

# **The Keepers of Truth Study Guide**

**The Keepers of Truth by Michael Collins (Irish author)**

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# Plot Summary

The story starts out in a small, forgotten Midwestern town. Bill, a reporter for the local newspaper, laments on how the town used to be bustling with factories and shops, and now those factories have been shut down and the people in the town have resorted to working in fast food restaurants to make a living. Bill is a college graduate who did not pass his LSAT exam and therefore couldn't go to law school, so he has come back to his hometown to live in his grandfather's mansion.

Bill's grandfather was a rich man who made his money in the refrigeration business, but when his father took over the business the factory was shut down by overseas competition. Bill's father then became an alcoholic and a womanizer, who shot himself in the head in the mansion. Bill works at the newspaper with Sam and Ed. Sam is the owner of the paper, and Ed is the photographer. Both men have been working together for 30 years and are in their 60's.

The story unfolds when Ronny Lawton, the town troublemaker, calls in a missing person's report on his father. An investigation starts, and a chopped off finger is found at Ronny's father's house, where Ronny also lives. Everybody in town right away assumes that Ronny killed his father and chopped up his body. By a turn of events, Bill gets himself dragged in to the situation with Ronny. He gets close to Ronny, learning some personal things about him that make him seem like less of an animal than others think he is. Bill also gets involved with Ronny's estranged wife, Teri. Teri is a simple woman who lives out in the cornfields in a trailer with her boyfriend. Bill spends some time with Teri and gets close to her.

Teri gets her hair done at the place of Ed's wife's, Darlene. It turns out that she has confided in Darlene that Ronny's father had raped her, and she is not sure if her child is Ronny's or his father's. We learn that Darlene has a connection with Karl, Teri's boyfriend, and it becomes obvious that Ronny may not have killed his father after all. Bill is convinced of this. Once the father's head is found, the police try to arrest Ronny, but not before he is able to barricade himself in his house taking Teri and their child hostage. He kills Karl in the meantime, and we learn that this is out of desperation. Ronny realizes that there is no way he can stay a free man after this, and he does not want Karl raising his child. In the end, Bill leaves town with Teri and the child, and Ronny sets fire to the house and to himself. Everybody in town, including the police and the FBI, is sure that Ronny was the killer and the case is closed. In fact, the case is never solved, since Bill and Darlene are the only two people who know what really happened.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

This introductory chapter provides some background information on a small town in the Great Plains. Bill is the writer for *The Daily Truth*, and he narrates this background. Years ago, this was an industrial town with factories and businesses and bustling life. Workers here used to manufacture cars, metal, appliances, doors, windows, and a wide range of other industrial products. The town had big contracts from major companies all over the US. Since the manufacturing industry has died down, the town has become quiet and rundown. The old factories stand abandoned and all that's left in their place are dark corners where drug dealers and prostitutes roam. The restaurant chains have moved in, and Bill says that the town is full of trainee managers. Since there is nothing else for the people to do, the favorite pastime for the people is now eating.

Bill works for the paper that his grandfather had started many years ago. His grandfather was an influential man in the area, and had many profitable businesses. He has left behind a mansion. Bill is bored at his job, for he spends his days waiting for a story to come in through the AP wire. He has resorted to taking small bylines and blowing them up into big front-page stories, for lack of other news. Sam Perkins is the editor of the paper, and he is scared that the paper is about to close. Both Sam and Bill see that people are much more interested in watching the news on TV than reading a newspaper, especially since the local station got a new anchor by the name of Linda Carter who is very sexy.

At the end of the chapter, Pete Morris calls Bill from the police station. Bill is working on developing a cover story about a bake sale, when Pete informs him that Ronny Lawton, the town troublemaker, has just called in a missing person's report on his father.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

As Bill narrates this introduction to the book, he calls it an "Ode to a Trainee Manager." In a way, it is kind of like Bill is poking fun at the new culture that the town has. Since the manufacturing industry has left this town, there is literally nothing else for the people to do. They have resorted to working in the fast food joints and the chain stores. Many remain unemployed. Bill sets a somber mood, showing us how depressed the situation in the town is. It's interesting to note that we never learn the name of the town, just that it's somewhere in the Midwest. So we can assume that he could be talking about any town from which industry has moved on.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Bill is wrapping up the bake-off story when he hears the ten o'clock news. Linda Carter is reporting on Ronny Lawton. Apparently he was brought in for questioning on the disappearance of his father. The town is buzzing with the news. It's late in the evening, and Sam Perkins calls Bill to chew him out. He is outraged that Bill is not planning on running this story on the cover page, and Bill concedes and says that he will run it. Sam sends over the phone transcripts of Ronny's conversations with the police, and demands that Bill works on a good cover story. Together with Ed Hoskin, Bill locates an old yearbook picture of Ronny Lawton and manipulates it to make Ronny look purely evil. This is the one useful thing that Bill feels he learned in journalism school; that you need a good yearbook picture to start off an interesting story.

Pete calls from the police station and suggests that Bill look into the old family records. Bill pulls old records and discovers that a year ago to the day Ronny's mother died. He also finds a history of Ronny beating up his father. Bill feels excitement and a jittery feeling growing inside him. He is almost sure that Ronny's father is dead and that this will be a huge story. As Bill and Ed Hoskin stand in the hallway smoking, Ed thinks back to the good old days when he used to take and develop meaningful pictures of town happenings.

Quickly, Bill develops the cover story of the event. He inserts Ronny's yearbook photo, his Rifle Club membership card, the obituary and picture of Ronny's mother, and a picture of his missing father. He is quite happy with his product and calls the typesetters to pick it up for printing for the following morning. The bake-off story has been moved to the second page.

Bill and Ed sit in the darkened office and listen to the roar of thunder around them. Ed is about sixty years old and has a wife by the name of Darlene. Ed rambles on about his life and misfortunes as they sit and wait. He stuck around town after the recession hit and was barely making it. Darlene had come up with the idea to open a beauty salon in their garage and offer a picture-taking service as well; this is how they pulled themselves out of the hole. Bill is sad as he thinks about this moment in time, about how their town has become a dead town. Industry has moved on, and people have resorted to doing nothing or doing what they can to just get by. As Darlene calls Ed on the phone wondering when he'll be home, Bill is amazed to hear Ed whisper, "I love you" to her.

Bill notices the bile smell that's coming from Ed, and hears him constantly coughing up liquids. Ed confesses that he is sure there is a dead body out there cut up in pieces. Eventually, Ed leaves to go home and Bill tries to call his girlfriend in Chicago. He gets her machine and leaves a message, makes himself a grilled cheese sandwich, and falls asleep at his desk. In the morning, he wakes up to see the newly printed newspaper. He realizes that his great cover story is nothing more than a compilation of bits and pieces



of pulled information; there is almost no original writing. As Sam Perkins comes in, still drunk from the night before, he is ecstatic at how great the story turned out. As they eat tuna melt sandwiches together and drink whiskey, Bill marvels at the irony of having great journalism without a single original word.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

The excitement starts to envelop Bill. He has been waiting on a big story for a very long time, and he thinks that this might be it. It's interesting that in the beginning he is not even planning on writing anything about the disappearance, until Sam pushes him. It's almost as if he has resigned himself to the fact that the big story won't come along, and doesn't recognize it even when it hits him in the face.

Sam's alcoholism surfaces in this chapter, and drinking and eating sandwiches is as much a part of the job at the paper as is writing. In fact, Sam doesn't seem to care much about good quality writing; he just wants sensational pictures and bold headlines to catch attention. When Bill and Ed manipulate Ronny's high school picture to make him look evil, it's almost like they are helping the townsfolk make up their minds about Ronny's guilt.

A parallel theme can be seen between Ed's illness and the town's situation. Ed is obviously sick and frail, and Bill imagines that Ed doesn't have too much time left to live. The town is in the same predicament; abandoned by factories and run down by crime.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Soon, word has spread about the Ronny Lawton story. Some of the big city papers have picked up the pictures that were printed in *The Daily Truth*, and Sam is very excited about this. Bill feels the excitement as well, and knows that the story will only grow. There is a gruesome discovery of a severed finger found at the Lawton residence. The town is buzzing, everybody is sure that it's the finger of Old Man Lawton. As Bill drives to the Lawton residence to get the story, he hears endless reports on the radio. Many of the neighbors have been interviewed, and they all point out Ronny's bad temper, his alcoholism, and the fights he constantly had with his wife and his father. The neighbors are sure that Ronny killed his father and buried his various body parts in the backyard.

As Bill drives to the house, he can't help but think about his girlfriend, Diane. She is studying law at Loyola University, and Bill wonders where she was late last night when he tried to call her. He would like to think that she was studying in the library all night long. He tried her again that morning, but she didn't answer, so he left a message. The two of them spent last summer together at his grandfather's mansion in town, staying inside and making love. Bill tried to keep her all to himself, and wanted to marry her. He tried to impregnate her, but in the fall she left for school. They do have tentative plans to marry, but Diane has told Bill that he should get out of such a little forgotten town and go someplace better.

As Bill approaches the Lawton house, he can't help but think of the Ronny Lawton story again. He imagines that if he wanted to, he could make the story last all summer, could make himself famous, and possibly escape the small forgotten town. All he needs for this to happen is for Ronny to plead his innocence and for the body to remain missing. He remembers back to his grandfather, and how he would haul blocks of ice in the middle of the summer and sell fruit-flavored ice, making a fortune on it. His grandfather used to laugh about the simple principle of supply and demand.

At the house, Bill pulls up to a scene filled with people. There are volunteers combing through the backyard, and various specialists inside the house, turning every corner upside down. Bill sees the finger on a step; Ed Hoskin says that it looks like it was evenly chopped-off by some pruning shears. Ed is taking pictures of the severed finger. In the basement, Bill sees a homemade gym that was apparently used quite often by Ronny. He steps outside to smoke a cigarette with Pete. Pete is disenchanted with the whole criminal process. He wishes there weren't so many specialists on the site trying to decipher what happened. Pete is sure that Ronny killed his father, and needs no other proof.

Pete mentions that Ronny's estranged wife wants Ronny to fry in the electric chair so that she can inherit the house. Bill thinks how ironic it is that Pete is the town law and has no regard for the legal process. He ponders over whether Ronny is playing with the





police, if maybe he left the severed finger in plain sight on purpose. In Ronny's room, he notices the walls covered with different movie and music posters as well as pictures of naked girls. He notices that the posters are all cut up, overlapping each other, in made-up positions. Bill and Pete agree that a man like that would be very likely to chop up his father in to small pieces. At that point a detective discovers a small box in the cellar. It is not another piece of Ronny's father, but the skeletal remains of an infant. Bill is appalled by this and leaves the house. He sees that the situation there is moving very slowly, and wonders what he'll write for the paper.

Back at the office, Sam is making his tuna melt sandwiches for Bill and Ed. Bill writes a piece on the loss of industrialism in their town, citing Einstein and Plato and their theories. Sam is furious as he reads this. He wonders why Bill can't write about the day's events since he spent the whole day at the Lawton house. Bill forces himself to write an account of the facts of the case so far. He would rather discuss the fact that even more than Ronny's father's death, it is their industrial society that has died.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

As we learn about Bill's girlfriend who is now away at law school, we wonder if Bill will ever leave this town like she suggested. Bill says that he could use the story to make himself famous and live in a bigger city, but we wonder if he really wants this and if he will put any effort into leaving.

The people in the town are treating this missing person case as if it were something much bigger. There is not much else to take up their time, so all their energy is now being directed towards the Lawton residence. Pete is a cop who has been friends with Bill for many years, since they were in school together. Bill is amazed that Pete has no regard for the law, that he is convinced that Ronny killed his old man and doesn't feel that he deserves the due process that should be followed in every case. Of all the people in the town to just assume that Ronny Lawton is guilty, but the cop shouldn't be one of them.

Again, it seems as if Bill is letting the story slip away from under him. He has a chance to write about the finger and about the gruesome discovery of a baby's body, but he chooses to ignore it and tells himself that it was an uneventful day. Only after Sam presses him, does Bill reluctantly write about the latest news. Bill's thoughts are mostly filled with the death of industrialism in their town, not the Ronny Lawton story.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Four years ago, Bill's father shot himself in the head in the mansion where Bill now lives. He had lost the refrigeration company to the depression, and three hundred men lost their jobs because of this. He was living in the mansion with his girlfriend and found his life unbearable after his loss of dignity. One morning, he fed his dog poisoned meat, had his girlfriend perform oral sex on him, and then shot himself in the master bedroom. Bill's grandfather, the great man who left Russia in search of a better life, had been very hard on his son and grandson, and they both always felt that one day his body would resurrect itself from the grave to chastise them for ruining the family name. Bill felt a shame on his family name, and also anger that the company wasn't able to survive the hard times. This hit him so hard that in college he even spent some time in an institution, recovering from his demons.

Bill barely sleeps at night. He stands outside for a long time, smelling the distinct odor of the zoo, which is just a quarter mile away. He remembers going up to the fence of the zoo when he was a little boy to look at the animals. Sam calls him in a frenzy, excited that they have made the national papers again. Bill goes to the YMCA and swims 50 laps to get the tension out of him. Since his grandfather had never learned to swim as a boy, he had forced Bill to practice swimming from a young age.

Bill arrives at the courthouse and stands behind a one-way mirror along with Linda Carter and other people. Ronny's court-appointed lawyer has invited them there to watch as Ronny takes a lie-detector test. Ronny knows that the press is behind the glass, and he mocks them. He puts up his two fists to the mirror. The tattoos on his fingers spell out the word "NOWHERE." The test is uneventful, with lots of questions and predictable answers from Ronny.

Following the test, the crowd of onlookers is ushered into the next room for a press conference. Bill sneaks back into the room where he can see Ronny being interrogated by a fat man. The man presses Ronny for details, but Ronny does not admit to killing his father and is upset at the constant questioning. Finally the fat man asks Ronny to help him find other suspects, and Ronny points the finger at his estranged wife. Bill is happy that he got this bit of information while the others are in another room.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

From the tentative timeline provided in this chapter, we can assume that Bill is in his middle to late 20's. He was in college when his father shot himself, which was four years ago. We can only imagine how creepy it must be for Bill to live in the same house where his father killed himself. We wonder why he can't find another place to live, since he doesn't seem to be poor, or sell the mansion and start his life over someplace else.

Bill's swimming habit shows us how strictly trained he was by his grandfather. His grandfather was a very stern man who was rough on both Bill and his father. Bill seems to resent him and the constant reminders of him.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Ronny is released and ordered not to leave the county. There are no other leads, and no progression in the case to write about. The town is quiet and forgotten again. Bill gets no calls from Diane, so he calls and leaves long rambling messages for her. Linda Carter got an exclusive interview with Ronny, and Sam is furious at this. Bill did not get the interview, although he tried to call Ronny and ask him for one. There is nothing else to write about, so Bill goes back to writing about mosquitoes and the summer heat, and continues spending long hours at the pool.

Ed invites Sam and Bill to his house for dinner, and Bill accepts. One day, as Ed goes into the bathroom at the office and does not come out for half an hour. Bill's morbid curiosity gets the better of him and he goes in, pretending that he has to pee. The smell reminds him of death, and Bill is ashamed of intruding on another man's misery.

Bill confesses to the reader that he wasn't able to pass the LSATs in order to get into law school, so he is stuck in the forgotten town. Sam has offered a monetary reward to any person who gives the paper a lead that turns out to be good, and over the next few days they run stories of people combing through the town fields. This dies down as well, since no good leads come out of it.

To keep himself from going crazy in such a dying town, Bill starts studying for the LSATs again as he sits in Denny's, where Ronny Lawton works. Ronny hasn't been back to work since his release, but Bill goes to Denny's every night. He observes the sad night scene of lonely men eating, smoking, and trying to flirt with the tired waitresses. He studies his LSAT questions in secret, hiding them in a newspaper. One night, Ronny returns to work and the place livens up. Throngs of teenagers come to see Ronny on the nights that he works. They mock him, chant his name, and just want to get a glimpse of him. He has become a celebrity of sorts, and the manager of Denny's confesses to Bill that their sales have gone up three hundred and fifty percent since Ronny returned.

Bill spends most of his days by himself watching cartoons in the mansion. He goes into work for about an hour and gets all of the mundane tasks done. No other news stories are pouring in, so he has plenty of time on his hands. He interviews the mayor, who is upset at the unruly teenagers at Denny's every night. Bill knows that the mayor's comments will be on the evening news with Linda Carter before he can print them in tomorrow's paper. Linda Carter has camped out in front of Denny's and is relaying all of the happenings on live TV.

Pete picks up Bill one night and takes him along on a stakeout; Pete has been told by the mayor to stop the unruly kids, and Pete stops a car full of kids on their way to Denny's. Pete finds beer and pot in the car. He is rough with the kids, beating on them



with his nightstick. Bill tries to get him to calm down, calls him a sadist, and then goes home. As he watches from his car the next night, he sees the same scene repeat at Denny's; teenagers chanting Ronny's name, a cheerleader being dragged towards Ronny as she fights and screams, Ronny cooking meat on the grill in such a fashion as to scare the kids. Bill continues to review LSAT questions. The questions are all about logic and math and things that he doesn't understand. He calls Diane on several occasions, rambling about the LSAT questions and about their lost relationship. Diane leaves him messages with only the answers to the problems.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Again, we are reminded that the town is slowly dying just as Ed seems to be. Bill can't help but be curious about it. As he confesses to the reader that he wanted to get into law school but couldn't, we begin to understand his prior relationship with Diane. We see that they had a common desire to attend law school, but Bill was forced to cut his dreams short. In fact, we imagine that he could have tried to take the LSATs again, but he just seems to give up. The only communication that he and Diane have left is revolving around the LSAT questions. He wants to talk to her, but she will only communicate with him by giving him the answers to the questions. It's almost like she is much smarter than him, and wants to show him that.

Ronny is quickly becoming a legend in town. Everybody is pretty much convinced that he killed his father, and Ronny is looked at with fear and interest. Since it's summertime, the teenagers have nothing else to occupy their time but harass Ronny at work. Bill just observes this wild turn of events from his table at Denny's, but we wonder if he will ever try to get closer to Ronny to get a good story. After all, why else would he be sitting in Denny's so late at night?



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Bill's mother died in childbirth. His father was a man who loved many women; he was a smooth operator who had numerous women in his youth as well as when he was an older man. He got involved with Bill's mother, a young girl from a large family who his grandfather didn't approve of. She became pregnant, and they married in secret. She died while giving birth to Bill. Bill's father told him that she was his one true love, but Bill isn't sure if he can believe that.

Bill was brought up in the mansion, and came back there because he flunked his LSATs. During the race riots of the 1960's, the mansion was almost destroyed but withstood the test of time. Bill sees the town as a wasteland, getting worse and worse each year. He tells the reader that the people of the town do not know yet that in about a decade things will pick up again, that the Reagan era will make the town alive again. Bill feels a lot of resentment towards his grandfather; he has not patched up the hole that the bullet made in the wall where his father shot himself, so that one day his grandfather will come back from the dead and see what his son did to himself.

Bill gets drunk on his grandfather's whiskey and drives out to Ed's house for dinner. He laughs as he picks up the mail at the end of the driveway, since his dead grandfather is still receiving tons of mail: Publishers' Clearing House, credit cards, music clubs, etc. On the way to Ed's house, Bill drives through abandoned neighborhoods that not long ago were bustling streets with working factories. Now, all that's left are abandoned warehouses and factories, and row houses occupied by forgotten, jobless men. Bill is scared to drive through this area, and puts up the canvas roof of his Buick Electra and drives cautiously. A big glass of whiskey sits between his legs.

Bill drives up to Ed's house and sees Ed, Sam, and Ed's wife Darlene sitting outside in lawn chairs. As he gets out of the car, a small poodle grabs his pants and he kicks it to the side. Darlene is an overweight woman, and Ed's thin frame looks even bonier next to her. Bill sees Darlene's nine-inch high hairdo, and insults her by asking what the hell is on her head. It is then they all realize that Bill is wasted and lay him down in a lawn chair. He is outside his own body for some time, watching as they grill meat and blend tropical drinks. They feed him barbecued chicken and ribs. Bill becomes coherent enough to realize that he has to shower Darlene with compliments about the food. After scarfing down tons of chicken and meat, and throwing up in the cornfields, Bill sobers up.

Ed praises his wife for her quick thought and business sense to open up a beauty parlor in their home. She offers the whole gamut of services, plus pictures with various exotic backdrops. Many young women come to her and pour their hearts out about their problems while they're in her chair. So Darlene has come up with a new business concept, of secretly taking a man's car and giving it a wash and a polish and returning it



without the man knowing who took it. The girls that have gotten this service for their men can't give it enough praise; it has really turned around their sex lives. Sam is bewildered by Darlene's quick thinking, and asks Ed if Darlene has a sister. As the sun sets and the men get ready to leave, Darlene hands Sam a book on women's sexuality to study. They discuss Ronny Lawton shortly, and Sam says that he hopes Bill will be able to write a breakthrough story on the case and then he will close the newspaper business.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

In this chapter we again notice Bill's resentment towards the memory of his grandfather. He wants to spite him somehow, to make him see how he harmed his family emotionally. He even wishes for his grandfather to come back from the dead just long enough to see the spot where his son shot himself. This seems very harsh, and we may wonder if Bill isn't being too hard on the memory of his grandfather. After all, Bill's father had shot himself because he had many problems.

For the first time we are introduced to Darlene, Ed's wife. Bill is so drunk that he insults her, but we see that she is a nice woman whom Ed adores. Bill behaves very poorly at dinner and does not like Darlene that much. Over the course of the evening, Sam gets to really like Darlene. Sam has never been married, has no children, and is infatuated with her. As we hear about Darlene's new business idea, we wonder if this has any relevance at all on the story. Ronny Lawton is barely discussed, and only when Sam brings him up.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

A snake by the name of Paul is extracted from Ronny Lawton's father's house. It had slid under the boards when it was small, but by now it is over eight feet long. Somehow, it survived under the floor by eating mice and rats. Ronny takes it out and stands in his front yard with the huge snake wrapped around him; Linda Carter is there with her camera crew to capture the footage. This only contributes to Ronny's image as a scary man. Rumors are going around that maybe Ronny had fed pieces of his father to the huge snake. The snake is given to the zoo for safekeeping.

Ed manages to get a couple great pictures of Ronny with the snake, and this makes the national papers again. Things are great at the paper for a little while, until it quiets down again. Linda Carter's upcoming exclusive interview with Ronny looms over them, and the paper seems to be going down the drain. Ed and Sam are constantly whispering behind Bill's back. Bill is not sure what they are secretly talking about, but he thinks it may have something to do with a news service that may want to buy out the paper from Sam.

Bill spends his days in the swimming pool, and has nothing else to take up his time. He calls up Ronny Lawton's estranged wife, Teri. At first she does not want to talk to a reporter, but then tells him to bring beer and cigarettes and come out to her place. Bill drives out to the trailer standing in the middle of a field, and sees a trashy woman who is beautiful in her own way. She invites him in and they drink beer in the hot trailer. There is a small, dirty kid in a diaper playing nearby who is Ronny's kid.

Teri drinks three beers before she begins talking. She tells Bill about Ronny's past. Ronny's mother was sick for a long time, but his father was too stubborn to take her to the doctor. So Ronny saved up a bit of money and drove his mom to the doctor in town, who told her she had uterine cancer and only a few months left to live. Ronny fought back his emotions and took his mother out for a night in the town. They ate good food, listened to Duke Ellington music, and had a great time.

Upon returning to the house, Ronny got a terrible beating from his father and was never the same again. Teri thinks that this is the moment that Ronny turned into his father, that he was a good man prior to the incident. When Bill asks Teri why she married a man like that, she says it was because of his large penis. Teri remembers how Ronny and his father constantly fought and says that she is sure that Ronny killed his father. Bill presses her for more information, and Terri tells him about an old abandoned tornado shelter that Ronny's grandparents built years ago. She says that maybe Ronny took the body there and hid it.

Teri asks Bill to drive her to work. She is impressed by his fancy car and knows that he looks at her sad existence with pity. As Bill steps outside, he notices gardening shears





in the grass and quickly puts them in the back seat of his car. Teri locks the child in a makeshift crate inside the hot trailer, and they leave. Bill can't believe that he is not appalled by this obvious form of child abuse, and wonders why he shouldn't call child protective services.

As they drive away, Teri puts on make-up and fixes her hair. Bill sees a real beauty in the seat next to him, and can't believe his feelings. She seductively gives him a kiss on the cheek and tells him that he should stop by again to talk about Ronny. Since she lives with a man named Karl, Bill asks if he will mind, but Teri tells him that Karl is usually at work. As Teri gets out of the car, Bill can't believe that he is having such strange feelings about Ronny's trashy wife. He then remembers the pruning shears in his back seat.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

For the third time, Bill's cover story makes the national papers. This makes Bill, Ed, and Sam very happy, but we realize that the story makes the papers just because of the sensationalism around it and the interesting pictures. In the meantime, Ronny is made to look like a monster. By holding the huge snake for everybody to see, he has made himself look even more like a criminal. It's also interesting to note that the snake is placed at the zoo, which is just a fence away from Bill's mansion. We wonder if this means that Bill will be getting closer to the story in the near future.

We get a glimpse of Ronny's personality as we hear Teri describe him. We see that he was actually a gentle man once who deeply cared for his mother, but was beaten by his father and turned into a jerk. Teri and Bill are two different people, and we wonder what in the world would attract Bill to Teri. It's obvious that Teri likes Bill for his power and his money, but Bill doesn't seem to mind. Right away, we start to wonder if Teri is telling the whole truth, or if she knows more about Ronny and the murder. As Bill finds the gardening shears, we can expect there to be more to this than it seems.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

For the next couple of days, Bill fights an internal war with himself. He can't believe that he has feelings for Teri, and wonders how he could have feelings for Ronny Lawton's wife. He is sure that Ronny is guilty of killing his father, but now he's not so sure that he wants Ronny to confess to the crime. Teri's story of how Ronny was abused by his father makes Bill think that maybe some things should be left out of the courtroom. The pruning shears drive Bill crazy. He hides them in the house, then buries them under a tree in the backyard, and is paranoid that they will be stolen. He knows that he should turn them in to the police but is hesitant. He wonders if maybe it was Teri and Karl that plotted to kill Ronny's father in order to get the house. He doesn't want to think this way, but knows that it is a possibility, especially when he then turns in the shears as evidence. Bill finds himself thinking that he should meet with Teri again to see if she would implicate Karl in the crime.

In the summer heat, Bill again thinks back to his grandfather. He knows that he thinks about him way too much. His grandfather came over from Russia, and changed his name from Vladimir to Igor because he felt that Igor was a more powerful name for the ice business. He would perform very heavy work by lugging around blocks of ice in the desert and making shaved ice for his customers. He also had the refrigeration business. His grandfather was only concerned with money, and even named him Bill because of the name's implication of finance. When he was still alive, he doled out very small pieces of his fortune to Bill and his father, barely enough to live on. In his will, he stated that the family should always occupy the mansion; this is why Bill is living in the house now. He hopes that one day he will be able to escape his grandfather's wrath.

As he gets ready to head over to Denny's in time for Ronny's night shift, Bill finds himself fighting not to fall asleep. He had taken some sleeping pills earlier, and has to drink two strong cups of coffee to stay awake now. He arrives at Denny's and sees that the night rush of teenagers has passed. The restaurant is almost empty. They only people inside are a few lonely men and the waitresses. Ronny is behind the counter. Bill sits down and turns on a small tape player, playing Duke Ellington music loud enough for everybody to hear.

Ronny immediately sits down next to Bill and tries to intimidate him. He speaks directly into his ear and tells him to leave him alone, that he did not kill his father. Ronny suspects that Bill has been talking to his estranged wife, and tells him that she's nothing but a liar. Bill tries to talk to Ronny about his mother, but Ronny snaps back at him and says to never mention his mother again. Bill insists on reminding Ronny on what a good son he was. As Bill leaves Denny's, Ronny's shift is over and he follows him in his car. They circle a few blocks and end up back in Denny's parking lot. Bill is a bit scared that he may have really enraged Ronny, but Ronny seems calm. He talks about his family, how his brother's death really took a toll on his mother, and how he was upset when he



saw his brother and father disgraced on the front page of the paper. Ronny tells Bill that he is in a good place now, that he is making good money at Denny's, and that he doesn't want to ruin it. When Bill asks Ronny where his father's body is buried, Ronny shows him his two fists that say "nowhere."

## Chapter 8 Analysis

As a reporter, Bill should certainly know that it's unwise to tamper with evidence. He must realize that his fingerprints are all over the shears now, and it would probably do no good to turn them in to the police at this point. He fights with himself about this, but still does nothing. He foolishly tries to think of ways that Teri can be the innocent party in all of this, forgetting that the police should be the ones conducting a full investigation. Since he likes Teri, he does not want her to be guilty of killing Ronny's father.

It is finally revealed why Bill is living in this mansion. It is not because he needs a place to stay, but because his grandfather put this stipulation in his will. It still leaves us wondering if the property could be sold, or if Bill wants to just give up the rundown mansion and go live in a big city, but it seems that Bill does not want to do this. It is almost as if he likes living in a forgotten town and having the ability to analyze its shortcomings; as long as he lives there, he feels secure and in his place. In a big city, he will feel inadequate and lost because he did not pass his LSATs and wouldn't know what to do with himself.

As Bill purposely drags himself further and further into the situation with Ronny, we wonder why. He purposely eggs on Ronny by playing Duke Ellington music. Ronny opens up to Bill a bit, and we again see his fists with the word "nowhere" tattooed on his fingers. This word signifies the situation both of the town and Ronny's current situation.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

The next day, Bill goes to the office and asks Ed why Darlene never mentioned that she does Teri's hair. Ed gets very defensive and says that Bill shouldn't insinuate anything. Even though Bill tries to assure Ed that he didn't mean anything by his question, Ed is still upset. The two of them, with Sam, go to The River's Bend, a local pub. It used to be jammed with people drinking and having a great time, but now it only caters to the sad and lonely men who are out of work.

The guys drink boilermakers, shots of whiskey dropped into a glass of beer. Sam keeps ordering more for the table, and they get quite drunk. Sam goes on and on about a retirement community in Florida that he wants to move to after the paper folds. He has a nice shiny brochure from the place, and shows the guys how they have a golf course, restaurants, all-you-can-eat shrimp and pasta, and home delivery of groceries. Ed tells the guys about another retirement place that he and Darlene keep getting mail from. Sam is sure that his place is better, and imagines himself living out his old age there.

When Ed and Sam ask Bill what he thinks about all this retirement talk, Bill goes off on a long rant about the value of things. He imagines a middle-aged man selling off his parents' belongings at a garage sale. He has locked his parents inside the house so they wouldn't get in the way. He sells off their valuables, one by one, to the people stopping by the garage sale. There is an old wedding dress, an encyclopedia set, a broom, and many other things which the son considers junk. The pieces go for just a few dollars each. The things that do not sell he places out by the curb so that the college kids can pick them up at night. The parents are shocked that their things are gone, and the father lies on his old couch, which has been put out by the curb.

As Bill finishes his story, Sam and Ed look at him in amazement and wonder how he comes up with this stuff. During the evening, all Bill wants to do is tell the guys about the shears in his backyard, but he can't find the right moment. As they get ready to leave, they have to call Darlene for transportation, and Bill has no chance of telling his secret.

Darlene has her poodle in the car with her. Ed says that the poodle can sense human emotions, and it had pretended to be pregnant because it knew that Darlene had always wanted children. The poodle had apparently faked a miscarriage, and Darlene and Ed are both upset over this. Sam lights up when he sees Darlene; it's almost like he has a crush on her, and wants to have a woman like her by his side when he moves to the retirement village.

After the bar, Bill goes to the YMCA for a swim. Although he spends a lot of time in the pool, but he swims laps only part of the time. He likes to drop down to the bottom of the pool in a fetal position and stay there for as long as he can. It makes him feel almost like



he is dead, and he likes that feeling. He has worked his way up to being able to stay under water for three minutes.

Later on that night, when it's too late to call anyone, Bill calls Pete. Pete is asleep at home with his wife, and is unhappy he is being disturbed. Bill tells him that he has had a break in the case and that he should come to his house right away. When Pete arrives, Bill shows him the cutting shears that he found on Teri's property. Pete goes into a rage when he learns that Bill removed this vital piece of evidence from the property and got his fingerprints all over it. Pete says that the shears cannot be admitted into court, and actually could get Bill into a lot of trouble for tampering with evidence. When Bill offers to get rid of the shears, Pete becomes even more upset and says that he will have to report Bill and maybe even book him.

Bill is able to convince Pete that he can help him break the case since he has a way in with Teri. Just then, Teri calls him on the phone, and Bill picks up the receiver after letting the answering machine turn on. Pete can hear their whole conversation and is later amazed at how obvious it is that Teri is interested in Bill and Bill likes Teri. Pete is convinced that Bill can get information out of Teri, but he warns him to be very careful. If Teri or her boyfriend did have anything to do with the murder, then they wouldn't hesitate to kill again if necessary. They agree that Bill should bury the shears in his backyard again and never mention them to anybody. Bill does this, but knows that he will have to dig the shears up soon and dispose of them elsewhere.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

It is very suspicious the way Ed behaves when Bill asks him about Darlene's relationship with Teri. Bill asks an innocent question, but Ed blows it out of proportion. We wonder if there is something that Ed is hiding.

As Sam and Ed dream about retiring in sunny Florida, it's sad to see two old men dreaming dreams that may never come true. Bill's rant about the value of old things ruins the old men's good mood. For some reason, Bill feels that he has to express his darkest thoughts to them. The picture he paints of the son giving his parents' things away is not a pretty one, but he elaborates on it so much that it almost becomes real. Neither Ed nor Sam have any children, so it's even sadder to think that there is nobody that would give their things away, theirs would probably just be thrown away.

Bill's preference to stay in a fetal position at the bottom of the pool makes us think back to his father. Bill even says that he would end it all, and this alarms us since his father ended his life. The pool is like a safe haven for Bill where he can hide from the world. When Bill finally tells Pete about the gardening shears, Pete is understandably upset. In return for forgetting about the incident with the shears, Pete tells Bill to get closer to Teri so that he can get some more information out of her. Somehow, we imagine that Bill would have tried to get closer to Teri even if Pete hadn't asked him to.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Bill sleeps in very late the next day. He recognizes that by visiting Ronny at Denny's every night and by taking the sleeping pills he has become almost a nocturnal creature, detached from the rest of the world. He gets dressed and realizes that he was supposed to go see Teri at Osco where she works, but has slept through it. He worries that this might affect his relationship with her. So he drives out to the fields where her trailer is, leaves his truck away from it, and walks up to see what's going on. He hides in the cornfields among the mosquitoes.

Bill watches Teri, completely naked, pouring out dishwater outside. He then sees Karl, a very large man, come up behind Teri and easily pick her up with just one hand. He turns her around and she holds onto his body with her legs, as he grabs on to her butt and they laugh together. Shortly after that, they go inside and Bill hears the child's voice and sees the trailer rocking. Bill goes back to his car feeling sad, like he has just been betrayed by his girlfriend. As he drives to the office, he has to pull over and throw up on the side of the road.

At the office, Sam and Ed have been working all day on a story about a fire out in a cornfield. Ed has taken a great picture of a cornstalk whose seeds have all popped in the heat of the fire. The picture represents how humans can't understand the vastness of the land. Bill sees how the picture puts in perspective the sad situation in the forgotten town. He tells Sam and Ed that they are the Keepers of Truth, and the two just love this nickname they've been given. Bill notices how Sam and Ed are almost like one person, and guesses that this is what happens to people after they work together for 30 years. He wonders what they always talk about behind his back and feels left out, so he finishes up his work quickly and leaves the office unnoticed.

When Bill returns home, he sees an unmarked envelope on his front porch. He has an eerie feeling that somebody is watching him, and hurries inside. He opens the envelope and finds letters cut out of a newspaper glued to a piece of paper. Some of the letters have become unglued, so it takes Bill a little time to put the letters back in order. When he does, the note says, "The head is out at the tornado bunker at Lawton's old farm." Bill is shocked at what he reads and wonders who left the note. He thinks it could be Ronny, Teri, or Karl, but can't figure out which one. He can also smell a faint scent of roses from the envelope, but can't quite place the smell.

Two hours pass and Bill just sits there listening to Duke Ellington music, not knowing what to do. He is wrapped in a towel after having taken a shower when he hears a knock at the door. It is Ed and Sam, and they have brought him donuts and a cake. They come in and say that they were worried because Bill left the office so suddenly, and decided to check on him. Bill finds it very strange that they show up at his house,



since they have never visited him at home since he started working for the paper. He wonders why this was the day they chose, of all days.

For a while, they discuss Bill's father's suicide that happened in the house. Sam says that it was so sudden, but Bill notes that his father's diaries prove otherwise. Apparently he had been in despair for a long time, traveling to distant countries watching factories being set up and his own town being destroyed by the economy of China. He watched the women and children working in the sweatshops, and was not comforted by the thought that he was saving money this way. He got hooked on drugs while overseas, and just couldn't handle it any longer. Sam then tells Bill that in just a few months he will be selling the paper. Since business is going so slow for him, he has decided to fold while he still has a buyer. Sam says that there may be a need for a reporter once the new owners come in. Bill is upset, and imagines that this is what Sam and Ed are always whispering to each other about.

The men sit around the dining room table eating donuts and cake. The anonymous note that Bill received is on the kitchen table, and Bill knows that it's only a matter of time before Sam and Ed discover it. He comes clean, and tells them about the letter and about his contact with Teri. He does not tell them about the shears buried in his backyard. Ed and Sam are shocked and can't believe that Bill has been investigating this case so thoroughly and in secret. Just then, the phone rings, and Bill lets the machine pick it up. It's Teri, and she leaves him a message saying that she misses him and that she really needs to get Ronny's father's house for herself.

The men can't figure out who could have sent the letter, and try to decide what to do with it. They also can't place the rose scent from the letter. They decide to go to the tornado bunker that weekend to check it out, before publishing anything in the paper. They also remember that Linda Carter's interview with Ronny is on Sunday, so they decide to hold off on releasing the news until then, to upstage her. Sam is thrilled, since he now has a chance of closing the paper in style, and this makes him feel important. The men sit around until early morning, and Bill calls Diane's voicemail and tells her he loves her before going to sleep.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Bill obviously has a crush on Teri. He puts himself in a dangerous situation by trying to get closer to her but doesn't care. As we see again how Ed and Sam are constantly whispering behind Bill's back, we wonder what it's about. Later in the chapter, we learn that Sam has decided to sell the paper, and can assume that this is what they always whisper about.

Bill calling Ed and Sam The Keepers of Truth is significant. He says it almost like a joke, but the men take it very seriously. Sam's purpose in running the paper is telling the story as it happens, and Ed takes pictures that best represent the truth. Bill knows that these are two good men who usually try to show the truth, even if it is sometimes painted in a more sensational light to make the paper sell better.



It's quite a coincidence that Ed and Sam show up at Bill's mansion at just the right moment, considering they've never come to his house before. It makes the reader wonder if they had anything to do with the note. When Bill decides to tell the two men about the note, they certainly seem surprised. Right away, they think of the best thing to do in order not to further the investigation, but to further their own involvement in the case and sell a better story.





# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Bill wakes up the next morning to a dust storm. It hasn't rained in a few months, and the drought is really starting to worry everyone in town. Everything in the town is covered in dust and sand. Bill cleans his car windshield from the sand and drives to the office. The heat is stifling. In the office, Sam is interviewing an American Indian by the name of Walter. He is a very big man, dressed in ritual clothing, with a hawk sitting on his hand. Sam is interviewing Walter for a story on the drought; Walter claims to be able to bring on the rain, which he is planning to do later that day in the town square.

Walter also says that he is able to find missing people. At first Bill doesn't understand, but then Walter laughs and says that he works as a private investigator. Walter tells the men that maybe Ronny's father is alive, and that a chopped finger does not automatically mean the person is dead. Ed goes on to take numerous pictures of Walter and his hawk in various positions outside. Bill is very bored and wants to escape. He also isn't surprised when he sees that Ed's nose is constantly bleeding in the heat; he suspects that Ed is very sick.

Bill leaves work and drives to the YMCA. He swims many laps back and forth, staying under water and cooling himself down as much as possible. There is a heat emergency issued outside, and Bill thinks about how this may be nature's way of getting back at the humans that have poisoned the earth. He buys a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken and some hair spray at a drug store. He fixes his hair as if he's going on a date. He drives out to Teri's trailer in anticipation.

Teri is in a bathing suit outside with Lucas who is playing in a small plastic pool. Teri is very excited to see Bill, and they share the chicken and beer as they sit outside on plastic chairs. Bill is excited by Teri's lean body. Teri feeds pieces of chicken to the child, and beats him when he misbehaves. She puts him in his small cage inside the trailer and gives him food to eat in the cage. Bill feels awkward witnessing this, and feels that he should hate her for hitting her child, but doesn't. He tells Teri that maybe Ronny's father isn't dead after all, and she almost chokes on a piece of chicken.

Bill offers to take her for a ride in his convertible. Teri is excited as she puts the kid in his cage in the backseat. Bill drives way too fast, to the thrill of both Teri and Lucas. They fly past cornfields and Bill is happy to see Teri so carefree. She leans close to him, touches his leg, tells him that she loves him and that she hopes he can love both her and her kid. Bill doesn't know how to respond so he offers to buy them ice cream. As they eat ice cream, Teri says that she has never seen Lucas so happy and that she can really see the three of them together. She then opens up about her visits to Darlene's place.

When Bill pries further, she confesses that Ronny's father had raped her, and that she is not sure who Lucas's father really is. It could be Ronny or it could be his father. Nobody



knows about this except Darlene. Darlene has advised Teri to keep quiet about this, and to never tell Ronny because either way the kid would look like a Lawton and it wouldn't make a difference. Bill is shocked at what he hears. Teri is also shocked since she thought that Darlene had already told Bill everything, when in fact he learned this from her just now. Bill feels like he is studying a question for the LSATs, where the facts are all mixed in together and make no sense. He drives them out by the road that leads to the tornado bunker that the note lead him to, but Teri does not let on that she knows where he is going and why. They kiss in the front seat of Bill's car.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

As Bill gets himself involved further and further with Teri, there is no going back. He learns her biggest secret from her, that Ronny may not be Lucas's father. This means that there could be other factors playing into Ronny's father's murder, not just the fact that Ronny hated his father. Now there is Darlene, Teri, and possibly Karl. Maybe this is why Ed was so defensive when Bill asked him about Darlene's relationship with Teri.

Bill doesn't know what to think anymore, but doesn't distance himself from Teri. A more rational man would not let himself get so closely involved with somebody who could be a suspect in a murder case, but to Bill this does not matter. He is lonely and likes the feeling he gets when Teri relies on him and tells him she needs him.

We again witness what a terrible mother Teri is. She beats her child, feeds him only fast food, and keeps him locked in a small cage. As an educated, middle-class man, Bill should be appalled by this. Instead, Teri's inappropriate behavior somehow draws Bill closer to her.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Bill is confused as to why Darlene never mentioned what she knows about Teri. This is definitely important information that she should have shared with her husband and with the guys at the paper. As Bill thinks back to how mad Ed got when he asked how Darlene knows Teri, Bill wonders if there is more to the story. He decides that the best way to approach Darlene is to set up a haircut appointment with her.

On Saturday night, just as Bill is talking to Teri on the phone, Ed and Sam come to Bill's house with a map of where the bunker is located. Teri tells Bill that Lucas misses him, and that she's sorry for having been raped. Bill tells her that he has to get off the phone and she abruptly hangs up. The three men drink a couple of beers to gather up the courage for what they have to do. In the meantime, Ed calls Darlene and whispers with her on the phone. He tells Sam and Bill that he really hates lying to Darlene. They drive out to the fields in Bill's car, and find the spot where they need to walk into the woods. It is dark and they are all afraid. They walk 220 steps into the woods and find the door of the bunker in the ground. It has apparently been opened recently since the grass is moved out of the way.

As they open the door, an awful smell washes over them and they can't imagine having to go down there. They gather up the courage and all three of them climb down the steps into the tiny room. It is filled with some old furniture and all kinds of dead and live bugs. They see there is a small door, and when they open the door, they see a rotting head propped up on a stick. Maggots have eaten most of the flesh and the inside of the head, so it's almost impossible to tell whom the head belonged to.

The men are in shock as they close the door and quickly ascend the steps. They hurry back to Bill's car and Bill speeds away. Out on the road, Sam and Ed lament about what this world has come to, with such weirdoes and sickos doing such terrible things. Bill drives them back to the office and they call Pete to come down for some information. They drink coffee as they wait for him, and Ed calls Darlene and tells her what they discovered. Pete arrives and can't believe what he hears. He is upset that they went to the scene of the crime without a police escort and may have disturbed the evidence.

Pete tells Bill that it is unacceptable behavior on his part. Pete thinks that Bill got a tip from Teri and is trying to protect her, so he put the note together. Bill assures him that this is not the case. Pete is still convinced that Ronny is the one who killed his father, and does not want to think about other suspects. Bill, Sam, and Ed decide to put out the news to the AP Newswire immediately, in the middle of the night. Bill writes up a column stating all of the facts and releases it. He knows that soon it will be all over the news and he may even get some recognition out of it.



As Ed and Sam decide to sleep the rest of the night in the office, Bill decides to go visit Ronny at Denny's before the news gets out. He drives out there and thinks about how the people who work at night are usually the ones who cause the most trouble in society. It is almost as if they have their own culture and the rest of the population wishes they would all just die out.

Ronny is sitting in his new Mustang in Denny's parking lot, smoking and listening to music after his shift is over. Bill approaches the car and tells Ronny that they found his father's head. It takes a while for this information to register in Ronny's head. He rambles on about how he used to sit out in the car with his brother and his mother and listen to the Chicago signal coming in on the radio, while their father worked at night. He remembers those good times and wishes that his brother and mother hadn't died. Bill asks Ronny if he sent him that note, and Ronny is surprised to hear that he got a note. They go inside Denny's for some coffee. By now, the news has been announced over the radio, and the workers inside Denny's are afraid to look at Ronny.

Ronny again starts remembering back to when he was a child and his mother used to dress up him and his brother as girls. He says that she always wanted a girl, but he didn't mind as long as he got her attention. He even shows Bill an old picture of himself wearing a dress. As Ronny gets up to leave, he tells Bill that he did not kill his father. He also tells him that only two people who are still alive know where that family bunker is located - himself and Teri. Ronny says that he needs a bit of time to himself and quickly leaves the parking lot in his new car.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

When Teri tells Bill on the phone that she is sorry for being raped, we see that she thinks that it could be her fault. Her situation is quite hopeless, even though the rapist might be dead.

Again, Bill does not do the right thing by following the tip from the note. He should have notified the police and let them go to the bunker, but instead he decides to take this task on with Ed and Sam. When they see the head they really understand that this is all very real, that Ronny's father really is dead and that the note was for real. Bill gets dragged into the picture even further because now others are thinking that he made the note himself.

For a man whose life dream is to pump up his muscles and work at Denny's, Ronny is certainly very sentimental and introspective. He analyzes his relationship with his mother, and how he wanted her attention no matter how he could get it. Even if it meant having his mother dress him up as a girl, this was enough for Ronny. We begin to think that Ronny may not have killed his father after all, since he is genuinely surprised by the discovery of the head and by the note that Bill received.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Ronny Lawton is wanted by the police the next morning, but he is nowhere to be found. Word has gotten out about the head in the bunker, and cops have come by to question Bill and Sam and Ed. All three men were able to corroborate each other's story, so there are no further questions for them. Bill goes along with Pete in his police cruiser to the scene of the crime. A small crowd of people is gathered by the road waiting to hear or see some grim news. Linda Carter is there shooting footage for the evening news. Her long legs and her slim body in her expensive suit just don't look right at this gruesome crime scene. She is not afraid, however, to jump right into the action.

A cop brings out the head wrapped in plastic. Pete is very upset with Bill for tampering with the investigation. He knows that Bill has been spending time with Teri and Lucas, and that he saw Ronny last night, and questions him about Ronny's location. Bill does not tell him anything. Pete is frustrated and tells Bill that he is a loser just like his father was. He suspects that Bill may have some motive for delaying the investigation.

Bill heads home and watches the evening news in the darkness of his basement. Linda Carter shows a quick recap of Ronny's life, by showing pictures of his family and his childhood. Then there is the interview at Ronny's father's house, where Ronny shows Linda how his father used to burn him with cigarettes. Ronny talks about his family, his brother's death, and tells Linda that he is not a killer despite what everybody else thinks. Then the interview moves over by the river, where the camera shows Ronny trying to get away from Linda and the microphone. Linda runs after him and asks him if he killed his father, and he again says no. The image of Ronny's huge military body and Linda's petite frame is a story in itself; Bill thinks that if the camera wasn't there that Ronny would probably rape Linda. The last piece of the report shows Ronny working at Denny's, and a few interviews are taken from the teenagers that still come by to see Ronny every night.

Bill gets a call from Teri late at night; she wants him to come to her work. She is crying and says she is afraid that Ronny might come after her and hurt her. Bill goes down to Osco and waits as Teri finishes out the last few minutes of her shift. He smells that rose scent, the same one that was on the letter he received. When he asks Teri about that scent, she says that when she was at Darlene's getting her hair done one day she bought a package from Darlene to have Karl's car cleaned and shined. Karl was very happy with his new car and noticed that there was rose scented perfume left in his car, so Teri has been wearing it ever since.

Bill is amazed at this association between Darlene and Karl, and wonders why he didn't think of it sooner. He pries Teri further, and she says that she might have told Darlene about the secret bunker. Teri suspects that Bill doesn't think that Ronny is the killer, and says so. She says she is afraid that Ronny will hurt her like he used to, will beat her up.



She starts crying, he kisses her, she wraps her legs around him and they make love against the side of the Osco drug store.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Again, Bill has gotten himself further involved in the mess by giving Ronny a heads up on the latest news. Ronny has time to get away, and when the cops can't find him they are suspicious of Bill. Pete is very disenchanted with Bill's inappropriate behavior, and rightly wonders why Bill keeps trying to delay the investigation.

All of this time, the guys at the paper have wanted to upstage Linda Carter, and they have done so. By releasing the news of the head a few hours before her interview with Ronny was to air, they have put a damper on her big moment. The interview still airs in the afternoon, but it doesn't seem as sensational as the news of this morning did. Linda Carter is a big-city woman who has somehow come to this small forgotten town for a job. She probably didn't expect to stumble upon such a big story.

As Bill sees Teri again and learns of the connection between Karl and Darlene, he is more certain than ever that Ronny didn't kill his father. There are just too many other factors involved for this to be an open-and-shut case. He doesn't go to the police with this information, however, and we wonder if he ever will. He should have reported all of the facts to the police, so they could conduct a thorough investigation of all the suspects. Instead, he keeps all of the information to himself.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

As Bill comes home, already there is a message from Teri on his answering machine. She tells him how great it was to make love to him, and how badly she wants to have Ronny's father's house.

The next morning, Ronny is still missing, and all eyes are on Bill. He is brought in for questioning by the FBI. They want to know all of the details of Bill's communications with Ronny, and are wondering where Bill is hiding Ronny. Bill suspects that this attention to him is even stronger because of the implications that Sam and Ed must have talked about. He imagines that Sam and Ed must want to go out of business in style, and are looking to make the paper look important by implicating Bill. Bill does not give any details to the FBI, but just repeats what everybody already knows.

Deep inside, Bill is worried about the shears that are still buried in his backyard. What if Pete told the FBI about that? But nobody mentions the shears to him. When the interrogator asks who sent that note to Bill, Bill concedes that it may have been Ronny. He feels himself getting very nervous in the interrogation room. It's the same room that Ronny had been questioned in, and Bill knows that there are people watching him on the other side of the glass.

After the interrogation is over and Bill is let go, he and Ed go across the street to have coffee. It is pouring down rain for the first time all summer, so they sit in the cafe and wait it out. Bill is still nervous from the interrogation. Ed lets him know that he and Sam think that Bill sent the note himself, and quickly made up that story about somebody delivering him the note when Sam and Ed unexpectedly dropped by. Bill knows that there is nothing he can say to make Ed understand that he did not write the note. Ed also tells Bill that the police have been tapping his phone for some time now, and Bill gets embarrassed when he thinks of the crazy messages he has been leaving for Diane.

Back at the office, Sam tells Bill that he hopes he will reveal Ronny's location soon, before they sell the paper. Sam has a meeting planned with the company representative who is planning on buying the paper, and wants to print one big story before the paper closes. Bill again says nothing, and goes on his assignment of writing a story about the local football team. He submits the story to Sam who sends it for printing without even reading over it. Bill reads over a proposed contract that Sam has from the buyers, and notices that there is no mention of him keeping his job once the paper is bought. Sam tells him that they are only buying the paper for the sports section, and will probably get rid of the paper altogether.

Bill drives out to Darlene's to get his haircut. He walks in on a whole crowd of women sitting around getting their hair and nails done. Each one is in a different place, whether





she is under a drying hat, or getting her nails done, but each one is reading a magazine as she waits. The chatter stops when Bill enters, as if he has intruded on their female territory. Darlene is very busy and takes Bill into the kitchen where she quickly cuts his hair.

Bill works up the courage to talk to Darlene about Teri, asks her why she never told him that she knew Teri had been raped by Ronny's father, and asks if she has discussed anything with Karl when she took his car to be washed. Darlene dryly replies to him that she is not at liberty to discuss every little detail that her clients share with her; otherwise she would lose the trust of her clients. She compares herself to a priest and her salon to a confessional. She implies that all of the women who come to her regularly know about Teri's rape, but that does not give Bill the right to tell Ed or the rest of the world. Bill leaves the salon and sees in the mirror that Darlene chopped up his hair.

Bill gets drunk on Sam's bourbon at the office. He is fed up with the whole situation, and does not like that everybody is sure that he is implicated in the crime. He goes out to Teri's trailer, but she is not there. Only Lucas is there in his cage. Bill takes him out of the cage and feeds the hungry child pieces of chicken. Teri is not at work either. Bill keeps drinking as he drives around town, stops at a seedy strip bar, pays for oral sex from an aging stripper, and keeps driving.

Bill eventually comes to the college where he is to give a speech. He is clearly drunk and once on stage rambles on about industrialism, science, and about the differences between the sexes. He is quickly taken off the stage by the dean of the college. Later, the town learns that Ronny has taken Teri and Lucas hostage in his house and has demanded Dunkin Donuts to be delivered to him.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Bill finds himself in the same room, being questioned by the same guy that was questioning Ronny just a few days ago. He finally feels what it's like to be treated like a criminal, and doesn't like the feeling. When he learns that Ed, Sam, and everybody else in town thinks he wrote the note and had something to do with Ronny's disappearance, he doesn't do anything about it. He knows that there is nothing he can say at this point to make all the others change their minds, so he doesn't even try. In a way, it is very cowardly to just give up and let people think what they want. On the other hand, he really has no real shot at making people change their mind, so he decides to draw as little attention to himself as possible.

When Bill goes out to Darlene's to get a haircut, his suspicions are further solidified. She is very rude to him, letting him know that he is invading her territory and shouldn't pry into other people's business. She obviously knew about Teri's rape, but does not let on that she did anything about it. Bill is so frustrated at this situation that the only thing he can do is get drunk. This is the only thing that he still has control over, and decides to take full advantage of it.





# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Bill wakes up the next afternoon, hung over from his drinking binge the night before, and a bit embarrassed at the scene he created at the college. He sits on his porch and thinks about his father. He remembers how his father drove him to his swim practices early in the mornings, barely saying a word on the way. He remembers his father's drinking binges and how he would call him in college at night and just ramble on about his life as he would drink. Bill would lay in his bunk bed and listen to him, feeling closer to him than ever.

Bill remembers how his father talked about the truth of the world, how most men find the truth but go on as if nothing has changed. Bill's father was not one of those men; he took all things to heart and had a hard time dealing with the changing society around him. Bill recreates the scene in his mind as his father gave poisoned food to the dog, ejaculated into his girlfriend's mouth, and shot himself in the head while she was in the bathroom.

Ronny calls Bill on the phone and tells him that he has killed Karl near his trailer. When Bill tells Ronny that his phones are tapped by the FBI, Ronny starts cursing. He tells Bill to bring his kid a chicken meal from KFC. He also says into the phone that he has his house booby-trapped, and that he is ready to kill if needed. Right away, the FBI gets on Bill to wear a wire when he goes to the house, and to put some tranquilizer into the KFC chicken in order to sedate Ronny.

Bill refuses to cooperate. As he drives out to Ronny's house, he sees the string of cars that have heard of the news and are coming out to see the action. The football team has lost the game, and everybody is ready for a good show. Pete is there in his police car, and the FBI as well. The first one to go up to the window of the house is a delivery kid who has brought the requested donuts and coffee. He is a geeky kid who is excited at this unfolding of events that now involves him. He goes up to the window and hands over the food, which Ronny pays for.

The crowd can see Teri tied up to a chair in the room. Bill goes next, bringing the KFC meal to Ronny. Bill asks Ronny if he wants to talk, but Ronny says that maybe they'll talk later. Ronny says that he is at the end of his rope and sees no way out of this. Teri is crying, and so is the child. The FBI makes a plan as to how they can get a clear shot at Ronny. Bill leaves to meet his deadline at the paper, but not before calling Ronny on the phone. Ronny asks Bill to bring three McDonald's breakfasts tomorrow morning, and assures him that he will pay for the food. As Bill drives away, Ronny puts up an American flag in the window, along with a picture of his dead brother, the letter informing the family of his death in Vietnam, and the Employee of the Month plaque Ronny got from Denny's.



## Chapter 15 Analysis

Bill is, in fact, quite similar to his father. He has a similar drinking habit, has a tendency to say exactly what's on his mind and to feel disenchanting with the world around him. Just as his father would get drunk and ramble on about finding truth in life, Bill likes to contemplate the misfortunes of society around him.

The situation comes to a head when Ronny takes Teri and Lucas hostage in his house. There is probably no turning back at this point; everybody is absolutely convinced that Ronny is the killer, especially now that he has confessed to killing Karl. In fact, it's quite sad that it has come this far, since we can try to believe that Ronny was a totally innocent man prior to killing Karl. He also shows another good side of his character by insisting that he will pay for the food that is delivered to him. A real criminal would not even think about such a detail, but it is important to Ronny to not take something without paying.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

Pete is giving a press conference on the circumstances surrounding Karl's death. Apparently Ronny had shot Karl in the face inside his trailer, but Karl managed to stumble outside and died inside his car. Pete takes great pleasure describing the big hole that the bullet made in Karl's face.

Bill goes back to the office and finds it empty. There are pictures left for him of the scene of the crime, but there is no sign of Ed or Sam anywhere. Bill notices a paper stuck inside Sam's typewriter, with the words "the truth is dead" typed over and over again. Bill types up the story of what happened out at the Lawton residence and sleeps in the office. He checks his messages and hears one from Sam, then he hears one from Diane saying that she wants to come see him so that she can interview him for extra credit for one of her classes. As he calls her back and reads a LSAT problem to her, she screams at him and hangs up the phone.

Bill calls Sam at home several times, but there is no answer. Early the next morning, Bill goes to McDonald's to pick up the breakfast for Ronny and his family. As he stops by his house first, he sees that somebody has dug up the shears from his backyard. He hears the reports on the radio, detailing the latest events for the whole country to hear. He imagines people getting up in the morning discussing whether Ronny is guilty or not. He goes to the Lawton residence and sees that the crowd of teenagers with Ronny face masks is still camped out near the house, waiting for action. He approaches the house and climbs in through the window. He knows that he might be climbing to his death, but his state of mind does not permit him to care.

Earlier that morning Bill had stopped by Sam's house. It held some bare furniture and tons of brochures of Florida retirement communities, and a toaster in the kitchen. Bill could tell that this house held no sentimental value for Sam, and that it was just a place to sleep. Sam had made his fortune in the newspaper business, and had then put all of his own money back into the paper once nobody wanted to advertise in it anymore. As Bill went into Sam's bedroom, he knew what to expect. Sam was laying down on his bed, arms crossed, holding a picture of himself against one of Darlene's beautiful sunny backdrops, an empty bottle of pills on the nightstand. Bill could see that Sam was dead. Bill sat in Sam's kitchen and cried, then he called Ed and in anger told him to ask Darlene what it was that she had plotted with Karl. Ed told Bill never to call him again.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

Bill finally hears from Diane, but it is only for some assignment that she has. This infuriates him, after all of this time being ignored by her. She is clearly trying to use his newfound fame to her advantage, and he does not allow this.



Sam's sad existence is fully glimpsed as Bill recounts his visit to his house. Sam's empty house signifies the empty life that he has lead, putting his heart and soul into a dying newspaper business that was losing money. The only appliance in the kitchen, a toaster, is also significant. Sam lived his whole life alone and the only way he knew how to cook was to make tuna sandwiches in his toaster. Although at first eating tuna melt sandwiches seemed like a nice tradition to have in the office, it is very sad to think that this is all that Sam ever ate. He will also never experience living in sunny Florida like he dreamed.

The reader is left to wonder who has dug up the shears from Bill's backyard. This is very alarming, because Bill could be implicated in the crime or even arrested for tampering with evidence. So far nobody has confronted Bill about this, but he is anxious that such a moment will come.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Ronny lets Bill in through the window and ties his legs and arms. He works out on his weights as Bill and Teri watch him. They eat their McDonald's breakfast. The kid is crying every now and then, but he doesn't seem to realize that something is wrong with his family. Around lunchtime, Ronny demands Burger King food and the FBI delivers it to him. He puts on the crown that comes with the meals, and looks ridiculous still waving his gun around with the crown on his head.

Teri is quiet, and Bill thinks that she looks as if she has accepted that she will die there that day. She asks to go to the bathroom and Ronny reluctantly lets her go down the hall. He holds the gun to the kid's head until she comes back. Bill lets Ronny know that they are being recorded, to be careful what he says. Bill is on Ronny's side throughout the day, cursing at the FBI and not cooperating with them. When the FBI call and Bill speaks to them, they ask him to bring Ronny closer to the window so they can shoot him; he refuses.

As the day passes, Ronny grows more and more sleepy. He fights the urge to sleep. He realizes that the FBI won't let him get out of there alive. For dinner, Ronny demands Burger King again. This time, when the FBI delivers the food, they tell Bill that the food is drugged. Bill tells Ronny, and Ronny throws the food out the window. Ronny begins to reminisce about his family, his brother, and his mother. He wonders if he will see them once he dies, and wonders what they will look like.

Ronny knows that he has no way out of this mess, and that he will die there. In desperation, he gets ready to shoot the kid, since he couldn't stand the thought of Karl raising his son, and he doesn't think that Teri is a good mother. Bill jumps in and offers to take care of the kid for Ronny, and explains to him that the kid doesn't have to die. Ronny then offers to kill Teri, so that Bill won't have to put up with her anymore. Bill convinces Ronny to let them all go. Ronny then tells them that there is a secret passage that leads out of the room into the back of the property, and that they can escape that way. Bill, Teri, and Lucas quickly escape through the secret door and drive away in Bill's car. They see from afar that the house is on fire. Teri is mad and wonders if she is now entitled to Karl's trailer.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

We understand Ronny even better now since we learn why he killed Karl. Ronny knows that he will either go to jail or die for a crime that he didn't commit, and does not want another man raising his child. As we watch the interaction between Ronny and Lucas, we see that Ronny is actually a better parent than Teri. He is kinder and gentler to his



child, even in this extreme situation. We feel sorry for him, and so does Bill, but there is nothing that he can do at this point to save him.

It's interesting that we never know the age of the child. He is old enough to eat solid food on his own, but not quite old enough to speak. He stays in a diaper most of the time. We can only assume that he is less than two years old.

Bill is clearly on Ronny's side, warning him that the FBI is recording their conversation, and telling him that the food is poisoned. The local police and the FBI know that Bill is now on the enemy's side and don't know quite what to do with him. As Bill escapes with Teri and Lucas, we once again witness Teri's selfishness. All she cares about is what she will get out of the situation, and she doesn't even seem to be grateful to Bill for saving her and her child's life.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Bill takes Teri and Lucas far north, to a secluded cabin that his family owns. His father used to take him there when he was a kid. They used to stay for weeks, and his father used to lead a very simple life there of hunting for food and chopping wood. This really upset his grandfather, who was very much into industrialism and consumption. It always amazed Bill how his father and grandfather could be two such different men.

Bill and Teri and Lucas stay in the cabin for about five days before they hear on the news that it was discovered that they all didn't burn in the fire. Bill knows it's only a matter of time before they are found in the cabin. They leave on a long drive again, deciding to start their lives over somewhere far away. As they sit in a diner, Bill contemplates life. He knows that it's clear to everybody that Ronny killed his father, when in fact Bill is sure that this is not the case. He is convinced that Darlene had something to do with the killing, that maybe she somehow made Karl kill Ronny's father.

Bill remembers back to the hair salon and how the women in there were almost like a cult, protecting each other's secrets and each woman's honor. Bill is sure that Darlene would do anything to protect Teri. Teri, in the meantime, is engrossed in picking out many things from a mail-order catalog. She insists that Bill calls the number to order her the things she feels that she deserves. Bill calls and orders, and Teri is very happy with him.

Bill thinks back to the shears that somebody dug up from his backyard, and is afraid that they could somehow implicate him in the murder. He calls Pete from a payphone, but Pete tells him to forget about the shears and they never existed. Bill knows that everybody has resigned themselves to accepting that Ronny was the murderer, and that he has nothing to worry about. The story ends with Bill, Teri, and Lucas starting their life together far away from their hometown.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

We wonder how long Bill and Teri's relationship will last. Teri is a bad mother, and a selfish person. She is obsessed with having material things, which isn't an interest of Bill's at all. Her slender body attracted Bill to her in the first place, but now we wonder how long that attraction will last.

Who are the keepers of truth? Did such people ever exist in this small town? It seems that the only real keeper of truth is Bill, because he realizes what has happened. Darlene could possibly also be a keeper of truth, but she will never speak another word about it for fear of being implicated.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Ronny's father's corpse was never found. Bill wonders where it could be, and knows that it couldn't have just disappeared into thin air. As far as who killed him, Bill knows that it wasn't Ronny. He ponders this question, and compares it to asking who shut down the factories, who moved the production to other countries, and who closed down the town. There is no one simple answer.





# Characters

## Bill

Bill is a reporter for *The Daily Truth* in town. He went away to college, and came back to his hometown for the job. He lives in the mansion that his grandfather built many years ago. He is in his mid to late 20's, and is single. He had a girlfriend by the name of Diane who seems to have left him without properly breaking up with him. He has a hard time accepting this and calls her constantly, leaving messages for her.

Bill's grandfather came to America from Russia many years ago, and started an ice business and then a refrigeration business. Bill's father took over the refrigeration business, but when manufacturing moved to foreign countries the business shut down and all of the employees lost their jobs. Bill's father took this very hard and eventually became an alcoholic who shot himself in the head. Bill was never close to his father, and he actually still despises his grandfather for being so harsh on the family.

The town that Bill lives in is forgotten, with no manufacturing jobs left. Bill likes to philosophize about the nature of society and about the hardships that have fallen on the town. Bill struggles to find stories to write for the paper every day, and resorts to making a big story out of some bake sale or high school football game. As Ronny Lawton's father goes missing, things pick up in the town.

Step by step, Bill gets himself drawn further into the mystery. He gets close to Ronny, and he also gets very close to Ronny's estranged wife, Teri. As the story progresses, Bill learns that Ronny did not kill his father, but it is too late at this point. Everybody else in town, including the police and the FBI, are convinced that Ronny is the killer, and eventually Ronny has no other choice but to get himself killed. As Bill escapes with Teri and her child, he is the one person who really knows the truth.

## Ronny Lawton

Ronny lived in his father's house. His mother was ill for a long time and passed away, even though Ronny was kind and tried to take her to the doctor's office. Ronny's brother was in the army and was killed in combat. His family never quite got over this tragedy. Ronny had a very volatile relationship with his father. His father used to beat him up and would put out cigarettes on his arm. Ronny himself was in the army, but was discharged. He enjoys lifting weights and has very strong, prominent muscles.

Ronny is married to Teri, and they have a child together, Lucas. Ronny and Teri have been estranged for some time now, but they are not officially divorced. When his father goes missing, Ronny is immediately the prime suspect in the case because of the history of violence in his family. He is taken in for questioning by the police, and eventually everybody in the town goes wild. They are obsessed with the case, and everybody is sure that Ronny killed his father. Bill gets close to Ronny, coming to visit



him every night at Denny's where he works. Ronny takes great pride in his job at Denny's, saying that he never thought he would have a steady job or be an Employee of the Month.

## Sam Perkins

Sam is the owner of *The Daily Truth*. He has held the paper for 30 years, and it has gone downhill in the past few years. It seems that print media is not as popular anymore as television. Sam is about 60 years old and drinks heavily. He drinks on the job, in the office, and at any time of day. At the office, his only two employees are Ed and Bill. Between the three of them, they have more than enough time to handle all aspects of running the newspaper. Sam has been putting his own money into keeping the paper afloat for the last few years, since there are not enough advertisers to make the paper profitable.

Sam has never been married and lives alone. He dreams one day of retiring to a nice retirement community in Florida, and shares his dreams with Bill and Ed. Sam has been in talks with a company from out of town about selling the paper to them. We never learn how much they were offering him for the paper, but he was ready to make the deal. Towards the end of the story, Bill stops by Sam's house and finds Sam dead on his bed. He has taken a bottle of pills.

## Ed Hoskin

Ed has been working at *The Daily Truth* as a photographer for 30 years. He is around 60 years old. He is very close to Sam since they have known each other for so long. Ed is married to Darlene. Ed seems to be very ill, since he is very thin and frail and is always coughing up blood. He also goes to the bathroom often and stays in there for long periods of time. Bill suspects that Ed is sick, but says nothing. Ed laments on how he used to take great meaningful pictures years ago for the paper, but now the only pictures he takes are for the high school sports teams.

## Darlene Hoskin

Darlene is Ed's wife. She is a very quick woman, despite her large size and the beehive hairdo. When the economy went downhill in the town, Darlene managed to keep her family afloat by opening up a beauty salon in the garage. She offers a full range of beauty salon services, and has expanded to include taking pictures in front of various beautiful backdrops. She has also recently added to her business by offering women a car washing service for their husbands and boyfriends. When the women pay for the service, Darlene secretly takes the men's cars and has them washed and cleaned, and returns them all shiny and new. This usually puts the men in a good mood and it has grown to be very popular.



## Teri

Teri is Ronny Lawton's estranged wife. She has a child by Ronny. She was actually raped by Ronny's father, so she is not sure if the child's father is Ronny or his father. She now lives in a run-down trailer in the middle of a cornfield with Karl, her boyfriend. He is a big man who is never around. Teri works at the local drug store, Osco. She does not treat her child well, feeding him only fast food and locking him in a cage when she goes to work at night. Teri is interested in Bill. She likes that he is an educated man with money, and lets him know it. They eventually make love.

## Lucas

Lucas is Teri and Ronny's child. There is also a chance that he is Ronny's father's child, since he raped Teri around the time she became pregnant with Lucas. He is probably around two years old. He really likes Bill, since he is kind to him and brings him food and toys. He is a neglected child since Teri does not pay much attention to him.

## Pete Morris

Pete is Bill's good friend from when they were in school. Pete is now a police officer in charge of the investigation of Ronny's father's death. As soon as Ronny reports his father missing, Pete calls Bill right away to give him a heads up so he can have a good story to write for the paper. Pete is convinced that Ronny killed his father even before there is any solid evidence to prove it. When Bill tampers with the evidence and with the whole investigation, Pete becomes very frustrated and their friendship is ruined.

## Linda Carter

Linda is a reporter for the local news station. She is fairly new in town, and does not fit in. She always wears sharp suits and has lots of makeup on, which does not sit well with Bill. She gets an exclusive television interview with Ronny.

## Ronny's Father

It is interesting that Ronny's father is never given a name in the story. It is as if he is unimportant and is not even worth giving a name to. He is an old man who beat up his son and abused his wife, and he has been killed. All fingers point to Ronny, but he may not be the killer. Ronny's father raped Teri a few years ago, and Teri's child might be his as well.



## **Diane**

Bill and Diane went out for some time. Diane has gone off to law school in Chicago, and has urged Bill to leave his small town as well. Bill had planned on marrying Diane, but it seems that Diane has forgotten all about him. She does not take any of his phone calls and only calls him once for an interview once his story gets big.

## **Bill's Father**

Bill's father was the owner of the refrigeration company before it went out of business. The industry was moved to foreign countries, and Bill's father felt that he was responsible for the loss of the jobs in town. He traveled a lot to foreign countries, but only got himself in trouble there by visiting prostitutes and becoming an alcoholic. Eventually, when he couldn't stand his life anymore, he shot himself in the mansion.

## **Bill's Grandfather**

Bill's grandfather came to the United States from Russia a long time ago. He started his successful refrigeration business in town. He was obsessed with hard work and with earning as much money as possible. He had hill erected especially for him, and built a mansion on top of it. He was very harsh to Bill and to his father, always letting them know that whatever they did was not enough.



# Objects/Places

## Bill's Mansion

Bill lives in the mansion on the hill that his grandfather built many years ago. His grandfather left a stipulation in his will that the mansion should always be occupied by a family member, so Bill has come to live here. It is also here in the mansion where his father had poisoned the dog and shot himself in the head. Last summer, when he was still going out with Diane, they spent the summer in the mansion making love. Now that Diane has left him, he lives in the mansion alone.

## Bill's Backyard

After visiting Teri's trailer for the first time, Bill stumbles upon some cutting shears in the grass and secretly takes them. He does not turn them in to the police right away, but instead buries them in his backyard. After he tells Pete about the shears, they decide that it's best not to tell anybody else about them since they already have Bill's fingerprints all over them. Bill leaves the shears buried in the backyard. At the end of the story, Bill notices that somebody has dug them up. It was Pete, who has destroyed the evidence forever.

## The Newspaper Office

The office of *The Daily Truth* is located in an old building near some abandoned buildings that used to be bustling factories. It is a couple of small rooms that are just big enough for Sam, Ed, and Bill. It is here at the office that Ed develops all of the pictures he takes, and Bill writes the stories. Sam always drinks in the office, and makes them tuna melt sandwiches in the toaster.

## The Lawton House

Ronny lived with his father in this house. Prior to their deaths, his mother and his brother also lived there. After Ronny reports his father missing, a finger is found at the house. Later, a big snake is extracted from underneath the floorboards, which has been living there for a long time. It had crawled in as a baby and has grown there. Ronny holds up his estranged wife and child in his room in the house. There is a secret passageway, and Bill is able to escape with Teri and Lucas before Ronny sets fire to the house and himself.



## Denny's

After being interrogated by the police for his father's disappearance, Ronny gets a job at Denny's as a night cook. To him this is a great job, and he is happy that he is receiving a steady paycheck for the first time in his life. Once Denny's becomes a popular place for teenagers to hang out and eat because Ronny is there, the manager of Denny's reluctantly gives Ronny a raise and makes him Employee of the Month. Bill comes to see Ronny at work almost every night, just sitting there and waiting to talk to him.

## The Trailer

Teri and Lucas live with Teri's boyfriend in his trailer. It is out in the cornfields on the outskirts of town. The trailer is old and run down. Bill comes to visit Teri there on several occasions, and spends time with both her and Lucas. He finds gardening shears in the grass by the trailer and wonders to whom they belong. Towards the end of the book, Ronny goes out to the trailer and kills Karl.

## Ed and Darlene's House

Bill is invited to dinner at Ed and Darlene's house one day. He arrives drunk and insults Darlene, and throws up in their grass. Darlene has a business that she runs out of their home. She has a beauty salon and a photo studio, and also a service where she secretly cleans men's cars. It turns out that at the salon Teri has confided in Darlene that she was raped by Ronny's father, and tells Darlene about the location of the tornado bunker.

## Sam's House

Sam lives alone in a house that is filled with brochures of sunny Florida. He has very minimal furniture, and the kitchen only contains a toaster. When Bill visits Sam's house, he finds Sam dead in his bed.

## The Tornado Bunker

Ronny's family has a secret tornado bunker that they had built many years ago out in the woods. Nobody knew about the bunker's location but Ronny's family and Teri. Since his whole family is dead now, we wonder who else might have known about the location of the bunker. Teri has actually told Darlene about the location, who may have told Karl. It is here in the bunker where Bill, Ed, and Sam discover Ronny's father's head.



## **The Garden Shears**

When Bill visits Teri at her boyfriend's trailer for the first time, he finds some garden shears lying in the grass. He picks them up and puts them in his car, then later buries them in his backyard. He knows that he has just tampered with evidence, but doesn't seem to care.

## **Bill's Buick Electra**

Bill has a convertible car that he likes to drive in. He spends time in his car driving to work, to the YMCA, to Teri's place, and to Ronny's place. Teri particularly likes Bill's car because it's so nice and it signifies wealth to her.

## **The YMCA**

Bill spends a lot of time swimming in the pool at the YMCA. We learn that his grandfather taught him how to swim and made him become a good swimmer. Bill hides from his life in the pool. Sometimes, he stays under water as long as possible, to try and recreate a feeling of being safe inside his mother's womb.



# Themes

## Suicide

The theme of taking one's own life out of despair recurs throughout the book. The first time we learn this is when Bill tells us about his father's death. His father was the owner of the refrigeration company that was passed down to him by Bill's grandfather, but when the manufacturing industry moved to other countries the factory was closed. His father always felt guilty for this, and felt like he had failed. He traveled to different countries and continents in search of something better for himself, but wound up visiting prostitutes and becoming an alcoholic. In the end, he took his own life by shooting himself in the head in the mansion where Bill now lives. Not only did he take his own life, but he was also in such a depressed state that he poisoned his dog before he died. He must have thought that the world was so bad around him that even his dog should not suffer in this world. This affected Bill very deeply, so much that he was even hospitalized in a mental institution briefly following his father's suicide.

Another person that took his own life in the story is Sam. He was an elderly man who ran *The Daily Truth*, but we learn that the newspaper was losing money and for years Sam had been putting his own money into keeping the paper afloat. Sam lived alone and had no children or family near him. His whole life was the newspaper, and that was going down the drain. Sam took his own life by overdosing on pills in his house.

Bill, the main character in the story, also thinks about suicide on several occasions. As the drama with Ronny Lawton unfolds, and Bill gets sucked into the situation further and further, he escapes to the pool at the local YMCA. There, he swims laps and also spends time just floating at the bottom of the pool, holding his breath. He tells the reader on several occasions that it feels almost like he is dead on the bottom of the pool, and he sometimes wonders what that would be like.

## Loneliness

It can be easily seen that many characters in the story are very lonely. It is apparent from the start that Bill has been lonely for a long time, living in a forgotten town without his girlfriend. We get the idea that he was happy once, when he spent the summer with Diane, but now she has left him and he is alone again. He lives alone in the huge mansion that his grandfather built. The house has nothing but bad memories in it for Bill. Out of loneliness, Bill gets himself involved with Ronny Lawton and with Teri.

Sam is also lonely. Living alone, he has put his whole life into the newspaper, which is going nowhere. Sam is quite jealous of Ed, who has a great wife. It can be also said that the town itself is lonely. The manufacturing jobs have long gone, and now people do what they can to just get by. Many have resorted to working in fast food chains, but many more have been unemployed for many years. The unemployed men spend their



days and nights in the dark alleys, where drugs and prostitution roam. They also spend time at the local bar that used to be a popular gathering place after work.

## Truth

The title of the book makes us think about who the keepers of truth really are. At the onset of the story, it seems that Sam, Ed, and Bill are the keepers of truth. They print news stories in the local paper, and we would imagine that they report the truth. As the story with Ronny Lawton unfolds, we learn that most people in the town are really not interested in the truth. Right away, the police and everybody in town point the finger at Ronny, and no amount of evidence or lack thereof will convince otherwise. As Bill gets further and further involved in the case, he is the only one that believes Ronny when he says that he didn't kill his father. We know by the end that Darlene and Karl had something to do with the murders. Since Karl has been killed, Darlene and Bill are the only two people left that know the truth about what happened. Darlene will never say a word about it to anybody, and Bill has left town.

# Style

## Point of View

The story takes place in the first person point of view, through Bill's eyes. This is done so that the reader really gets a sense of Bill's thoughts and feelings on the situation that unfolds. By hearing the story in the first person, we also get the benefit of hearing Bill's long rants on society and on industrialism. He has a lot of strong feelings about the reasons behind the town's demise, and we are afforded the opportunity to hear his innermost thoughts.

## Setting

The story is set about 30 years ago in a small Midwestern town. It is interesting that we never learn the name of the town, or even what state it's in. This is so we can easily imagine that it can really be any town, since during that time the economy of many small towns was depressed because of growing competition from overseas. The time of year is summer, and a drought has hit the town. Crops are growing very poorly and the first rain comes at the end of August.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in the story corresponds to the characters that are speaking. When Bill narrates the story and speaks, we hear a regular Midwestern dialect. When we hear Ronny or Teri speak, it is in a much harsher tone. They are what one would call "trashy," and their speech certainly reflects that. They speak in very simple words and sentences, and Teri especially never tries to look at things from a different angle. Ronny, however, surprises Bill and the reader by being introspective and thoughtful at times.

Sam and Ed are both older, in their 60's, and their style of speech reflects their generation. They always lament about the good old days and they use words and phrases that younger people wouldn't use.

## Structure

The book is divided evenly into 18 chapters, with an epilogue at the end. The story follows a chronological order of events. The only times the author strays from a chronological order is when Bill starts thinking or talking about the past.

## Quotes

We are now a town of trainee managers. Oh, happy are ye that inherit the deep-fat fryer! What we do now is eat. It has become our sole occupation, our idle hands have found something to take hold of. Chapter 1, page 17.

Then his wife called. When was he coming home? She needed milk and doughnuts. Ed came back and sat in the shifting dark with me. He smelt sour, like something inside him was leaking. Chapter 2, page 28.

All you got to do is look around you here, and you know that Ronny Lawton chopped up his old man plain and simple. All that finger tells me is that Ronny's old man is dead. Chapter 3, page 40.

Then Ronny opened his mouth slow and, uncrossing his arms, brought the two fists together, merged the NOW and HERE into the enigma of NOWHERE. He whispered that word, NOWHERE, to us. Chapter 4, page 58.

You know, I nearly didn't get all this here, this mansion and the money. I was that close to never having this family name. I was conceived a bastard, in some motel next to this small Midwestern college. Chapter 6, page 88.

"There are other destinies beyond having your own babies. I was put here to do a greater good. You see, Sam, all them girls is my babies. They come and tell me their secrets, and I listen and help them." Chapter 6, page 100.

She leaned and kissed me on the side of the cheek, a softness that unsettled me. I hit the damn horn on the wheel and jerked as she laughed. Chapter 7, page 118.

Ronny was on the phone. He was talking quietly. I turned up the volume on the cassette player and pressed the start button. Chapter 8, page 126.

I was withholding goddamn evidence. Christ! It just surfaced like that, self-debasement and ridicule. I knew what it was though, that sick feeling of being in love, holding off because I was afraid I might just implicate Ronny's estranged. Chapter 9, page 144.

The kid looked all Ronny Lawton, the same eyes and that family chin. Even at two or three years old, he was a Lawton. Chapter 11, page 196.

"I don't know which of them is the father, Bill. Ronny, or his father..." Chapter 11, page 206.

You could just make out the head through the translucent plastic. It was a macabre sight that broke through the monotony and sent a chill up my spine. Chapter 13, page 231.

I was out by the car, looking into the rearview mirror, when I saw what the hell Darlene had done to me. I mean, she'd given me this shit haircut as some sort of revenge, all



chopped here and there, but at that moment, I was just glad to get the hell out of there alive. Chapter 14, page 256.

"Bill. We got a dinner tonight with that guy from the newspaper conglomerate. I think this might be the night things get settled." Chapter 14, page 257.

And so, we began our resurrection, through the dark tunnel of this obscure world. Chapter 17, page 301.



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the significance of Bill going so often for a swim at the YMCA.

What is the meaning of the title of the book?

Where do you think Bill will be five years from now? Where will Teri be?

What will become of the paper? Will it be taken over, or just dissolve?

Why do you think the author leaves the murder unsolved by the authorities?

What is the significance of Bill's father, his grandfather, and the town not having a name?

What is the significance of Ronny's father not having a name?

What relevance does Ronny's tattoo have to the story?

What purpose do Bill's rants on society have?

Why do you think that Bill is attracted to such a woman as Teri?

Discuss the similarities and differences between Bill and Ronny.

Why is Ronny immediately seen as a suspect by everybody in town?

Why does Bill consistently keep tampering with the police investigation?

What do you think Ed's role was in the murder, if any?

What do you think Ed and Sam were always whispering about?