter 3

This chapter fills out the idea of a young, urban professional who has a lot of possessions, but nothing of value. She has surrounded herself with great things, but she's left unfulfilled. This underscores the theme of Wealth. Laura has been chasing money for most of her adult life, and it has brought her great wealth and a comfortable lifestyle, and yet, she doesn't 'feel' wealthy. Her definition is being reshaped by her circumstances.

In contrast, her co-workers, so far, don't get it. They see taking Maurice to lunch as a one-time thing. A nice gesture on Laura's part, maybe even something for bragging rights. This is certainly something to feel proud of, but it is just grist for the conversation mill. What their reactions do, however, is hold a mirror up to Laura. Only a day earlier, she was exactly the same as they are....callous to the obvious suffering going on all around them. Capable of doing something, but failing to take action. She begins to feel ashamed. It is this realization that makes her determined to go back out and find Maurice again.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Laura unsettled and unhappy with her life? What's changed?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Laura's viewpoint toward poverty to that of her co-workers.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Routines and how it ties in to Laura's new revelation about herself.

Vocabulary

fathom, incomprehensible, inordinate, discourse, scrounger, coaxing, pizzazz, cajoling, stoic, amid



Chapters 4-5

Summary

Chapter 4

It is now three days after her initial meeting with Maurice (a Thursday). Laura goes out to find the boy. She finds him easily enough – he is in the same spot as she found him on Monday. He smiles when he sees her, and agrees to go to McDonald's again. This time, she notices, he eats a lot more slowly.

Readers don't learn anything of what happens during this meal, except that at the end, Laura makes plans with Maurice to meet on the next Monday. Instead, there is a flashback and the reader is offered more of an insight into Maurice's childhood.

(Flashback). Maurice lived at the welfare hotel with his mother, two sisters, and grandmother Rose, who is described this way: "Grandma Rose was 4-foot-11 and hard as a two by four." She carried a straight razor named Betsy. Maurice had only received two gifts in his life, and one of them was from Rose. On his sixth birthday, she gave him a joint. He coughed through a few puffs, and after that, Rose kept him away from drugs. All six of Maurice's uncles were involved in drugs in some way, most of them dealers.

At one point during a flashback, it's unclear about the timeline, Maurice's mother disappeared. He got his first job working for a pimp, knocking on car windows if a prostitute took too long with a John. He'd come home every morning with a wad of cash. It was around this time that child protective services came to the hotel to try to take him away, but he'd managed to elude them, hiding on the streets.

Chapter 5

After a few weeks of eating at McDonald's Laura tells Maurice that she wants to take him someplace nicer. They agree to meet at the Hard Rock Cafe. This is a trendy place, and Maurice is worried about fitting in. He has made sure to wash his sweatshirt, and his face, before coming. He hungrily devours a steak and mashed potatoes. Laura has a surprise in store for Maurice. She has tickets to a Mets game. Normally, she would take a client, but she's going to take Maurice instead. Maurice is excited about going to his first ever game.

The majority of the chapter is a flashback to Laura's own childhood, and abusive father, Nunzie. Specifically, how he came home from his bartending job and saw that her brother, Frank, had broken his tape measure. Frank managed to escape a beating, but his beloved baseball mitt wound up bearing the brunt of his father's aggression. He cut it to pieces.



Analysis

Chapter 4

Maurice's home life is sad, but there is a weird kind of order in all the chaos. His six uncles all have gang or rapper nicknames, and come and go out of his life. Other family members do, too. But he recognizes love coming from them. Even the uncle who hits him, he sees it as someone who is toughening him up for the real world.

In the real world, there is no one who cares about him, and no one who loves him. He comes and goes throughout New York City without anyone really paying any attention to him. So, the family in his life know him, and that's enough for him. Even if they are never around 24/7, they are still constants in his life. He might not know when he'll see them again, but they are out there, somewhere. And one day, they'll come home and it'll be great to see them, or so he rationalizes.

The theme of Routine is offered in a different life, this time. The focus is on Maurice and his daily routine. His routine locks him into a life of violence, crime, and loneliness. He has never known anything else. This is his normal. The reader is offered this glimpse into Maurice's life as a flashback, so that the reader sees the shocking disparity between Laura's life and Maurice's life.

It should be stated that the McDonald's, in and of itself, becomes a symbol. It is a common ground, a meeting place. The fact that Maurice eats slower this time, symbolizes that he's beginning to understand that there may be more of this type of meal in his future, and so he can take the time to enjoy it, instead of wolfing it down as fast as he can. It also indicates that he's taking the time to literally 'ingest' what it is that Laura is offering to him, which is her friendship and compassion.

Chapter 5

Maurice is still pleased to meet with Laura, and he shows it with a bit of formality. He cleans himself up. He also continues to call her Miss Laura. He is seeing her as an adult worthy of respect. Additionally, just as he was eating food (and symbolically eating up the attention and advice Laura had to offer), now, there is better food, food of a much higher caliber. This indicates that the relationship between them is more than just 'fast food'. They are entering into a mentor/mentoree sort of relationship.

Presumably, Laura is giving readers a glimpse of her own troubled childhood to compare it with Maurice's. She grew up in a middle class suburb. She and her sisters knew to close the windows during one of her father's rampages so the neighbors wouldn't know. Her mother had coached them how to act normal even though there were troubles at home. Nunzie never beat his two daughters, but his sons and his wife were fair game.

The fact that the author refers to her own father by his first name a number of times shows the distance that she has from him. This also shows, that in many ways, Laura



identifies with Maurice's own fatherless situation. In many respects, too, though she is not aware of it, she could also be giving Maurice the care and nurturing, attention, that she never received as the child of an abusive and distant father.

The baseball mitt is symbolic of how Laura's father, Nunzie, tore apart their family, literally shredding any sort of family bond or sense of happiness in that household. They merely went through the motions, presenting a nice suburban face to the public, when behind closed doors, they were miserable.

Discussion Question 1

How are Laura's childhood and Maurice's somewhat similar?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Routine as it is offered from Maurice's viewpoint.

Discussion Question 3

What is the symbolism of the food and act of eating at McDonald's?

Vocabulary

slinking, reflexively, trafficking, squalid, epidemic, etiquette, elemental, talisman, kinetic, guileless



Chapters 6-7

Summary

Chapter 6

For a change of pace, for their fourth weekly meal together, Laura takes Maurice to her apartment. She figures he's never had a good home cooked meal before. She's right. She asks him to set the table, and he fumbles with it for a minute before asking her to teach him how to do it.

He's eyeballing a bottle of loose change she's been collecting in a jar. She takes it that this is a good time to set some ground rules. She says that she wants to be Maurice's friend, and a friendship is based on trust.

He only eats half of his meal. When she asks if he likes it, he says he does. He just wants to take the rest home to his mother. She tells him to finish it, because she has another serving ready to go home. She also makes a little care package: soap, toothbrush, and other toiletries. She later learns later that Maurice never got a chance to use these. A family member stole them. So, later in their relationship, she buys him a lockbox.

Meanwhile, she tells him that she's going to take him to the Mets game that Saturday, but she needs his mother's permission. She even gives him a typed permission slip. Sadly, he never brings it back.

Chapter 7

As the Mets game looms, Laura realizes that Maurice's mother isn't going to sign the slip. She decides that she will go and ask for permission. But she isn't about to go into the housing project alone. Laura recruits her friend Lisa to be back-up for her when she goes to visit Maurice. When they enter the area, everyone looks at the two women, some with open curiosity, and some with hostility. A guard meets them and escorts them to the right room.

Maurice isn't home, but Darcella, his mother, and Rose, his grandmother, are. Darcella is too strung out on drugs to make much sense of anything around her. Rose comes to the rescue, and signs the permission slip that Laura brings. "Did he tell you about me?" Laura asks. Rose says that he has. The hotel is dirty and dangerous. Laura realizes that both she and Lisa have crossed over into a way of living that was unlike anything either of them had ever known.

The next time she sees Maurice, he warns her never to go back there again. He's trying to protect her, knowing that she's too soft and would become an easy victim. They do wind up going to the Mets game, and Maurice has the time of his life.



(Flashback)

Maurice's mother became addicted to heroin, becoming so bad that once she had to shoot up in a subway, with her children forming a wall around her to hide her from the cameras and authorities. Maurice rationalized that at least the drugs made her happy. She tried to go to rehab, but became addicted to crack afterwards. She sustained her habits through prostitution, robbery, and being a snitch for the police. Then, once she learned how to make crack, she became one of the neighborhood's foremost dealers.

Analysis

Chapter 6

Laura is worried that she is overstepping her bounds. She wants to be sure that someone who has authority in Maurice's life knows that she's helping, and is okay with it. Her speech about a friendship being based on trust is good for setting ground rules. Laura doesn't realize that the trust has to go both ways. All Maurice's life, adults have wanted something from him. And white people have usually been government workers wanting to take him from his family. So, when Laura announces that her intention is simply friendship, he accepts that friendship, but not completely. Up until now, he has been more wary of her than she was of him. He has a lot more to lose.

The Symphony apartment is luxurious and completely overwhelms Maurice when he arrives. There's even a doorman, Steve. Steve knows everyone by name when they come, but he can't figure out how Maurice is connected to Laura when she brings him in. As he leaves for the night, Steve says goodbye to Maurice by name. It's a symbol that he's being introduced into Laura's world, and accepted. This demonstrates the theme of Culture Shock as Maurice isn't used to being treated with any respect, always being seen as a stereotype, or as invisible.

The permission slip from Laura to Maurice's mother is very symbolic. The fact that it is never returned by Maurice, either indicates that he never gave it to her (as he might have feared his mother would stop him from coming) or he knew that she would never sign it anyway. In either instance, it is a symbol of the disconnection between Maurice and his mother, despite the fact that he only eats half of his meal so he can take the other half home to her. This demonstrates several themes, among them the theme of Suffering in Silence. Maurice and his family are obviously starving, or good food and money are hard to come by.

Chapter 7

Laura and Lisa are in over their heads, going into a dangerous world just to get a permission slip signed. It's preposterous, in a way. Here's a world full of drugs, where an 11-year-old boy routinely sees people shoot heroin, people getting beat up for money or drugs, people dying. And Laura's worried about a permission slip. The reader also sees that it is most likely Rose, Maurice's grandmother, who offers him the most emotional support.



Laura wants to make sure that whoever is supposed to be watching out for Maurice knows that she is spending time with him, and that she's not victimizing him in any way. Little does she know that his family really doesn't care. This just underscores how out of touch Laura is with Maurice's situation, as she can't fathom a mother that isn't caring. During all of this emerges the theme of Personal Definitions. Both Maurice and Laura are defined by their environments, and yet, both are attempting to stretch beyond those definitions, to change them. The author seems to be suggesting that definitions that one chooses for oneself is better than those that are imposed on you.

Maurice's warning to her toward the end of the chapter shows something that she doesn't quite understand yet. Maurice would never be her victim, so her desire that everyone know that she's not taking advantage of him is ironic. He's outsmarted or outrun police and social workers. Since his mother is a dealer, he's got a level of protection that few children his age have. There would be no way that a street smart kid like him would ever be taken advantage of by a woman who doesn't even know which neighborhoods to stay out of. Maurice's family knows that Maurice isn't in any trouble, even if Laura still wants to make sure they know that.

Discussion Question 1

What does the permission slip indicate about both Laura and Maurice?

Discussion Question 2

What are some gross assumptions that both Laura and Maurice have about one another?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Personal Definitions.

Vocabulary

art deco, sheepish, spacious, perked, mauve, harried, facade, partition, roused, desolate



Chapters 8-9

Summary

Chapter 8

After spending a few minutes with Maurice's mother, Laura discusses her own family for this chapter. She questions what makes an unfit mother.

(Flashback) As she remembers stories told to her when she was a child, she recalls that her mother told her that her great grandmother, had her children taken away in Italy because she couldn't provide for them. Her husband had been drafted into the army.

She follows the family line down to her own family living in America. Again, she tells the reader about the abuse her family suffered at the hands of her father. In one instance, the children were wakened one night by his furious yelling. Then, there was the sound of broken glass. Laura and her sister, Annette, shared a bedroom, and Annette talked her into going to make sure her father hadn't thrown their mother through a window. It wound up being a broken lamp. But when she saw her mother, bruised and bloody, she had been terrified. Her mother was mortified that her children had seen her this way. In the morning, no one said a word.

Chapter 9

The beginning of this chapter speaks about Maurice's effect on other people in Laura's life. Her boss, Valerie, who is also a friend, is the voice of concern. She is worried that Maurice might be taking advantage of Laura, but she's more concerned that people will think Laura is taking advantage of Maurice. She warns Laura to be wary of how their relationship might appear to Maurice's family, or social services. A co-worker cleans out his closet at home and brings a bunch of his sons' old clothes to work for Laura to give to Maurice.

At this point, Maurice is coming to visit her every week at the Symphony. He tells her that the concierge treats him differently when she's not around. She has a little talk with the concierge, making sure they know that he's a friend, and needs to be treated with respect. It gets the message across.

During his visits, she does his laundry as well. Soon, he starts bringing his family's laundry. And she sends milk and cookies home to his sisters. She also makes him lunch for the week, leaving it at the front desk of her apartment in a brown paper bag.

They fall into a routine. He comes over every Monday night, and she makes dinner. He sets the table and helps with dishes. Every once in a while, there is a stark reminder of how dire his straits are. For example, he comes over with a bad cold. He keeps sniffing and finally Laura tells him to go blow his nose. He doesn't know what that means. No one has ever taught him how to blow his nose before.



Maurice asks Laura to come to a parent-teacher night at his school, I.S. 131 in Chinatown. She learns from the teacher that the last time Darcella went to the school, she almost had to be escorted out by security. She also learns that Maurice isn't doing well in school. He's late, if he decides to show up at all. He's distracted a lot. He smells terrible. The other boys make fun of him, which causes him to get into fights. He thinks he's illiterate because his mother has told him that he is.

Laura meets his teacher, Kim House, who also, as it turns out, visited Maurice at home to see what was the matter. One time when she'd gone to Maurice's to visit, Rose had told Kim that she was a good woman for looking out for Maurice, and that of all the children, he was a very good kid.

After that, Kim knew where he was coming from, and took steps to reach him. Realizing that chaos set him off, she gave him private time to work on his assignments. But Kim tells Laura that Maurice needs to get to school on time and complete his work. Kim also cautions her on her involvement with Maurice saying that kids from the projects like Maurice is are constantly disappointed by life, and in particular, the adults in them. They are always letting the kids down. She tells Laura that if she's going to be involved, she needs to decide to be really there for him. Otherwise, she's just another person that's come into and gone out of his life.

Laura takes this to heart and on the way back to Maurice's apartment, she scolds Maurice, perhaps for the first time, about how important it is to get to school on time. She sees Maurice cry and is heartbroken. He explains how he doesn't have a clock or a watch, so he has no idea what time it is. She immediately goes out and buys him an alarm clock and a watch.

Analysis

Chapter 8

While the woes of Maurice's family are pretty obvious even to the casual observers, the horrors that Laura suffered growing up were all kept secret. This demonstrates the theme of Suffering in Silence. Her mother commanded them all to be quiet about it. No one spoke of the abuse. On the surface, they were one big happy family. Even as an adult, she says that people who knew her dad would approach her and tell her how great a man he was. She still can't tell the truth.

Laura's search for the answer to what makes a mother unfit, is subtly suggested through her flashback to her great grandmother, in another country. For one reason or another, they were unable to provide for the children, and they were removed from the home. Yet, in the US, children are left with their families, even when it is obvious, like Maurice's situation, that they are starving. It is not an easy answer, or an easy question, as there are pros and cons to both arguments. Laura decides that suffering in silence is what should end.



While her family had all the modern conveniences, and never wanted for anything, they were always afraid. They were afraid of her father's drunken rages and they were afraid every time he came home. In some ways, it was no different than the fear that Maurice has. Although, perhaps, Maurice became stronger since he had to fend for himself. This also demonstrates the theme of Wealth Not Buying Happiness, as Laura's family had money, but they were just as miserable and afraid as Maurice.

Chapter 9

This chapter underscores an important theme: Personal Definitions. In other words, people can often be defined by what others think of them. Throughout the book, everyone has an idea of what Maurice is: some homeless kid from the projects. But there's more to him than that. Laura and Kim see his potential and reach out to him.

However, Laura's relationship with Maurice is under scrutiny. Everyone has their own opinions about it. They all stem from a good source: People don't want anything bad to happen in this relationship. It leads to a lot of warnings.

Valerie, Laura's boss, warns Laura that others are going to think she's taking advantage of the boy. Kim warns Laura that helping Maurice can't be a hobby, a distraction to make her feel good and then to throw it away when it stops feeling good. It's a relationship, and it goes both ways. Severing it now would destroy his trust. Additionally, the people in Laura's ritzy apartment don't want Maurice around, or don't know what to do with him while he's there. These people in their lives want the best out of the situation, but sometimes don't know what else to do but issue warnings. One has to wonder if they are more worried about Laura and Maurice, or more about themselves and how her involvement challenges their own lack of action on similar issues and matters. Their relationship makes obvious and glaring the need that is just a few blocks from their own complex. They would rather she just go back to ignoring it, as they do.

The fact that Laura is packing Maurice a lunch in a brown paper bag represents, not only between Maurice and Laura, that there is a level of care and concern there, but also it signals to the rest of the kids at school that Maurice is loved and cared for...that he matters. This simple act lays the foundation for Maurice to finally trust Laura and to consider her his second mother.

Discussion Question 1

How did Laura's childhood family suffer in silence?

Discussion Question 2

What are the arguments for and against removing a child from a home?



Discussion Question 3

How have Laura and Maurice handled their childhood traumas differently?

Vocabulary

scrounging, rutted, trudged, hellacious, frivolous, rational, abreast, concierge, meticulous, carrel



Chapters 10-11

Summary

Chapter 10

Laura takes Maurice to visit her sister, Annette, and her family. She has a husband and three children. She also owns an acre of property in Greenlawn, a quiet, middleclass neighborhood.

There's more culture shock here. Maurice lived in a single room with 8-12 people. Even Laura's apartment, with all its grandeur, was still small with just a few rooms. Here, there is an acre of property, three bathrooms, and a room just for watching TV. And his favorite part, he tells Laura, is the big table where they all just sat around and talked. That wasn't something that happened at his home.

Laura hosts Thanksgiving that year, because her apartment overlooks the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade route. There's a track for jogging on the roof, and everyone is eye level with the floats. Laura's father is also there. The man who had held such control over everyone in the family is now a stooped old man. She watches as he is uncharacteristically kind to Maurice.

(Flashback)

Laura remembers her childhood, of when her father would be verbally abusive and physically abusive to his wife and son. His son eventually started to fight back, engaging in screaming matches. Her mother fought back a few times. In this particular flashback, Nunzie was drunk at a family function and drove the family home in the snow. He was swerving and driving erratically, but not because he was drunk. He was doing it because he knew he was making them scared and he loved causing fear. Eventually, his mother demanded to drive home, and Nunzie skulked off into the snow on foot.

Chapter 11

As if Chapter 10 has set off a cascade of memories, this chapter continues with a flashback to some additional scenes from Laura's childhood. In these memories, Laura is a pre-teen and another child has been born in the family.

The birth of baby Steve, the fifth and final child in the household, keeps her father sane for a while. Before long, though, his true nature returns. There is one instance of her mother fleeing into Laura and Annette's bedroom, and the three covering themselves with a blanket, as Nunzie throws liquor bottles at the wall behind them. Police come to the door, but Nunzie talks his way out of it. There's another instance where – for unclear reasons – her father is kicking her mother and Laura threatens to call the police. That time, he actually stops. The family spends three days with a grandmother, who tells them to go back to Nunzie.



Analysis

Chapter 10

The big table at Annette's house represents a sense of community and comfort that the middle-class family has that Maurice just doesn't. There isn't even a table in his apartment. The idea that meals are meant to be shared with loved ones, rather than scrounged whenever or wherever they can be found, is alien to him. He enjoys the idea of just sitting around and talking with others. The theme of Culture Shock is demonstrated in Maurice's reaction and excitement about being in a different setting and seeing a different way of life.

The women in Laura's family seek to create peace. Laura has her own little world, removed from the chaos of her childhood. When someone enters that world, in the person of Maurice, she feels as if she has to make it right for him as well. Annette, meanwhile, has created an idyllic suburban world for herself, also far from the rest of the chaos of her childhood and the big city. Ironically, they still invite their father to Thanksgiving, even though they all know how horrible he was to them.

Chapter 11

Few people go out of the way to help in a bad situation. The police officers that come to the door don't even come inside the house. The husband just talks his way out of it, and the officers leave, apparently convinced that there's no trouble. This indicates a type of neglect and complacency on behalf of the very organizations that are there to protect people from abusive situations (including extended family members).

When the grandmother sends her daughter and grandchildren back home to live with an abusive husband, it's another example of *Suffering in Silence*. During the time in which Laura grew up, and coming from the cultural traditions of her own family, this type of abuse was not to be discussed in public, and the family was not allowed to break up, not even when it was dangerous to remain together. The traditional family structure of this old Italian family forces the women to live with abusive men. They are required to be dutiful wives to their husbands, even if the husbands are dangerous to themselves and their children.

Discussion Question 1

How does Maurice and Laura's childhood continue to have similarities?

Discussion Question 2

How is Laura's mother's legacy continuing on with her?



Discussion Question 3

What is Maurice's reaction to being at Annette's house in the country?

Vocabulary

oblige, pennants, camaraderie, discreetly, ingrained, respite, stew bungalow, bawled, groggily



Chapters 12-13

Summary

Chapter 12

Laura has Maurice help her decorate her apartment for Christmas. She invites him to her family's home for the holiday, after learning that his family don't do anything for Christmas. He tells her that kids like him know about Christmas and what's supposed to happen, but that when you grow up in the projects, you know you can never have it, so they just don't think about it.

Up until now, the only Christmas present Maurice had ever received was a white stuffed teddy bear from the year before. He went to the Salvation Army for their charity Christmas meal. A volunteer had told him to pick out one thing under the tree, and that had been his choice. This year, he receives plenty of clothes and things he needs. Laura also gives him a remote-controlled car, which was on the top of a Christmas list she had him make. Immediately, he wants to take it to Laura's nephew Derek's house so they can play with it there. They go the next day, on Christmas, and spend a picture-perfect holiday. Maurice doesn't come empty handed, though. He brings Laura the only present he can: the stuffed bear he had received the year before.

Laura then delves into her own backstory some more, and about her first marriage that was over by the time she was 23. She calls him Kevin in the book, but notes that she has changed his name. They had a fast and intense romance, and everything was going according to plan. That is, until Kevin called from a work trip in South Carolina and told her that he didn't want to be married to her anymore. She was floored by this. Her friends and family urged her to contact a divorce lawyer, as they have suspected he's cheating. She denied that he would ever cheat, but her family convinced her to hire a private investigator. The PI brought back photos of Kevin with another woman. The divorce went on from there.

Chapter 13

This chapter is a continuation of Laura's memory of her disastrous marriage, and that time in her life. On the same day that Kevin called, telling her he wanted a divorce, she had also gotten a call that her mother's uterine cancer had returned. She had been in remission, but now it had come back. Laura moved back home, and tried to help. However, she just couldn't live there with her father, so she moved away.

Her mother's health gradually deteriorated until there was nothing left to do but wait. Even the oncologist told Laura that she needed to tell her mother goodbye. Laura and her mother had a heart-to-heart talk. About Kevin's betrayal, her mother tells her that God would never give her more of a burden than she could handle. Laura turned this around when it was time for her mother to give in and let the cancer take her. She tells



her to believe that God will take away her pain very soon, and that she would never be in pain again.

Soon, her mother was taken home to die, and eventually became comatose. She was taken back to the hospital, where she had a bizarre, miraculous recovery. She gained control of her faculties, felt no pain, and said she saw heaven. She was able to give parting words to each of her family, including apologizing to Frank that she hadn't protected him enough, and made Nunzie promise to control himself.

Later, in the present, Laura is startled to realize, with tears filling her eyes, that it was her mother's influence that made her turn back and go talk to Maurice on that first eventful day. This is her mother's true legacy.

Analysis

Chapter 12

Maurice's first real Christmas is marked not by the things he receives, but by the kindness that is extended to him. The gifts are wonderful, and he really hits the jackpot with Laura's family. However, the real gift is that he got to share this family for Christmas.

Maurice understands that he's on the outside looking in, a very intelligent observation for an 11-year-old. He still feels that he's an outsider, because for most of his day-to-day life, he's with his biological family. And he still lives where he lives.

Again, we see the theme of Life is What Happens When You're Busy Making Plans. As Laura was working so diligently to create the life that she has wanted from childhood - marriage, career, family – and all the while, her new husband was having an affair.

When she was a girl, she and her sister Annette would talk about what kind of lives they'd have when they were older. Every child (except Maurice, probably) thinks about what their lives will be when they get older. For the girls, however, it was escape in two different ways. It was an escape in the way that little kids are using their imaginations. And it was also a literal escape, to flee their hellish home life.

Annette has secured her dream. She lives comfortably in a nice suburb with a wonderful family. That kind of peace has eluded Laura. In retrospect, she suspects that she was trying too hard for that kind of perfection, and maybe fell more in love with the idea of marriage, home, and children, than the man she was actually married to.

Chapter 13

The theme of Suffering in Silence is chronicled in this chapter. Laura's mother refused to tell her the cancer had come back until it was too difficult to hide. And even then, she didn't tell her how far along she was. Frank, who was in the military, wasn't told that she was even sick.



Even this idea of “God never gives us more than we can handle” is part of this. It's a way to avoid speaking about problems, assuming that God will just give them the strength needed to overcome all obstacles.

Pain and suffering is something you deal with privately in this household. This is a direct parallel between Laura's childhood, and Maurice's home environment currently. In some aspect, though she may not be completely aware of it, she is doing what her mother could not do for her...protect her, and remove her from the pain of their situation. She is nurturing her own inner child.

The uterine cancer is very symbolic. Decidedly female in nature, the cancer has attacked Laura's mother in the area that was used to create and give life to them. A slow growing, insidious cancer has been eating away at her, much like her marriage to Nunzie has. The fact that she begins to get better when she gives voice to the problems, speaks about them to Laura, is also very evident. Laura, in remembering this time, comes to her own conclusion about how she can heal from her childhood traumas, and this leads her toward understanding why she stopped to speak with Maurice that fateful day.

Discussion Question 1

What startling revelation does Laura come to in Chapter 13?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of Laura's mother's cancer.

Discussion Question 3

Compare Annette to Laura and how their lives have turned out.

Vocabulary

survival mechanism, swanky, elated, infrastructure, hysteria, vacillate, methadone, instantaneous, baffled, antsy



Chapters 14-15

Summary

Chapter 14

This chapter summarizes a few lessons Laura tried to impart to Maurice. She warns him against doing drugs, although he has more experience seeing what drugs do firsthand and knows better. She shows him how to make a cake from a recipe, which is a bizarre thing to him. He's never made anything, or cooked anything, before. She always asks him about what he wants to be when he grows up. He says he wants to be a police officer, because he's seen too many bad ones and he wants to be a good one.

Later on in the month, Maurice's mother is arrested for drugs, and Maurice is in tears. He finally opens up to Laura about Darcella's history (a history the reader has already been aware of). Although Laura generally knew what was going on, now she knows all the details: the selling, the stealing, the trading food stamps – all for drugs.

Darcella is in jail during Maurice's birthday, so Laura takes it upon herself to make a big to-do and give Maurice the best birthday ever. They go to Wrestlemania. They go visit Annette and the kids. They have a nice, long weekend. Afterwards, he gives her a kiss on the cheek and tells her, for the first time, that he loves her.

Chapter 15

Two years of hanging out with Maurice go by in a few pages. A few situations are noted. There's a part where her niece is inconsolable after learning that Santa Claus isn't real. Maurice watches as her father sits down and holds her while she cries. He's never seen an adult take the time to console a crying child. He also receives his first bike, as a gift from Laura.

Now 38, Laura is introduced to a man named Michael, and they fall for each other quickly. Before long, she is living with him in White Plains, New York. Maurice's mother qualified for Section 8 housing and his family moves away from that old neighborhood. Both Maurice and Laura knew that they would continue their friendship, even if getting together proved more difficult.

Laura lives so far away that the day to day affairs involving Maurice go unnoticed. Maurice begins hiding information from Laura. His bike is stolen because he trusts an adult. Then, his mother is arrested for attempted murder. She is back to dealing drugs, and gets in a fight. When the police arrive, they find the drugs on her. Though she's given a lighter sentence for turning state's evidence, it also means that she will lose their subsidized housing. Darcella goes to jail for two years, and Rose and the rest of the family move to a smaller apartment. Maurice doesn't like the strangers who are staying there, so he starts living on the streets. Laura doesn't know any of this at the time.



Laura is shocked when Michael won't allow Maurice to come to the house for Christmas. He says it's not appropriate. He is a wealthy man, used to getting what he wants, and he doesn't budge. She gives in.

They get married the following year. Maurice isn't invited to the wedding.

Analysis

Chapter 14

While Laura says she is trying not to be the surrogate parent, she knows she is. She's providing for Maurice in ways that no one else has, or will. She might still call him her friend, but the only person she's fooling is herself. Maurice has since dropped the more formal "Miss Laura," and now calls her "Laurie," because Annette's kids call her "Aunt Laurie."

There are times that he just hangs out at her apartment. Sometimes with her. Sometimes without her. The Symphony has stopped becoming an outside thing for him. Now, it's a second home. It could almost be considered a first home since it's safer than the one he has. It is clear that much has shifted for both Laura and Maurice.

The theme of Routine is offered, yet again, in a new context, as both Laura and Maurice have new routines that include new circumstances. Laura needed someone to care for, to take care of, someone that needed her. Maurice needed someone to care about him, and for him, to see his potential, and to encourage him. He needed somewhere, and someone, safe. By opening his heart to her, by kissing her, and telling her that he loves her, he has crossed a line that he has not ever dared cross with anyone else. He truly sees her as his surrogate mother, though he does not come out and say so.

Chapter 15

This time, it is Maurice who is Suffering in Silence. He's been hiding the reality of his living situation. In truth, he had been only giving Laura selected information from the beginning. A lot of what is revealed in the book is learned much later in their long association.

It's unclear exactly why Maurice hides these situations from Laura, but she has a few guesses. One is that Maurice is afraid that if she knew everything, she would be scared away. Another is that he wants to protect Laura from the real dangers of his life.

Also, there are some things that Maurice suffers through that he doesn't think to say anything about because he doesn't think there's anything wrong. For him, it's just normal for kids to get hit if they disagree with adults. It's normal for police and white authority figures to do more harm than good. So, he doesn't think to talk about it.

Laura is heartbroken about her decision to stand by her man rather than stand up for her friend. The book is written decades after these decisions, so she is seeing them with



the benefit of hindsight. Even as she writes, she is regretting these decisions, as she now sees the ramifications of her decisions years before.

The bicycle acts symbolically in this chapter. It had been a gift from Laura, a sign of their friendship. It mattered a great deal to Maurice, and it afforded him some mobility. When it is stolen from him, it mimics the fact that his time with Laura has, likewise, been stolen by Laura's inclusion of another person in her life, whom she clearly chooses over him. In many respects, he finds himself back where he started.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Michael and how does he impact both Laura and Maurice?

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Maurice tell Laura everything about his life?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism of Maurice's bicycle and why it is so devastating to have lost it.

Vocabulary

stressing, diligence, doused, categorically, visualize, resilience, inconsolable, distraught, envied, unbridled



Chapters 16-17

Summary

Chapter 16

Maurice isn't doing well. He drops out of school. He's living on the streets. He even goes to the social workers, who just put him back with his grandmother, so he goes back on the streets. Maurice's family business is the drug trade. He could have easily started in it and made hundreds of dollars on his first day. The temptation was strong. But instead, he applies for a job at a few messenger services before one accepts him. He has his first job.

He likes the feeling of a regular paycheck, making \$8 an hour as a young teenager. He wants more and finds a way to sell knock-off jeans, buying them for \$7 and selling them for \$40. This lets him afford his first place to live. He rents a room daily at a hotel that usually rents hourly to prostitutes. But, it's finally his own and he doesn't have to share with anyone.

Darcella is released from jail, and is given a 2-bedroom apartment to live in, so he joins her. He sees a stranger there one day and is surprised to learn that it's his father. His father has become so old-looking and frail, not the terror he used to be. It turns out, he has AIDS. At first, Maurice wants nothing to do with Morris, but after helping him up after a fall one day, they start talking. Morris apologizes for his old behavior. Maurice asks him why he acted that way. "It was the only way I knew," Morris answers. Morris dies later, after making Maurice promise to name a son after him.

A few years later, Nunzie, Laura's father, passes away as well. The five children had been trying to take care of him as best as they could, but he made it very difficult with his verbal abuse. Eventually, Meals on Wheels had taken over the duties of bringing meals, but they stopped coming to the house because Nunzie wouldn't stop smoking while on oxygen. He died alone, in a hospital, as opposed to his wife, who was surrounded by family.

Michael and Laura discuss having a family. She has always wanted children. He has two grown sons from a previous marriage. He is flatly against more children, and won't budge. He meets Maurice, and eventually they spend a Christmas together, but Michael never lets Maurice get close to him.

Maurice turns 18, and is able to apply for Section 8 housing. He is given a two-bedroom apartment with his girlfriend, Meka. He lets his mother stay there. When he is 19, his son, Maurice, jr. is born. When he comes home from the hospital with the new baby, he learns that his niece and nephew have set fire to his apartment, and he is homeless again.



Laura is not supportive of Maurice being a father, and that drives a wedge between them. She thinks he's too young to be a father, and perhaps she's jealous because she'll never have a child of her own. Maurice borrows \$300 from Laura to buy a winter coat for Meka. This is the first time he's ever asked for money. She lends it to him, trying to get him to pay it back, even if it's only a quarter a week. He stops seeing her shortly thereafter, too ashamed to continue the relationship.

Chapter 17

Maurice disappears from Laura's life for two years. Throughout that time, Laura's worried that she was too harsh with her judgment of him, and wishes she knew where he was.

He tries to start a new life. He splits up with Meka, and starts a new relationship with a woman named Michelle. She gives birth to another son, Jalique. They raise both sons together.

His grandmother Rose dies from cancer, after a scene in which Maurice has to sneak into the hospital to visit her and finds her in dirty linens with her respirator shut off. It's revealed that Rose had been a heroin addict for Maurice's entire life, but she never did drugs around the children.

Maurice leaves New York to set up a business in North Carolina. He thinks that he can set up a pipeline for his jeans there, and just ship them to salespeople. The people he chooses to do business with are gang members, and he finds himself huddled behind a car during a shootout. One of his friends tosses him a gun to protect himself, but he doesn't touch it. After the shooting stops, he's yelled at for crying. He goes home to his family, who are still waiting for him in New York.

Unfortunately, he learns shortly after this, that his mother has HIV. The tragedy of it is that she finally becomes sober, and starts living a healthier lifestyle. She has a stroke one day, slips into a coma, and dies shortly thereafter. Maurice calls Laura for the first time in two years, crying. He tells her his mother has died, and that she's his real mother now.

Analysis

Chapter 16

This chapter sums up quite a few years, and jumps back and forth between years a few times.

Laura and Maurice's pseudo-family relationship is strained in this chapter as real world issues creep in. Both of them are pulled separate ways by people they love. Michael doesn't really want much to do with Maurice. He recognizes that he's a good kid, but doesn't have room in his life for anyone that isn't there already. Laura moves away to chase her dream of being a wife and mother. Maurice is pulled away first by his own



family, his mother's needs especially. And then, he has a family of his own, and that takes precedence.

When they initially met, Laura was a young woman and Maurice was a kid. Now, Laura is middle-aged and Maurice is a man. Their dynamic has changed. It's no longer Laura setting the rules and showing Maurice how to find value in things. Now, Maurice is an adult and can make his own decisions. Even if they aren't the best.

The theme of Life Happening When You're Busy Making Plans is relevant here as well. Laura is convinced that her relationship with Michael is going to lead to having two children and a family. Now, she realizes she never discussed children with him before the marriage. Neither of them were clear with their future plans. As Laura is making this plan, real life goes in a different direction. She will never have that dream of family, of being a mother to little babies. Life had other plans for her, and viewing Maurice with his new baby makes her, on some level, bitter and resentful. It is too painful for either of them to be around one another at this point in time in their lives.

Chapter 17

Even as an adult, Maurice's life is still difficult. Part of it is that he has few people whom he can depend upon. The people his age that he starts a business with are gang members. No good can come of it, because he is defined by his surroundings. His grandmother and mother, two people who were relatively constant in his life, are now gone.

Maurice's son is nicknamed Junior, much like Morris was nicknamed Junior, or Junebug, as his mother called him. People drift in and out of his life all the time. When Darcella disappears for a bit, after she's clean, Maurice knows something must have happened to her. She must have become sick. He's right.

When Maurice disappears, Laura thinks the worst, as well. She's worried that he's fallen in with a bad crowd. She's right. But Maurice has the intelligence to know not to do anything rash and to rise above his surroundings. There are a couple of themes that come through in this chapter, as well. First, there is the Personal Definition, that a person is often defined by the company that they keep, and by the circumstances in which they find themselves. This is completely true in Maurice's life at this point. Secondly, there is the Suffering in Silence theme that, at this point, is a very strong theme throughout the entire novel. Whenever a character suffers in silence, nothing good comes from it. It is only in sharing the burden with a trusted other that it is made bearable, and sometimes, fixable.

Discussion Question 1

How has Maurice's life changed since Laura moved out of the city?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Personal Definitions and how Maurice feels trapped by them.

Discussion Question 3

What are the regrets that Laura now has?

Vocabulary

off the grid, elude, shrill, lucrative, burgeoning, naive, fathomed, vortex, succumbed, ceding



Chapters 18-19

Summary

Chapter 18

Maurice explains, in this chapter, that now he and Laura are talking again, that there have only been a handful of people who have ever cared about him. He has lost his grandmother and mother. So, he has made sure to call Laura so he won't lose her, too. There has been a lot of loss along the way. This chapter gives brief updates on the people in Maurice's life. Few of them have happy endings.

Laura's brother Frank gets a longer segue. He lost his way somewhere in high school, she says. There are times when he was working steadily and had a good marriage, but good things didn't last for him. He dies in his 40s of a mysterious illness.

Maurice, meanwhile, has been taking classes and receives his GED. He enrolls in college so that he can become a police officer, like he had wanted to do since he was younger. He works for a security company, but excels at the Bureau of Welfare office, where they tell him he is good with people, at understanding their situations. At school, he comes together with some other students and the college's president to begin a prison-to-college pipeline to encourage prisoners to better themselves.

Chapter 19

This final chapter sums up where Maurice and Laura's lives have gone. Laura and Michael divorced. She never had children of her own.

Maurice changed his mind about police work, and now runs his own construction business, redoing abandoned homes. He has a large family, which includes his wife's son, Ikeem, from a previous relationship, and his son, Junior, from a previous relationship. They also have Jalique, Jahleel, Princess, and Precious.

Looking back on her life at a 50th birthday party, Laura is thankful for a lot, and especially Maurice coming into her life. Maurice gives a speech, thanking her for fulfilling the caregiver role that was so lacking in his life. Laura uses this time to reflect on what Maurice was able to do for her. He taught her what friendship really was, how important trust is, the value of money, and courage, perseverance and overcoming adversity. She knows that she received as much in return as Maurice ever did.

Maurice closes out the end of this book with a letter of his own. He echoes much of the same sentiment that went on throughout the book, showing his side of certain high points: their first meeting, watching a father console her niece instead of hitting, the big table. In Maurice's words, "It is about a mother longing for a child and a child longing for a mother."



Analysis

Chapter 18

The theme of Personal Definitions is demonstrated in this chapter. The people in Maurice's life who couldn't get out, and away from their definitions, lived horrible lives. Even his mother, who finally became sober, got out of her surroundings too late for it to matter, because she was dying.

Maurice might be the exception that proves the rule. He manages to get out. When he does, he is able to help those behind him follow his path. He does this through the welfare office. He defuses nasty situations and gets people what they need. And, through the prison-to-college program, he helps people go to school who would have no other opportunity. Most of the people he is helping are people who are trapped by their surroundings, defined by personal definitions that they are unable to break free of. He shows them how, because he was shown how.

Chapter 19

This chapter shows where the surviving people in their lives have gone. Things might not have happened according to plan, but it could have been worse. Laura never had children of her own. Her two marriages ended in divorce. She never had that suburban life with a husband, children and security. However, although she regrets her failed relationships, she understands why they happened. Additionally, she wouldn't have had things any other way, because Maurice filled a void in her that she didn't realize she had.

Maurice had no plans. He was living day to day, and as a child, had no idea where his next meal would come from. He couldn't afford to make plans. Anyone with hope, where he grew up, had their hopes dashed. So he didn't have any. Until, of course, he met Laura. She instilled hope in him and made him think about the man he was going to become. Rather than taking the quick and dangerous life, as so many of his friends and family did, he chose to work hard and become someone. He also never closed the door behind him. He kept it open, helping other people in similar situations.

The theme of Personal Definitions is explored for a last time in this chapter, as it is made clear that the only one creating the personal definitions are those to whom they are applied. Circumstances and environment, family members, where one lives, have no bearing on who a person is on the inside, of what they might become, of how they should see themselves, personally, or of their worth. Laura taught Maurice this, and it is a gift that continues to be passed along in his current job.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the ramifications of the theme of Personal Definitions.



Discussion Question 2

What would have Maurice and Laura's life have been like had they never met?

Discussion Question 3

What was the Author's purpose in writing this novel?

Vocabulary

burdensome, defused, regimen, void, casualties, shantung, pall, hailed, epic, giddy



Characters

Laura Schroff

Laura Shroff is a young upwardly mobile sales executive for an advertising company. She's by self definition, a New York kind of woman. She's streetwise in that she knows to ignore panhandlers, carry her purse close to her body, and to avoid certain parts of the city when it is dark.

She grew up in an abusive home, where her father, Nunzie, held court. She had two brothers Frank and Steve, and two sisters, Annette and Nancy.

Growing up in the suburbs, she longed to have a house, husband, and children playing in the yard. This was the ideal situation. It was one that her family pretended to have as they hid her father's alcoholic rages.

Laura works hard, and values the rich life. She lives in a small but expensive apartment, and is proud of the fashionable and expensive possessions she's acquired as a result of her hard work. And yet, she realizes that for all of her wealth, she is not fulfilled in a meaningful way. It is not until she stops to speak with a young panhandler, named Maurice, that she finds out what it was she'd been looking for all along.

Maurice Mazyck

Maurice Mazyck is just 11 when he meets Laura, although at the end of the book, it is revealed that he was really 12. It is unclear if Maurice was vague when speaking to her in the beginning because he didn't trust her yet, or if his count was off because his birthday was never celebrated.

He has been told from a young age – if not expressly then through his surroundings – that he will never amount to anything. This is the way he lives from day to day, just scraping by. Until, that is, he meets someone who actually values him and shows him he has value.

Despite his tough beginnings, he is shown to be a very intelligent boy, and capable of great insight and compassion, even at his young age. He is particularly devoted to his mother, a drug abuser and dealer/prostitute, and his grandmother, Rose (who really attempted to take care of everyone).

Laura is constantly shocked at the level of neglect she uncovers in her dealings with Maurice. He has never, for example, been shown how to set a table, eat with a knife and fork, blow his nose, and misses school due to the fact that no one at his apartment owns a watch or a clock.



Darcella

Darcella was young and tough when she met Morris, Maurice's father. She was uncommonly pretty. She had children very soon, and Maurice was one of them. Maurice loved his mother's singing voice. Everyone around her was an addict, and eventually she became addicted to heroin, and then crack. She paid for her addiction through prostitution and theft. She would sing plenty of gospel tunes, but he especially loved when she made up songs about what was going on around her. Darcella's rough living eventually catch up with her and she dies from complications stemming from HIV.

Morris (Red)

Maurice's father. He and Darcella met in a gang. He was uncommonly big and dangerous. He is so brazen that he even robbed people he knew, who could recognize him, because he knew they wouldn't or couldn't do anything to retaliate. He disappears from Maurice's life when Maurice was still very young. Later, he returns to live with Darcella as he is dying from AIDS. He apologizes to Maurice for everything and asks if he will name his first boy child after him, which Maurice does.

Nunzie

Laura's father was "great when he was good." Laura means that when he was sober, he was extremely loving. But many nights he would come home drunk and terrorize his family, getting a thrill from causing fear. He was the family's secret shame. Later, he is depicted as a stopped and frail old man, but even so, he is so abusive to the hospice workers that he dies alone, in his home.

Marie

Marie is Laura's mother, and the glue that held everything together. She provided the love where her father could not. Unfortunately, she also lived in a time when a wife stood by her husband no matter what. She set the tone in the household that all of the family are to ignore the abuse and just carry on as if they were a normal family.

Annette

Laura's sister Annette has what Laura always wanted: a great husband, wonderful children, and a nice piece of property in a suburb. Annette's family is Laura's surrogate family. It's a refuge for Laura to go and spend time with family. She takes along Maurice, and the surrogate family becomes his, as well.



Valerie

Laura's co-worker is given the role of the Devil's Advocate in the book. Some of Laura's friends and family were questioning her relationship with Maurice. Valerie is the only one who vocalizes them in the book.

Kevin

Kevin, interestingly, is the only person in the story who is given a somewhat detailed physical description. He is described as "strikingly handsome," with hazel eyes, light brown hair, and an easy confidence about him. He is Laura's first husband who cheats on her.

Grandma Rose

Grandma Rose is a tough woman who raised her family the best she could. She is Darcella's mother and Maurice's grandmother. She's been known to use a knife to get what she wants. She is protective of her family in her own way. She never lets the children see her use drugs. She gives Maurice a joint for his 6th birthday, but after seeing his reaction, she thinks he's special. She tries to protect him from the harsh world of drugs, and encourages his relationship with Laura, as well as his studies.

Michael

Laura's second husband is the king of his castle. Nothing happens without his saying so. Laura doesn't mind at first, because they have so much fun together. But, after a quick courting, she realizes that he doesn't have room in his heart for anything else that she wants.

Kim

Kim is Maurice's teacher, whom Laura meets when Maurice asks her to go with him to the parent teacher meeting. Kim warms Laura that coming into Maurice's life should be a long term commitment since he's had people come into and out of his life so much that his ability to trust and care for others has diminished.



Symbols and Symbolism

New York City

This is more than a setting. It represents all the things that can happen in a city: the pursuit of dreams and the death of dreams. The close living conditions make people of all kinds bump into each other. .

The Symphony

Laura's apartment is a status symbol. It's small, but it's hers. It is a symbol of people who have made it.

Brown Paper Bag Lunch

When a kid brings his lunch to school in a brown, paper bag, it shows that someone cares for him. This is one of the insights that Maurice brings to Laura. She starts making him lunch and leaves it at the front desk of the Symphony every school day.

Annette's Big Table

One of the biggest impressions from Maurice's visits at Annette's house is the big dining room table. Growing up, people just ate what they could when they could. Seeing this is an eye opener. He watches as people sit around the table, eat, and just talk, tell stories, and laugh. To Maurice, the big table means family. He makes sure to have one in his own home as an adult.

Bicycle

A bicycle is something every child should have. When Maurice is given his first, he is ecstatic. But it comes with rules. It is kept at the Symphony, because it would get stolen in Maurice's neighborhood.

McDonald's

The McDonald's is the bridge, initially, between Laura and Maurice. It is a safe and neutral place to meet each Monday until there is a level of trust established.



Apartment Buildings

Both Maurice's welfare apartment, and Laura's high rise apartment are within a block of each other. The places where they live represent them, in many aspects.

Baseball Mitt

When Laura was younger, her brother Frank and Nunzie got into a fight and in retaliation Nunzie shredded Frank's baseball mitt. This is symbolic of the way he purposely shredded any semblance of family happiness on a regular basis.

Permission Slip

The permission slip that Laura sends home with Maurice to ask permission to take him to the ballgame represents the level of neglect that his family has toward the children living there. Laura ends up going to the projects herself to get the permission slip signed, and the grandmother signs it as Darcella is too wasted to sign it.

Steve the Doorman's Greeting

It is when Steve the Doorman finally greets Maurice by name, and treats him with respect that Maurice realizes that he can hope for a different life.

White Stuffed Bear

Maurice's one and only Christmas present he received the year before is what he gives to Laura the first Christmas he spends with her. It represents the fact that he trusts her with his most precious possession.



Settings

New York City

Both Laura and Maurice live in a square city block of one another. Laura routinely walks past panhandlers all of the time, but for reasons she isn't aware of until much later, she stops for Maurice. New York is a place of dreams made, and dreams lost. The setting is a perfect backdrop for everything that takes place.

Symphony Apartments

This is the apartment complex where Laura lives. She eventually brings Maurice there and he comes to regard it as a second home. It is the first place where he has a complete meal to himself, learns how to blow his nose, has his clothes washed for him, and learns how to cool. It is also where he learns to trust.

The Projects

The welfare hotel, as Maurice calls it, is a government housing project that is about a block from Laura's high rise apartment complex. This is where Laura goes to get the permission slip signed, and Maurice makes her promise never to go back there again as he doesn't want anything to happen to her.

Maurice's School

This is where Laura meets Kim, Maurice's teacher. Kim had also gone to visit Maurice at his apartments and saw his living conditions. She urges Laura to tread lightly and to please not get the boy's hopes up if she doesn't intend to stick around.

Annette's House

This is Laura's sister's house in the country. Maurice, when he goes with Laura to visit, is astounded by the space and the fact that each child has his or her own room to themselves. He is also shocked at how they all sat down to eat together, and then just sat around afterward to talk.



Themes and Motifs

Life Is What Happens When You're Busy Making Plans

Laura has a plan when she comes to New York City. She wants to make it big, fall in love, and then raise a family in a suburb within commuting distance. However, this is not what happens at all. Her life takes an unexpected turn when she meets Maurice. Through her interaction with him, she realizes that her inability to make and form close romantic attachments come from her own lack of interaction with her father, Nunzie. She realizes that she's more in love with the idea of being in love, than the actual act.

Her sister, Annette, fulfills the dream, however. As girls, they had talked about what their lives were going to be like when they were grown. They were the same. Annette won her dream. Laura didn't. She's been so focused on this that for most of her life she hadn't seen a lot of what was going on around her.

For example, Maurice asking for change. She walks right by him. Then, she breaks out of her habit of ignoring panhandlers and turns back. Maurice is the exact opposite. He doesn't have any plans. He can't see beyond where his next meal is coming from.

Both Maurice and Laura, initially, have a set course of action and interaction that they have been following blindly and thoughtlessly for years. It is only when they deviated that a 'course correction' occurred. As a result, neither of them planned on what happened, or what became of the kindness of offering a kid a hamburger.

Suffering in Silence

Laura's family has a history of suffering in silence. From the first generation to come over from Italy, they were taught to just take their blows and keep going. Part of this is pride. They want to look like they are strong. For instance, a grandfather, Sebastiano, withheld affection for fear of being seen as weak.

For others, they want to fit in. Laura's mother tells the kids never to talk about the abuse that is suffered at home. They don't want to be looked on as different. Some of this is happening with Maurice as well. He keeps some of his situation a secret from Laura. He doesn't want her to judge him. He doesn't want her to be scared away. He doesn't want to expose an innocent person to his life because he knows it is inherently ugly.

While Maurice has a front row seat to a lot of the suffering in his family, he doesn't see Grandma Rose's secret shame. She only uses drugs once the kids are asleep. In nearly every chapter, and nearly every character, has some sort of secret shame, some silent suffering that goes on.

At the end, Maurice learns that even his derelict and absent father had his own share of silent suffering. Morris was never a good father because he never had that himself. He



didn't know any other way. Likewise, Laura's mother, Marie, has suffered for many years at the hands of Nunzie (moreso than any of the rest of them).

Routines

One of the key messages that the author seems to want to portray through the novel is that people tend to go through their routines, and they don't see what's really going on. They look, but do not see. It's a choice.

Laura goes through her day and is mostly oblivious to the poor living conditions of some of the people around her. She says that living in the city, she had to build up an armor to protect herself or else she would be too upset all the time.

Similarly, once Laura and Maurice have their routine, she doesn't think as much about what goes on when he's not there. Sometimes it might be days before he eats. She doesn't think about this at first, but eventually starts to make a routine of looking out for him so that he has at least one meal a day he doesn't have to fight or panhandle for.

Maurice's life lacks routine. It's total chaos. But it's a chaos that he's learned how to navigate. He knows where and when charity meals are served. He knows he can panhandle to get a ticket to a 24-hour movie theater and sleep all night there. It may not be a routine like having breakfast and going to school, but he's aware of the rhythms of the city and how to survive.

Routines, the author shows, tend to define a person as surely as one's environment, homelife, and choice of activities. This is definitely obvious when both Laura and Maurice adopt new routines, such as meeting for a meal a week, or Laura packing Maurice lunch each day in a paper bag.

Personal Definitions

Maurice suffers from this the most. He is just a normal panhandler. The fact that he's a kid gets him some sympathy, but generally speaking, when people see a young, black kid in beat up clothes on the side of the street in Manhattan, they make up their minds about the child. While that person's estimate of Maurice's family might be pretty accurate, it turns out that Maurice is different than that.

However, everyone looks at him as "the other." He is not to be looked at, acknowledged, or helped. Laura's coworkers have their concerns. The people at her trendy apartment complex treat him differently. Laura's own husband drives a wedge between them.

It gets so bad that Maurice internalizes it. He's told he's illiterate so many times that he believes it. He is told routinely that he will never amount to anything, so he doesn't try as hard.



Laura is on the other side of things. When people in Maurice's neighborhood see a white woman walking around, they assume she's up to no good. No one who looks like Laura has ever helped one of them, so she's judged as well.

Culture Shock

Every time Maurice encounters something in Laura's comfortable life, it's for the first time. When he's sick, no one ever taught him how to blow his nose. He doesn't know how to hold a steak knife. He learns quickly. Partly, he appreciates the novelty. He likes trying new things.

Another part of it is that he knows, on some level, that things are not right at his home. He watches as drugs eat away at people's lives. He has never really known that there was another way to do things, though, until he was shown.

The greatest example of this is when Laura's niece is crying, and her father comforts her. Maurice has never seen this before. He doesn't realize that a father's role can be that of a caretaker, a provider, a creator of safety. This is a surprise to him. It's a lesson he takes with him as he becomes a father later on.

Laura suffers from her own culture shock the few occasions that take her to Maurice's apartment building. She agrees when Maurice asks her never to go back there, again, as it is unsafe. Laura intellectually knew that the projects were bad, but to experience that first hand was eye opening.

Wealth Doesn't Buy Happiness

This theme is reiterated through several places throughout the novel. Initially, it happens with Laura when she realizes that despite all of her financial and career success, she's still feeling restless and unfulfilled.

Later, she realizes that though her own family was well off and living in the suburbs, they were miserable. They were not able to speak of the abuse at their home, and worse, yet, as young children they internalized a type of normalcy that was anything but normal. This, in large part, stifled Laura's ability to develop true intimate bonds with her husbands.

The types of things that Laura, and Maurice, come to value have nothing to do with the money and the material things that they have. They understand that the true gift, and something that was most precious to them both, was the friendship that they offered one another.

Later, as a father, himself, Maurice realizes this fact, and knows that though he is not as well off as he'd like to be, it is more important to be a good father and the kind of father that his own dad never was. He attributes his ability to be a good dad to his meeting

Laura and learning that there was another way of living...none of which hinged on being wealthy.

Styles

Point of View

The point of view of the book is third person, omniscient. The main points of view that are offered are those of Laura as well as Maurice. Occasionally, the reader is treated to the thoughts of secondary characters, but for the most part, the internal thoughts and actions come from Laura and Maurice.

Language and Meaning

The language may differ depending on which character is being featured. When the character being profiled is Maurice, the language is age appropriate, and words are utilized that would be used in an impoverished, uneducated environment. Much drug lingo and slang are used. Likewise, business terms, and procedures that Laura takes for granted are offered, and are just as confusing for the reader as they are for Maurice at first.

Structure

The book is fairly linear in fashion, but offers flashbacks in nearly every chapter. The author is not always good to let the reader know that what they are reading is a flashback until the flashback is actually over. Much of the information that the reader gains, Laura, herself, was not privy at that point in her relationship with Maurice.



Quotes

An invisible thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place and circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle. But it will never break.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1)

Importance: This is where the book gets its title from, speaking to the fact that it was fate that Laura and Maurice met.

I'm not looking for a lot of breaks in life. But I am looking for one.”

-- Laura (chapter 3)

Importance: This is the chapter that tells Laura's escape from her abusive father and her eventual move into the city.

The reason I invited you to my apartment is because I consider you my friend. Friendship is built on trust, and I want you to know I will never betray that trust. I want you to know you will always be able to trust me. But if you betray my trust, we can no longer be friends.”

-- Laura (chapter 6)

Importance: When Laura first brings Maurice to her home she sees him eyeing a jar full of coins on her table. She sets the ground rules very early on.

We had crossed over into a world neither of us knew existed.

-- Laura (chapter 7)

Importance: Laura and Lisa go to Maurice's home in the projects and they both realize that where they are is an underbelly that they'd never dared acknowledge existed.

The only time you should kiss your children is when they are asleep.”

-- Nunzie (chapter 8)

Importance: This is Laura's father's belief of how children should be treated.

He's a really good kid with a terrible life. He just needs someone he can turn to for help

-- Kim (chapter 9)

Importance: This is what Kim, Maurice's teacher, tells Laura when she attends the Parent Teacher open house at the school.

When I see kids come to school with their lunch in a paper bag, that means someone cares about them. Miss Laura, can I please have my lunch in a paper bag?”

-- Maurice (chapter 9)

Importance: Maurice appreciates the help that Laura is giving him, and he explains



how he is viewed at school. He wants the others to know that someone cares about him.

Children like Maurice are always disappointed in life. Every day someone else lets them down. I hope you realize you can't just come in and out of his life. If you are going to be there for him, you have to really be there for him.”

-- Kim (chapter 9)

Importance: At another meeting Kim warms Laura once more about being involved in Maurice's life.

Kids like me – we know everything that's going on out there. We see it on TV. But we're always on the outside looking in.”

-- Maurice (chapter 12)

Importance: This is Maurice's response to Laura asking him about Christmas.

You told me God never gives us more than we can handle. You have to believe that now. God is going to take this away from you very soon, and then you will never be in pain again.”

-- Laura (chapter 13)

Importance: Laura's mother is dying from uterine cancer and she believes that her mother is going to die. This is what her mother, for so many years, has used as her litany against leaving Nunzie and enduring the abuse.

It's about time you met someone nice. Someone who is gonna take care of you.”

-- Maurice (chapter 15)

Importance: This is Maurice's reaction to Laura introducing Michael into their lives.

It was the only way I knew.”

-- Morris (chapter 16)

Importance: As Maurice's father is dying, he apologizes to Maurice for how he treated him. He only offers as an excuse the fact that he never knew how to be kind or caring to anyone.

I consider my childhood a gift. It happened to me so I could learn the right way to raise my children.”

-- Maurice (chapter 19)

Importance: Maurice tells Laura that he will always be extremely grateful to her because her kindness over the years has taught him to view life in a different way than his parents did. As a result, he's a better person for his own children.