

# **Prep Study Guide**

**Prep by Curtis Sittenfeld**

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# Plot Summary

Lee Fiora, a Midwestern girl who decided to enter the pretentious world of boarding school, is the main character in the novel *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld. Even though Lee had told her parents that she wanted to attend Ault because it was a better school academically than her public school, she really hoped to find a handsome, intelligent boyfriend. Lee spent her boarding school years trying to fit in with her schoolmates rather than studying. Although she tried to hide her own insecurities, Lee's real personality had a way of showing itself and getting her into trouble.

The novel is narrated in the past tense by an older (now 30-something) Lee who occasionally intersperses thoughts and information from the present tense. Each chapter deals with one or two topics that are resolved in the course of that chapter. In the conclusion of each chapter, the narrator often sums up the lessons learned in that section.

In Lee's first semester at Ault she discovered a black girl, a fellow scholarship student, was responsible for stealing money from the rich girls in their dorm. Even though Lee understood the girl's reasons for stealing the money she turned her in for the thefts. Later that school year Lee had an encounter with Cross Sugarman, the most popular boy in her freshman class. This encounter solidified Lee's desire to be Cross's girlfriend.

In the final months of her freshman year Lee met Conchita Maxwell. Because Conchita was Mexican, Lee assumed she was on scholarship even though Conchita's clothing and dorm decorations indicated otherwise. During the school wide game of Assassin Lee admitted to Conchita that she had a crush on Cross and that she hoped the game would lead her and Cross to one another. Conchita manipulated the game so that she could keep Lee safe from being "killed" while Lee worked her way toward Cross. When Lee told Conchita that she wanted to room with Martha instead of Conchita, however, Conchita "killed" Lee taking her out of the game.

In Lee's sophomore year, she was obsessed with an intern English teacher who was more like Lee than Lee wanted to admit. Also, as a sophomore, Lee learned she had an affinity for cutting hair. She stopped giving haircuts when Martha, her roommate, helped her realize that people were taking advantage of Lee's ability by letting her help them without giving her anything in return.

In her junior year, Lee angered her father when she treated him disrespectfully when he came to visit her at school during parents' weekend. Also in her junior year Sin-Jun, one of Lee's friends, tried to commit suicide. Lee learned later the attempt was partly because Sin-Jun was gay and was trying to break off a sexual relationship with her roommate.

It was in Lee's senior year that she got her wish to be close to Cross, who turned out to be the class play boy. He came to her dorm room and the two experimented sexually with Lee finally having sex with him. Lee asked Cross not to advertise their relationship



but later got angry with him because he didn't send her a rose on Valentine's Day. Cross used Lee's request not to make their relationship public against her when she confronted him about rumors that he had a new girlfriend. Lee additionally realized from Cross' reaction that he would not have publicly recognized her as his girlfriend and that his relationship with her was possibly part of a sex game the senior boys played.

Even though Lee spent her years at Ault trying to prove she was like the other students, she blew her cover when she was interviewed by a newspaper reporter for The New York Times. Lee was handpicked for the article because it was believed she was a scholarship student who would say good things about the school. Instead Lee confirmed the writer's suspicion that boarding schools were still places where racism and socio economic factors played a role in the way students were treated.



# Chapter 1: Thieves

## Summary

The unnamed narrator in the novel *Prep*, by Curtis Sittenfeld, begins her story by explaining her belief that everything at Ault happened to her because she misunderstood her assignment in Ancient History. When Jamie Lorison began talking about architecture, the topic the narrator believed was hers, her “heart lurched” (4). When the teacher called the narrator, whom the reader learns is named Lee Fiora, to present, Lee tried to explain that there was some confusion. Lee learned from the teacher that she was supposed to have written about athletics. The teacher insisted that Lee give the presentation she had prepared. An embarrassed Lee tried but walked out of class because she felt her eyes filling with tears.

As she ran from the classroom building, Lee thought about going back home. However, a girl wearing cowboy boots was lying on her back on one of the granite benches in front of the dorms. The girl, Gates Medkowski, was one of the two senior prefects. She told Lee it was a rule that she could not go into her dorm during classes. When she saw Lee was crying, Gates encouraged her to tell her what was wrong. Lee was surprised when Gates told her how difficult Ault was for everyone their first year. She continues to narrate Gates’ conversation with her as Gates tells her Ault was better than public high school for academics and that the students tended to behave in ways to impress others, but there was nothing anyone could do about that.

The following week while Lee was lying in bed thinking about Gates she heard Dede, one of her roommates, cry out that someone had stolen \$40 from her drawer. Dede questioned Lee and Sin-Jun, their third roommate from Korea. The next night at curfew Madame Broussard announced there had been a theft. She encouraged the girls to come forward with any information they might have and also warned them not to keep large sums of cash in their rooms. Lee was surprised anyone at Ault would steal cash because she knew cash really was not needed for anything. When a student needed to pay for something, they wrote their student ID on a form and their parents got the bill. The only other announcement that evening came from Aspeth requesting that the person who was leaving public hair in the sink to clean up after herself.

Lee climbed the stairs wondering if she might be the thief when she heard a voice behind her that one girl, Amy Dennaker, who suggested starting a vigilante group to catch the thief was crazy. The voice belonged to Little Washington, a black girl with whom Lee had considered trying to be friends. Little commented that the theft gave Dede a reason to be the center of attention. Lee expressed her surprise that Little knew it was Dede’s money that was stolen, but Little assured her there were no secrets at Ault.

Although Lee had told her parents she wanted to attend Ault because of academics, she really hoped to meet a handsome, studious boy. Her parents did not think she would be



accepted to Ault. Then, when she was accepted and offered a scholarship, they had no choice but to let her attend. From the first day, Lee realized how different she was from the other students. She was embarrassed by her father, their rusty car, and her father's job. He sold mattresses for a living.

The day of the campus drag dance senior prefects Gates and Henry Thorne had arrived at roll call dancing and dressed in drag. After roll call Lee complimented Gates on her dancing. That evening while the girls helped boys get ready for the dance Lee observed the action as she did her laundry. When her dorm mates had left for the dance Lee looked up pictures of Gates in the yearbooks stored in the dorm's common room.

That same night Lee met Little in the bathroom as they both prepared for bed. They talked and Little complimented Lee for being real. After Little left, Lee noticed there were black hairs in the sink where Little had been combing oil through her hair. These were the hairs that Aspeth thought were pubic hairs. Lee wiped them up with a paper towel.

The night after the drag dance Lee learned Aspeth had \$100 stolen from her. As Dede told Lee about the second theft she became distracted by the smell in their room. Lee had also noticed a fishy smell, but they could not find the source. By the time December had come there had been two more thefts in the dorm. The smell in Lee, Dede, and Sin-Jun's room was worse. In the course of getting her mail Lee learned that Gates had been accepted to Harvard. She wanted to congratulate her, but she was afraid to approach her in public. Instead, Lee decided to make a card and deliver it before the formal dinner. When she went to her room to get the card, Dede slammed one of Sin-Jun's drawers shut as Lee opened the door. Dede said she was looking for the source of the smell, but Lee assumed Dede was looking for something to steal. Dede swore she was not the thief and asked Lee if she was going to tell on her. Lee left without answering. Since she had also forgotten Gates' card, she decided not to go to formal dinner. Instead, she hid out in the phone booth until she was sure Dede had left. Back upstairs in her room, Lee looked at the card she had made for Gates and decided it was juvenile. She tore it up and threw it into the trash can.

Before Dede came back from dinner Lee went to Little's room. She told Little she had caught Dede going through Sin-Jun's drawers. Little encouraged Lee to turn Dede in by telling her that if she did not Dede would just keep stealing. When Lee left Little's room she avoided Dede by hiding in the bathroom. Once Dede came in and called for her, but Lee did not answer. She went downstairs to talk to Madame about her suspicion that Dede was the thief. Instead, she told the dorm mother she was going to bed early.

Lee did not go back to her room until after Dede and Sin-Jun had already gone to bed. She got up before they did and went to the infirmary. In the infirmary sitting room, she found a pamphlet about being gay. She took the pamphlet and read it in private trying to imagine if she would like to kiss Gates.

When Lee finally went back to her dorm room, Dede showed her the squid she had found in Sin-Jun's closet, proof that she had been looking for the source of the smell. She warned Lee that if she tried to turn her in as the thief she would be embarrassed.



Later, Lee lay on her bed and looked at the pamphlet she had gotten from the infirmary. She hid the pamphlet in the top drawer of her desk when Sin-Jun came in the room. Sin-Jun apologized about the squid.

The next day Lee was in Spanish class when she remembered she had left the pamphlet in her desk drawer, a place the thief might find it if he went looking for money. She sneaked back to her dorm after class. At the point where Lee reached the dorm, her narrator briefly switches to the present as Lee looks back on that day and wonders if certain coincidences are one's destiny.

The narration returns to the past tense as Lee tells that as she was about to go into her room Little opened the door to leave. Little told Lee the families of the girls she stole from did not need the money she was taking. Little guessed Lee was on scholarship and thought she could get Lee's forgiveness because of that situation. When Lee pretended she was not there on scholarship, Little told her she could tell she was on scholarship because her comforter was not flowered. Little then told Lee the theft was actually for the good of both of them. She had stolen money from Sin-Jun giving Lee proof Dede was the thief. Lee would benefit because the room mate she did not like would be kicked out of school. Lee recognized the longing and sadness she saw in Little's eyes. Little's look was so profound that Lee almost decided not to turn Little in for stealing.

## Analysis

Although Lee Fiora chose on her own to attend to Ault, a prestigious boarding school, it is not hard to see that she is definitely an outsider on the campus. Even though students are not supposed to discuss finances or money, it is clear that Lee is attending the school on scholarship. Little Washington sees proof that Lee is not like the other girls during their first few meetings. "Most people here, they're not real. But you're real" (23) Little tells Lee. She refers to the differences between Lee and the rich, privileged girls with whom they both deal. Little also recognizes Lee is on scholarship because of her bedspread. Lee's reversible blue and red comforter sets Lee apart from the rich girls with their flowered bedspreads. When Lee first arrives at Ault, she is wearing a dress while the other students are wearing jeans and flip flops. She believes at this point she can observe the other students and learn how to fit in with them. Still she is embarrassed by her father's job as a mattress salesman and their rusty car. There are also a few instances, like when she realizes she has done the wrong assignment in her history class, that Lee considers returning home to South Bend, Indiana.

Lee makes her decisions, even the one to attend Ault, based on the idea that she will feel good about herself if she has a boyfriend. "I'd pretended it was about academics, but it never had been" (15). She imagines herself dating a boy who is handsome and intelligent. Lee's desire for a boyfriend will narrow to the desire for a particular boy in coming sections.



After Gates is kind to Lee, Lee worries that she is homosexual. She becomes obsessed with this popular senior who is the first person to go out of her way to help Lee understand all students at Ault are uncomfortable when they first come to the school. “Even though she was special, she was pretending to be like the rest of us” (19). Lee makes this comment about Gates after she compliments the older student on her dancing during a roll call the day of the school’s drag dance. Lee finds a pamphlet and reads the stories of other gay people. She believes she might not be gay because she does not get sexually excited when she thinks about Gates but steals the yearbook from the dorm’s common room so she can study the pictures of Gates that are included in it.

Each of these chapters centers on a particular problem that Lee faces in her boarding school career. In this section, the story focuses on the thefts in the dorms. Author Curtis Sittenfeld chooses to let Lee tell her story in the first person point of view. Use of this point of view allows the reader to get to know Lee very well. In this particular section, Lee is faced with a string of thefts in her dorm. When Lee learns who the thief is, Lee admits that she feels a strong connection with Little and her reasons for stealing: “I felt a sense of recognition so profound that I almost believed I would keep her secret” (36). Little tries to convince Lee not to tell on her by offering Lee a chance to get rid of the roommate she dislikes so much. Lee had earlier seen Dede going through Sin-Jun’s drawers. Little tells Lee she has stolen from Sin-Jun. If Lee had not caught Little leaving the dorm room Lee shares with Sin-Jun and Dede, she would have thought that Dede had stolen the money from Sin-Jun.

Honesty can have unfavorable consequences. After Lee learns that Little is the thief she must tell on her friend, even though she understands her reasons for stealing. When Little first meets Lee she mentions that Lee is different from the others because she is real. When Lee catches Little stealing, however, Little expects Lee to go against her “realness” to protect her and instead tell on the innocent Dede.

The silent power of money is all encompassing at Ault. Students are encouraged not to talk about money. They also do not know who is on scholarship or who is paying full tuition. Little steals from the girls in her dorm because she does not believe they need the money she takes. She sees the way they throw money around, and it makes her angry. Lee understands her frustration, but she does not stoop to stealing. “Money was everywhere on campus, but it was usually invisible” (12) Lee says of Ault.

There is blindness to racism at Ault that, even Lee does not recognize it as such. This blindness to racism appears in her relationship with Little. Lee does not realize that Little is also on scholarship. Instead, she believes the rumors she has heard that Little is the daughter of a lawyer and doctor. Lee believes that because Little is black, and her color singles her out at Ault in a good way. “Little’s blackness made her exist outside of Ault’s social strata” (14). Lee believes Little does not have to worry about the social rankings at Ault, but she realizes when she catches Little stealing from Sin-Jun that Little is just as confined by social standings as Lee. Also, Aspeth’s complaint about the pubic hair in the bathroom sinks is related to racism. It is Lee who realizes the hair that Aspeth believes is pubic hair is actually hair from Little’s head. Blonde Aspeth believes that course black hair could only come from a person’s pubic areas. She does not take into





consideration that the hair of black people is coarser and darker than that of white people.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the first person point of view work well for this novel?

## Discussion Question 2

Are Lee's reasons for going to Ault good reasons? Is she setting herself up for disappointment?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Lee decides to turn Little in for theft? What might have happened if Lee had not seen Little leaving Lee's dorm room on the day Little stole money from Sin-Jun?

## Vocabulary

prefects, lull, succinct, entendre, concession, pertinent, opposition, vigilante, integrity, stigma, strata, inconspicuous, disdain, fluent, gyrating, traipsed, sporadic, emanating, curt, roiling, pathological, vaporous, aptitude, infinitesimal



## Chapter 2: All School Rules Are in Effect

### Summary

In Chapter 2, Dede and Lee were in the common room studying for a Biology test when Amy Dennaker told them she thought they'd have a surprise holiday the following day so they did not need to worry about studying. She told them they would know for sure if they saw a green jacket during roll call the following morning. Sure enough, Dean Fletcher pulled a green jacket out of a box during a lecture about keeping the mail room clean. He told students a bus would take students to Boston while another would go to Westmoor Mall.

In the dorm, Dede and Aspeth were preparing to go to Boston. Dede was disappointed because Cross Sugarman, the most popular boy in their class, was not going to Boston. Dede had a crush on Cross. Lee thought the crush was "predictable and pathetic" (45). Because Dede pestered Lee, telling her she should go somewhere and not stay in the dorm all day, Lee lied saying she was going to the mall to get her ears pierced.

At the mall, there were no jewelry stores that pierced ears. Lee did find what she called "the male counterpart" (47) to a girly store that had a motorcycle and lots of leather clothing. Before she told the man at the counter she wanted to get her ears pierced, she noticed Cross had also come into the store. Lee felt lonely when she looked at the earring choices the man showed her. She felt as if she should have a friend with her for this activity. The man pierced Lee's right ear. She jumped when he tried to pierce her left ear, and he glared at her for jumping. Lee was surprised to see a spot of green light in front of the man's face.

The next thing Lee remembered she was lying on the floor. Cross was standing over her asking if she was a diabetic. He helped her out of the store to a diner where they got milkshakes. While they sat in the diner, Lee was impressed with herself because she was able to kid Cross about being a meathead because he liked sports and question him about his girlfriend. When he commented that his girlfriend (Sophie) was cool because she liked to give blow jobs, the conversation became uncomfortable. Cross told her he was supposed to meet friends to see a movie, and Lee encouraged him to leave. She was trying to decide what she wanted to order for lunch when Cross reappeared and asked her to come with him. Even though she declined at first, Lee changed her mind and went.

Lee could not concentrate during the movie even though Cross did not touch her. Afterward she left the theater and was surprised the boys with whom she and Cross had seen the movie followed her and then waited while she got a drink from the water fountain. It seemed natural for Lee to join them for dinner and then to a video arcade. Cross and Lee flirted again when he saw her playing pinball. After the arcade they ate again, pizza this time. When they finished they realized they had missed the bus back to campus. Cross said they could take a taxi.



In the taxi Lee thought about the only time she had ever been in a taxi before. She and her brother Joseph had ridden to the hospital in a taxi to see their newborn brother. All the way to the hospital Lee had been afraid the taxi driver would kidnap them. In the taxi with Cross, Lee did not feel afraid. He sat next to her and put his arm around her even raking his fingers through her hair occasionally. Lee was disappointed when Cross sat forward to direct the taxi driver to their dorms on campus. The boys got out first with Cross only saying “Bye, Lee” (63) before the taxi took her to her building. When Lee told the taxi driver she would have to go inside to get money he said her boyfriend had already paid.

When Lee returned to her dorm room Sin-Jun and Dede complimented her on her earrings. Dede was surprised the man who pierced her ears had not told her how to care for the piercings. As Dede cared for her ears, Lee thought to herself that she could not tell them about that day because she could not tell them about Cross. She did not understand exactly what had happened between them. She considered how unlikely it would be that Cross would ever care for her and Lee began to cry. Dede and Sin-Jun comforted her because they thought it was her new piercings that hurt.

## Analysis

Lee has chosen to attend Ault with trivial expectations — she wants to date a smart, handsome boy — but she seems to be setting herself up for failure. Lee thinks how she would be happy if she were Cross’ girlfriend. She describes her mindset: “As I thought this, I also thought that I wouldn’t get it — surely, I wouldn’t — and I felt my eyes fill” (65). Lee has decided even before a relationship has started that the relationship is not feasible.

It is also in this section that Lee’s obsession with Cross begins. “In this moment, I understood for the first time in my life what it was to feel attracted to someone” (52) Lee thinks to herself as she spends time with Cross in the diner.

Meanwhile, it is clear that Lee is not the only student at Ault whose life revolves around the opposite sex. Her roommate Dede has a crush on Cross, but Lee does not believe that Dede has a chance with the boy who is the most popular one in the freshman class. “I knew that Dede had no chance with Cross. Yes, she was rich, but she was also Jewish, and, with a big nose and the last name Schwartz, she wasn’t the kind of Jewish you could hide” (45). Lee’s assumption that Cross will never date Dede is significant, especially since the reader will learn later in the novel that Cross is also Jewish. Even though Lee believes Dede has no choice with Cross, Dede has studied Cross and his current relationship to the point that she believes Cross’ relationship with Sophie is “unhealthy” (46) and that he did not really like her that much.

When Lee flirts with Cross at the diner in the mall on surprise holiday, she learns there are some things about Sophie that Cross dislikes. He also shares with Lee that he does like Sophie because she likes giving blow jobs, an admission that shocks Lee. “Everything I didn’t understand and wasn’t part of at Ault rose up and loomed over me,



like buildings in a city; I felt myself shrink back into a small, hunched figure, walking against the wind” (56). Notice the way the author uses imagery to help the reader visualize exactly how Lee feels at the moment that Cross mentions blow jobs. The things that Lee did not understand about Ault are compared through a simile to “buildings in a city” (56) that rise up and loom over her. Meanwhile Lee describes herself as a “small, hunched figure, walking against the wind” (56). This imagery speaks of a person who is fighting for a foothold in conditions that are working against him. Compare this feeling to Lee’s earlier belief that one of the possibilities of Ault was that “you could fall desperately in love. In my whole life, Ault was the place with the greatest density of people to fall in love with” (42). Even though Lee hopes for a relationship while at Ault, she also feels handicapped by her own lack of knowledge.

Lee is so obsessed with boys. She lets her grades drop. She is in a college preparatory school where just doing the homework does not set her apart as being one of the smarter students. Her grade in biology is a C, the lowest grade she has ever had in her life. Nevertheless, she is still not motivated to study. “If I wasn’t literally getting dumber, I knew at least that I’d lost the glow that surrounds you when the teachers think you’re one of the smart, responsible ones” (37). Lee faces the stress that many students feel when the stakes have gotten higher. Usually these feelings come out in college but since Lee has decided to go to a college prep school she is among the brightest and smartest students in the country and she seems to lose faith in herself. She realizes that even though she looks down on her roommate, Dede is a serious student. When Dede suggests they should study for their biology exam even though the following day might be a school holiday, Lee recognizes her old self in Dede. “It was as if I were seeing a version of myself from a year before, the version who had convinced my parents to let me go to Ault” (40). Instead of doing the responsible thing and studying, however, Lee decides to go to bed early.

Notice the way the author moves forward and backward through time to tell the reader about other experiences in Lee’s life. For instance, there is a flashback where the reader learns the details of the night that Little was expelled. There is also a flash forward when Lee is sitting in the taxi with Cross. Lee’s older self realizes that not every boy’s embrace is as perfect as the one Cross and Lee had where they fit into each other. This older Lee mentions that sometimes when leaning against a man she has had situations where their bodies do not line up correctly and their bones poke.

There are a few more examples of imagery to notice in this chapter. As Lee sits with Cross in the mall she is thinking “It was as if I had, as in a dream, plucked him from his own world, the world of lacrosse games and sailboats and girls with long blond hair wearing sundresses, and pulled him into mine: a grimy restaurant in a depressed mall, on a rainy day” (50-51). Notice how Lee contrasts the world she believes Cross lives in with the world she believes she lives in. His world contains “lacrosse games and sailboats and girls with long blond hair wearing sundresses” (50). All of these are images of leisure and wealth while Lee’s world includes “a grimy restaurant in a depressed mall, on a rainy day” (51). The author uses the words “grimy,” “depressed,” and “rainy” to underscore the fact that Lee believes her life is below average, as well as dirty and depressing.



The author uses metaphor, a direct comparison, when Cross puts his arm around Lee to describe her feelings. "My whole body was hot liquid" (63) Lee describes herself as she sits in Cross' embrace.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Lee is doing so badly in her classes at Ault? Do you share Lee's feelings that if she had a boyfriend she would do better? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the paradox in which Lee finds herself. She has criticized Dede for chasing after Cross believing that Dede has no chance with the most popular boy. After their day together, Lee finds herself attracted to Cross. How should she handle this situation knowing that she and her roommate both have a crush on the same boy? Why does Lee believe she has a chance with Cross when Dede does not?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way the author uses imagery in Lee's descriptions to expand the story. How does the author appeal to all of the reader's senses through these descriptions?

## Vocabulary

ingratiating, juncture, peripheral, acolyte, synchronized, fixate, blasphemous, guileless, apparatchik, rendition, placid



## Chapter 3: Assassin

### Summary

In Chapter 3, Lee met Conchita Maxwell on the first day of lacrosse practice. Lee paired off with her because she felt she was not going to get an offer from anyone else. Conchita stood out because she dressed in colorful clothes that did not always match. Since Lee was wearing her father's Bob Dylan shirt, Conchita assumed she was a fan and told Lee she could come to her room to listen to music. Conchita recognized Lee was not happy at Ault and suggested they could be friends. Lee did not give her an answer.

The beginning of the school's annual game of Assassin was announced during morning roll call the following day. Those who wanted to play would receive the name of the person who was their target in their mailbox along with a sheet of orange stickers. The target was considered killed when an orange sticker was put on them without anyone seeing. The students who "killed" their target was to take over that person's target.

Later that same day Conchita invited Lee to her room to listen to music. Lee went because she remembered how mean she had been to Conchita earlier. Conchita told Lee she had a single room because she had such bad insomnia. Lee realized when she entered the room it was not a single but instead a double turned into a single. The decorations in the room were overdone, and Lee was surprised to learn that Conchita was allowed to have a phone in her room. All other students had to use the one payphone in the common room. Conchita said her mother, who was very overprotective, got special permission for her to have a phone installed. Lee liked the first song that Conchita played, a song of longing, but did not care much for the other pieces by Dylan. As Lee was turning to leave, Conchita invited her to go off campus to dinner. Lee accepted the offer. By accepting, she learned Conchita could not ride a bike. Lee offered to teach her.

Lee killed her first target in Assassin easily. She met Devin Billinger in the stairwell after she went to the mail room and got her letter advising her that he was her first target. Devin was furious he had been killed so easily. After killing two more people in Assassin, Lee realized she had an aptitude for the game. She learned by eavesdropping on a conversation between Aspeth and Cross that Cross was still in the game. Lee wondered if she went far enough in the game if it would lead her to Cross.

Lee's next target, McGrath Mills, was harder. She tried to kill him after chapel but was seen by another student. That evening she fended off Edmundo who was trying to kill her. When she told Conchita that Edmundo had her name Conchita seemed surprised. They began talking about crushes, and Conchita convinced Lee to tell her that she had a crush on Cross. Lee explains that she admitted to Conchita that she hoped the game of Assassin would lead her to Cross or Cross to her. Conchita chose that time to ask



Lee if she would room with her the following year. She also invited Lee to go with her to Boston to meet her mother for lunch.

After curfew one evening, Amy Dennaker mentioned to Lee how funny McGrath had thought it was that Lee had tried to kill him. She mentioned that his room was right below Alexis and Heidi's room. Amy suggested Lee somehow send down a threat to McGrath. Sin-Jun proposed that they could use a fishing pole to dangle something in front of the boy's window. They asked permission from Madame to go down to the basement and get a fishing pole they had seen there before. To their surprise, Madame agreed to help them and told them they should teach the boys a lesson. They could not find a fishing pole. They decided to attach a pillowcase with a message written on it to a broom and a mop. Working with Amy, Lee lowered the pillowcase to the level of McGrath's dorm window. The girls and boys bantered back and forth for a while before Madame told the girls it was time to leave the boys alone.

On Friday morning, Martha, who was also going to lunch with Conchita on Saturday, talked to Lee. She had tried to talk to Lee before, but Lee had been so nervous she had blocked Martha's attempt to be friendly. After the two talked Lee wondered why she had not talked to the girl before.

Meanwhile, Lee was concocting a plan to kill McGrath. She decided to hide under the table he was required to set for formal dinner and kill him then. As she sat under the table, Lee explained she had a brief moment of a second thought before she placed the sticker on McGrath's leg. McGrath laughed when Lee crawled out from under the table and commented that she had gotten him good. Even though Lee had successfully killed McGrath, she thought she had also executed any chance at a friendship between them.

On Saturday Lee was surprised to see Conchita in a limousine that was to pick her and Martha up for lunch. As Conchita talked to the driver and requested a radio station without waiting for a response, Lee realized that Conchita was rich. During lunch Mrs. Maxwell requested both Lee and Martha's life stories and then listened as if she were really interested. When it was time for Lee and Martha to go they both hugged Mrs. Maxwell. Lee thought she was lucky to be included in Conchita's world.

Back in the limo, Lee learned from Martha that the man sitting at the table next to them during lunch had been Mrs. Maxwell's bodyguard and that Conchita's father was the CEO of a gasoline company. Martha mentioned that Conchita had come to Ault to try to fit in but the school had not been what she had thought. Lee explains that it was not until Martha told her that she realized that Conchita was allowed all of the special treatment she got because her parents were so rich.

Martha gave Lee a guilty grimace when Lee asked if she had ever consider rooming with Conchita. Martha said it was hard to imagine her rooming with Conchita but she had been thinking about the two of them rooming together. It was at that point that Lee realized she would be friends with Martha for the rest of her schooling at Ault.





Meanwhile, in the game of Assassin, when Edmundo passed Lee on campus the next time he told her he did not have her name any longer. He had gotten killed. Edmundo would not tell her who had killed him.

After Conchita's next bike lesson Lee told her that she and Martha had decided to room together. She was surprised when Conchita burst into tears. Lee made excuses saying it was hard to share a small space, especially since Conchita had so much stuff. When Conchita asked Lee had to tell her that they had decided to room together on the way back from lunch. Conchita suggested they could get a triple and all room together. Lee tried to convince Conchita they could still be friends but Conchita denied they were friends at all. Conchita asked Lee to leave her alone. Even though Lee knew it was not what Conchita really wanted she walked away.

In the Assassin game, Lee had killed her next target and had noticed no one had made another attempt on her life. She wondered who had her name. By eavesdropping on Cross again she learned he was still alive.

Later when Lee went to Conchita's room to try to talk to her Conchita accused her of stealing Martha from her. Lee explained that she felt a sting of truth when Conchita accused her of having no identity and therefore having to define her identity by whomever she spent her time with. Despite her anger, Conchita said she would forgive Lee and they could still room together. Lee did not accept Conchita's terms for friendship.

As Lee walked away from Conchita's room, she felt the girl's hand on her back. She knew that she had been killed. The narration switches to present tense as Lee looks back on the situation from her standpoint as an adult. She believes Conchita had killed her because it would have hurt her not to do so, especially after the way that Lee had treated her. Lee tried to put a timeline together and decided that Conchita had killed Edmundo and gotten Lee as a target to protect her. She had been working in secret to help Lee win.

Returning to the past tense, as Lee looked at Conchita in the dorm hallway, she realized the only way Conchita would take back her act of killing her was if Lee would agree to room with her. Lee also realized that their friendship was over because their resentment had become mutual. Returning again to the present tense and her older self Lee narrates that she owes Conchita because it was she who set up the circumstances that allowed her and Martha, who became her best friend, to meet. She knew Conchita had also reminded her that she knew how to make friends.

Lee goes back to the past in her narration to the bike lesson just before she had told Conchita she was rooming with Martha. As she jogged next to the bike on which Conchita rode, Lee realized she was not holding onto the bike anymore. Conchita had learned to ride by herself. Lee treasured that one incredible moment from their brief friendship.





## Analysis

Notice how the author leaves the reader with a good feeling about Lee and Conchita's relationship, even though it ended quite badly. The reader's spirits have already been lifted because the adult Lee shares the lessons she learned from Conchita. The tone switches to a jubilant one when Lee shares her feelings when Conchita first rode the bike by herself. This is one of the few moments of pure joy that the author includes in the novel.

Lee's short relationship with Conchita highlights how even Lee is blind to her own racism. Although all the signs point in a different direction, because Conchita is Mexican and because she admits she feels out of place at Ault, Lee assumes Conchita is on scholarship. Even after Lee sees the special privileges that Conchita is allowed — a phone in her room and a double-sized room even though she rooms alone — Lee does not recognize Conchita has been given these special favors because her family is rich and the leaders at Ault expect her parents to make donations to the school. There is one point where Lee looks at Conchita's room and thinks that it looks like a professional decorated it. However, she still believes that Conchita is on scholarship. "I thought about how much money it must have cost to furnish this room, and then I thought about how maybe it was a cultural thing, how even though her family didn't have a lot, they were willing to pour what they did have into objects that were tangible and conspicuous" (77).

Conchita's story is an example of the silent power of money. "Being rich, in the end, counted for the most — for more, even, than being pretty" (101). Since Conchita's parents are filthy rich, Conchita is allowed special concessions at school. Martha helps Lee to understand that the leaders of the school think they can profit off Conchita's family if they treat her right.

Lee identifies which kind of rich can be discussed. "There was normal rich, dignified rich, which you didn't talk about, and then there was extreme, comical, unsubtle rich — like having your dorm room professionally decorated, or riding a limousine into Boston to meet your mother — and that was permissible to discuss" (107). Also, there is a group of boys in the freshman class referred to as the bank boys. These boys have earned their nickname based on the idea that they seem to be the sons of bankers.

Imagine how difficult life has probably been for Conchita. Even though Lee believes Conchita should fit in at the school because she is rich, Conchita has already described her reaction when she first arrived at Ault. "When I got here, I thought I'd landed on another planet" (69-70). The difference in Conchita and the other rich girls is that Conchita wants to be around people who are real. "I can't tell if we've decided to be honest. At first, I thought you and I were going to. I'd gotten the impression you weren't the same as everyone else" (70) Conchita tells Lee during their first encounter with one another. Conchita is spoiled because her mother has babied her all of her life and given her what she wanted. For the first time at college Conchita is not able to get what she wants just because she wants it.



Conchita tries to be a good friend to Lee. She thinks she is making a connection with Lee when she invites Lee to her dorm room to listen to Bob Dylan because Lee is wearing a Bob Dylan t-shirt. Conchita also appears to have tried to work the Assassin game in Lee's favor until she learns that Lee does not want to room with her. Just as Martha had described Conchita's father as being "ruthless," (106) Conchita shows she may have inherited some of this ruthlessness by the way she treats Lee after Lee tells her she and Martha have planned to room together. Conchita "kills" Lee by placing a sticker on her back ending Lee's hopes that she and Cross will be brought together during the game. In Lee's mind "blocking someone else's crush was always and absolutely wrong" (114). For that reason, she feels justified in disliking Conchita based on what she had done to interfere in the relationship between Lee and Cross.

Lee's reason for attending Ault is to have a boyfriend and her reasons for not rooming with Conchita are also based on her desire to have a relationship with a boy. Notice that when Martha and Lee talk about sex and sexual touching Conchita is embarrassed and accuses them of being promiscuous. She is proud of her virginity and tells Lee and Martha she does not plan to have sex until after she is married, a claim that Lee finds disturbing. "I wanted to have boyfriends, I wanted my life to be sorrowful and complicated and unwholesome, at least a little unwholesome" (90) Lee thinks. She believes that if she rooms with Conchita she will be content to stay in the room and never get out. For this reason Lee wants to room with Martha, a girl who seems more like her even than Conchita.

As a teenager, Lee describes her situations in some very interesting ways. Notice that Lee is very observant and that she describes the things she sees and observes in detail. The descriptions she comes up with are those that young teens can understand. For instance after Lee learns that Conchita is rich and is not at Ault on scholarship she realizes: "Thinking this felt the way peeing in your pants does when you're five or six: a complicated relief, one best ignored in the present moment" (101). Lee feels this relief because she believes that if Conchita is rich and Conchita likes her that means that Lee isn't completely hopeless.

Other literary devices used in this section include the description of the lacrosse ball through a simile: "the ball, a rubbery white globe like the egg of some exotic creature" (67) and Conchita's teary face as a metaphor: "Her face was a slimy red raisin" (108-109). The night is personified in the quote "that was the last I heard before I was back in the room and the night was outside again" (96). Lee compares herself to a dog after she crawls out from under the table in the dining hall and tells McGrath that she had killed him. "I couldn't help feeling a little like a dog" (99). This isn't the only time that Lee will compare herself to a dog.

Notice also that the older Lee, the one who is narrating Lee's memories, continues to interject in the narration. "Again, there was laughter, laughter that makes this day and this game seem longer ago than it was" (73). The adult Lee notes how the laughter makes the time in which she played assassin seem much longer ago than it actually was. At this point the reader is not sure what age Lee is when she narrates her story, only that she is no longer at Ault. In this quote: "This seems distinctly Aultish to me now,



the casual sacrifice of a pillowcase in the service of a joke. There was so little attention paid to the fact that pillowcases, like everything else, cost money” (94). Lee recognizes that even she was careless about the cost of things even though she hadn’t grown up in the same socioeconomic situations as many of the girls at Ault. Notice the allusion to the musical “The Sound of Music” as Amy says to the boys “Farewell, so long, auf Wiedersehen, good-bye” (95) when Madame tells the girls it is time to leave the boys alone.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the brief friendship between Conchita and Lee. Why did this friendship not work out? Did Conchita’s wealth have anything to do with the split?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss how the interjections from the older Lee who narrates this novel add to the story.

## Discussion Question 3

What is the tone of the novel in this section? How does the author use language to help develop that tone?

## Vocabulary

deference, debutante, perused, pathos, filibuster, lore, articulated, immaculate, tangible, conspicuous, audible, conspire, proximity, melodramatic, exponentially, capitulated, feigned, malleability, scrutinizing, machinations, volition, illicit, innocuous, poltergeist, zealous, unperturbed, promiscuous, hypochondria, permissible, obliviously, cajoled, pustules, ceded, conformist, abolished, rescind, asymmetry



# Chapter 4: Cipher

## Summary

Chapter 4: Cipher jumps forward in time to the fall of Lee's sophomore year, though the narration remains in the past tense. Lee remembers that in her spare time she used to think about the book shaped pin that Ms. Moray, the intern English teacher, wore to class. Before class began on her first day Lee noticed first that Cross was not in her class. She also noticed a group of students trying to kill a bee near the back of the room. The bee flew toward Lee. Without thinking she smashed it between her palms. Ms. Moray came into the room just as Darden used a curse word to exclaim about Lee killing the bee. When Ms. Moray told the students she would ignore Darden's comment, the students thought (at first) that they had gotten a cool teacher.

Ms. Moray first asked Darden's name. After Ms. Moray finished with Darden, Lee asked to go to the bathroom. Ms. Moray refused to let her go. Lee believed the teacher thought she was being obnoxious. When Ms. Moray called Lee's name in roll call, Aspeth told Lee to raise her hand. Lee did so showing her classmates and teacher the smashed bee. Lee expected Ms. Moray to be more understanding when she saw the bee, but the teacher was still irritated with her. However, Ms. Moray

did let her go wash her hands.

One evening Tullis Haskell walked through the common room of Lee's dorm while she was cooking. Tullis asked Lee if she knew how to cut hair. Even though the situation seemed strange and Lee had no experience, she told him she would cut his hair. He had a pony tail and Lee knew that the change would be so drastic that other students would notice it. She wondered if Tullis' haircut would bring Cross to her. Tullis offered to pay Lee for her work, but Lee refused to take any payment. Before Tullis left he asked Lee if she would shave his neck as well. Lee did as he asked.

Lee returns to her narration about her English class to a period in which Ms. Moray asked her students to read aloud the essays they had written about the place they went to reflect on life. When it was her turn, Lee did not think she could read her essay out loud. She tried because she was afraid if she did not try it would concrete the relationship between herself and her English teacher as a bad one. Lee's voice got quieter as she read until it finally died out all together. Ms. Moray finally gave Lee permission not to read but asked for her to stay after class. Ms. Moray made Lee read her essay out loud to her. Lee was surprised Ms. Moray that Ms. Moray did not understand why she was embarrassed to read the essay, which was about her father's mattress store, out loud.

Meanwhile, Lee enjoyed Dede's reaction when Dede learned during lunch one day that it was Lee who had cut Tullis' hair. Dede was equally surprised when Nick Chafee asked Lee to give him a haircut. Lee began giving more and more haircuts. She never let her



clients wet their hair before a cutting, always made them close their eyes when she was standing in front of them and she never charged. She felt proud of her newfound ability.

Lee returns to her narration about her English class in which the students were studying the novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Groups of students were to act out significant scenes from the novel. Darden, Aspeth and Dede gave the last presentation. Before they began their presentation, Aspeth warned Ms. Moray that their presentation was a modern interpretation. When the three came into the room and began their presentation Lee was confused by what they were trying to say. She could tell that Ms. Moray was confused as well. When Darden started speaking to Aspeth and Dede as if they were prostitutes and he were their pimp Ms. Moray made them stop. She scolded them for the inappropriateness of their presentation. All the students were surprised when Ms. Moray said she saw racism in the behaviors of the three students. Darden tried to stop Ms. Moray by telling her they had made a mistake and asking her if she would let it go at that. Lee narrates that Ms. Moray continued, making the point that it was also not okay for the girls to portray sexist roles. Aspeth was highly angered by Ms. Moray's criticism of them. Even when Ms. Moray came to class and pretended to be a cheerleader, a move Lee believed was intended to show that Ms. Moray had forgiven her students, Lee knew that Ms. Moray did not realize that her students had not forgiven her.

Lee was surprised one day when she noticed how weird Martha was acting when she told Lee she was going into town to get a haircut. Martha didn't want Lee to cut her hair because she thought Lee used her talent as a way to get close to boys without having to have social interaction. She also pointed out that Lee was doing people a favor but not really getting anything in return. People didn't even help her clean up afterward. Lee realized that Martha was indicating she believed Lee was cutting people's hair so she could interact with them even though she thought she was a loser. Martha reassured her no one else had noticed because they were too busy thinking about themselves.

In Ms. Moray's class one day, Lee received a note from Dede and Aspeth asking her to rate Ms. Moray's clothes, shoes, and makeup. They had both judged her harshly in their ratings. Even though she realized how dangerous it was to put one's thoughts down on paper Lee played along and handed the note back. After class Aspeth asked Lee if she would cut her hair at six that night. Even though Lee and Martha usually went to dinner at six, Lee agreed. Lee arrived at Aspeth's dorm room a little after six and found the girl was not even dressed yet. Aspeth pulled on a pair of jeans out of her laundry basket. Lee realized Aspeth didn't care that Lee was seeing her putting on dirty clothes because she did not care what Lee thought about her. Lee narrates that she also noticed that Aspeth left all the lights and music on when she left the room and that she stepped on an expensive looking coat when she left the room.

Aspeth told Lee they were picking someone else up before the haircut but Lee did not understand the name Aspeth told her. Aspeth told her again the boy was Cross Sugarman. When he had heard Aspeth was getting her hair cut by Lee he had requested to sit in. The common room at Cross' dorm was full of guys so Cross suggested they go to the basement. He brought a chair. As Lee listened to Cross and



Aspeth interact with each other she realized they were actually bigger losers than she believed she was. She tried to change the subject by asking Aspeth if she thought Ms. Moray would wear boots to class again. Aspeth mentioned to Cross that Lee and Ms. Moray had had several clashes.

Aspeth decided to fill Lee in on the school gossip and told Lee that Ms. Moray had been a last minute addition to the staff at Ault. Aspeth also described Ms. Moray as a “shitty” (157) teacher, a designation Lee did not think that Aspeth had the right to make since Ms. Moray had so little experience. When the haircut was finished Aspeth noticed they had only 15 more minutes to get to dinner and turned to leave. Lee suggested they help her clean up but Aspeth and Cross did not take the hint. Lee wound up cleaning up by herself. She made up her mind that would be the last time she would cut anyone’s hair.

Later in the semester Lee had to write a paper in English about something that mattered to her. Lee decided to write about prayer in schools. Martha advised Lee it was not a great topic because it was not something Lee was passionate about but that it would work. When Ms. Moray handed the papers back and began asking students to read their essays out loud Lee noticed her paper was not given back to her. Ms. Moray told Lee she wouldn’t be reading aloud and that “you know exactly why” (160). After class Lee learned Ms. Moray was upset with her because she had noted that the topic about which she’d written was not one she really cared about. She accused Lee of going through life unattached, believing she was too cool to make a difference or reach out to people. Lee was amused when Ms. Moray pointed out the way Dede and Aspeth wanted to be Lee’s friends but Lee would not talk to anyone before class. She realized how wrong Ms. Moray was about the entire situation.

Even though Lee realized Ms. Moray wanted her to be enthusiastic about a decision to say “yes” to life Lee could not lie to her teacher. She thought the woman was naive for believing Lee could change her outlook on life in such a short period of time. Ms. Moray came to Lee’s dorm that night. She asked Lee to give her a haircut. She said she would grade Lee’s cut and replace her failing grade on her paper.

The narration switches to the present tense as the adult Lee tells her reader she did not want to see Ms. Moray again and that the woman had made no real impact on her life. Even so, as an adult Lee’s memories of Ms. Moray haunt her for reasons that Lee can not completely understand. She notes that Ms. Moray gave her an “A” on her paper just as Lee had thought she would do.

## Analysis

Lee clashes with Ms. Moray because they are so much alike. They are both from the Midwest. Because she has already attended Ault for one year, Lee has a better grasp on the mores of life at the school. She is able to make judgements of Ms. Moray’s behavior. For instance, Lee knows Ms. Moray is making a mistake when she tells her class she was Phi Beta Kappa, “At Ault, you didn’t toot your own horn” (122) Lee thinks to herself.





Bragging on herself is not the only mistake that Ms. Moray makes. She also angers Aspeth, one of the most popular students, when she criticizes a group of students who make a presentation with racial and sexual overtones. From that point forward Aspeth criticizes Ms. Moray's ability as a teacher telling people she is "shitty" (157) as a teacher and is "out of her league" (157). Lee understands why Aspeth thinks Ms. Moray is a bad teacher but Lee thinks the qualities Aspeth is seeing are because of Ms. Moray's inexperience, not because she is just bad.

Lee sees her parallel journey with Ms. Moray as being both symbolic and literal as they probably traveled the same interstate to get to Ault from their homes. "From Iowa (not South Dakota) she'd probably taken I-80 to Cleveland, then picked up 90 — that was the route my father and I had gone when he drove me to Ault to start my freshman year" (157). Even though Lee recognizes the similarities between her and Ms. Moray, she does not realize it is because Ms. Moray is so similar to her that causes Lee's dislike for her. Lee may subconsciously recognize herself in Ms. Moray and realize that just like Lee does not fit in at Ault, neither does Ms. Moray.

Ms. Moray does not understand Lee because Ms. Moray does not have the strong desire to fit in that Lee has. Lee does not understand how Ms. Moray can feel so comfortable with being an adult dork. Lee refuses to read an essay she has written about her father's mattress business in class because she is embarrassed about what her father does for a living. "That she didn't know both relieved me and made me think less of her" (137) Lee thinks when she realizes that Ms. Moray has no idea why Lee did not want to read her essay in class. Lee thinks less of Ms. Moray because the teacher does not understand Lee's desire to impress her fellow students. At the same time she is relieved because Ms. Moray does not think selling mattresses is a subpar job. Again and again Ms. Moray does things that make Lee believe she understands only the stereotype of schools like Ault. The kilt she wears to school one day, for instance, "was another idea of boarding school that only an outsider would have" (160).

Lee spends her year obsessed with the silver book shaped pin that Ms. Moray wears occasionally to class. The pin is an important symbol because Lee uses it a way to determine Ms. Moray's personality. She seems to believe if she can determine how Ms. Moray came to have the pin she will know something concrete about the strange teacher. Lee thinks at first the pin was a gift from a mentor or even a peer but she believes that at her age Ms. Moray is too young to wear such a "frumpy" (117) accessory. At the end of the semester Lee finally comes to the conclusion that Ms. Moray had bought the pin for herself. Lee believes it is a symbol that Ms. Moray is trying too hard to make up for her own insecurities. "'That's the one possibility that didn't occur to me,' Lee thinks as she considers the option that Ms. Moray bought herself the pin. 'To think it would have seemed unbearably depressing, it would have seemed pathetic ... and it might have elicited from me true and continuous sympathy instead of mere intermittent pangs'" (166). Lee believes if she had realized earlier how hard Ms. Moray was trying to fit in she would have felt sympathy for Ms. Moray because she understands the drawbacks of trying too hard.



Because Lee is trying so hard to be something she is not, Ms. Moray makes false assumptions about her. This frustration that Ms. Moray feels for Lee comes out when Lee notes on an essay that she really did not care about the topic that she had chosen to discuss. The reader can understand Ms. Moray's frustration. The intent of the assignment is for the student to identify and support something they cared about. Lee's comment on the essay "this is not an issue I truly care about" (160) seems sarcastic and can be taken as a willful attempt on Lee's part to undermine Ms. Moray's authority. Ms. Moray's frustration with Lee is obvious by the description of her response to Lee. This response was "a jungle of red writing, which I scanned, though not all the words were legible" (161). Ms. Moray is so angry as she grades Lee's paper that her writing is illegible.

Ms. Moray criticizes Lee, but Lee believes she criticizes her based on the false assumption. "Here you are, you're going to this incredible school, being given every advantage, and you can't think of anything that matters to you" (161). Lee knows there are a variety of things that matter to her but believe that none of those things will work for the essay. Lee is also surprised when Ms. Moray interprets the relationship between Aspeth, Dede and Lee in the wrong way. Ms. Moray scolds Lee for never talking to Aspeth or Dede even though Ms. Moray believes the girls want to be Lee's friend. Lee, on the other hand, knows that Dede and Aspeth want her to join in their criticism of Ms. Moray but that they do not want to be her friends. She is shocked how wrong Ms. Moray is on her take of Aspeth and Dede and must wonder what else Ms. Moray is wrong about.

The students in Ms. Moray's class are surprised when the teacher accuses them of racism because they believe there is no racism at Ault. The description of the presentation given by Darden, Aspeth and Dede is included because it will affect a situation that Darden and Lee face later in the novel. "He seemed to me in this moment like an adult ... how it appeared he wanted the situation resolved more than he wanted himself exonerated" (143) Lee says of Darden's admission that he and the girls had made a mistake and they should let things go at that. For Darden this may be the point at which he realizes that it is not okay for even him, as a black person, to poke fun at black people around white people.

The presentation that Darden, Aspeth, and Dede put on in Ms. Moray's class shows how the students believe that racism does not exist and it should not bother them. Note first that when Ms. Moray accuses the students of being racist, Lee comes up with a great simile she believes describes the attitude toward racism at the time in which she lived. "Racism seemed to me like a holdover from my parents' generation, something that was not entirely gone but had fallen out of favor — like girdles, say, or meatloaf" (143) comparing racism to ladies' undergarments or mystery meat shows Lee has little grasp on how real racism really is. She has already shown signs of racism in Chapter 3 when she assumes Conchita is a scholarship student because she is Mexican.

Lee's comment about Darden and the other students' relationship with him has racist tones. "People genuinely liked him, and on top of that they liked the fact that they genuinely liked a big black guy from the Bronx" (119). Just because the students like





Darden and even like him despite the fact that he is from the Bronx does not mean they are not racist. It means they can tolerate Darden. Aspeth attempts to point out that their presentation can not be racist because Darden is black. While Aspeth has a point that it a black person making fun of other black people Darden still portrayed blacks in a stereotypical way, a way that was not appropriate. Notice also that Darden's reaction to Ms. Moray's lecture is different from both Aspeth and Dede's. Darden realizes he's messed up and tries to smooth over the bad judgement. Dede tries to explain the reasons they came up with their idea for the presentation hoping Ms. Moray will understand. Aspeth, however, argues with Ms. Moray insisting that they were not racist.

It is an encounter with Aspeth that makes Lee decide to abandon her talent for cutting hair. Martha had already criticized Lee for letting people abuse her willingness to cut their hair without expecting anything in return. Lee puts Martha's assumption to the test when she cuts Aspeth's hair. Not only does the girl make Lee miss dinner but she also refuses to help Lee clean up after the haircut. Lee realizes that Martha is right. She is not making friends, she is only allowing herself to be used.

In the final scene of this chapter the topics of the chapter merge. Lee has been interspersing sections about her haircutting with sections about her encounters with Ms. Moray, her English teacher. The night after Ms. Moray criticizes Lee so badly for her essay the teacher goes to Lee's dorm room and asks for a haircut. Lee agrees. It seems to be Ms. Moray's way of apologizing to Lee or indicating that things are okay between them. It is apparent that Lee does not warm to Ms. Moray during this experience, she feels fear because she suspects the teacher wants to hug her, but Ms. Moray does give Lee an A to replace the F she had gotten on the essay.

## Discussion Question 1

Consider the following quote: "as unhappy as I often was, the knowledge never made me feel better; instead it seemed the worst part of all — that our lives at Ault were only temporary" (147). Since Lee is so unhappy at Ault, why do you think that she considers the worst part of her high school experience to be the fact it will end soon?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the idea of racism as presented in this section of the novel. Are Aspeth, Darden, and Dede acting in a way that is racist during their presentation? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Ms. Moray's act of going to Lee at the end of this chapter symbolize? Why do you think Lee finds the memories she has of Ms. Moray's "haunting" even years after either of them were at Ault?

## Vocabulary

frumpy, exacerbated, assonant, rapport, reticent, nebulous, rapt, credibility, incarnation, exacerbate, hypothetical, amorphous, demure, justification, ostracized, exonerated, espionage, vehement, lairs, paradox, fabricated, perverse, cipher, arbitrary, inorganic, demeanor, fervor, explicitly, inertia, adjourn, tenuous



# Chapter 5: Parents' Weekend

## Summary

This chapter of the novel jumps forward a full year from the fall of Lee's sophomore year to the fall of her junior year. Lee opens this section by describing the clothing, names and lifestyles of the rich parents of other Ault students. In the dining hall, Maria Oldega asked if Lee's parents had arrived for parents' weekend yet. They had not because they were driving but Lee did not want to have to admit that. She listened as Maria and her roommate Rufina Sanchez made fun of Ault and its habit of serving better food during parents' weekend. Lee believed they could get away with making fun of the school without seeming bitter because they were Latina.

As Lee listened to Rufina laugh she wondered if the girl was really happy. She remembered sitting on the bus next to Rufina as they rode back to campus from an away soccer game. Even though Lee was not enjoying herself she was not unhappy either. She was surprised when she noticed Rufina was crying. She offered Rufina a napkin she'd used for lunch and wished was cleaner. Rufina told Lee she just wanted "to know if it'll always be like this" (172). Two years later, Lee noticed how Rufina had changed not only physically but also socially. Lee wondered if she had changed as well.

When Rufina told Lee to have fun with her parents before the two parted, Lee thought about how she had once looked forward to her parents coming. That feeling had changed into a belief they would be an inconvenience. Lee felt she was finally beginning to belong at Ault and felt her parents might be "bewildered" (175) by the new version of herself. She waited for her parents at the gate because she was afraid if she did not that they would go to the wrong gate. Lee had her parents park in a parking lot that didn't get much pedestrian traffic so as few people as possible would see their older, dirty car.

After used the bathrooms in the dining hall Lee's parents were interested in looking at the marble panels onto which the names of all of the senior prefects were engraved. Even though Lee had told her parents they probably wouldn't recognize any of the names she was surprised when they did recognize some names. Lee happened to mention that a girl who attended the school was the daughter of a senator. She regretted her comment when her father said he wouldn't mind meeting a senator.

The tension in the atmosphere eased when Lee and her parents teased one another about their sins when they toured the chapel. At the dorm, however, the tension returned when Lee's mother asked questions about a picture of Lee and Martha in a swimming pool and her father commented on how it must be nice to be rich. Lee explains in her narration that it was when her father began making fun of her for a women's magazine she had in the room that Lee really got angry with her father. Even though Lee tried to draw him away from her dorm her father continued to read embarrassing things out of the magazine. She finally left the room waiting outside for them to join her. As they walked away from the dorm her mother asks questions her



about Martha and her family. Lee didn't answer the questions and instead asked her mother why she cared about Martha's family. They began to argue in earnest and Lee told her father to watch how he talked to her after he criticized her for talking badly to her mother.

At lunch Lee believed she had gotten lucky because there was no one at her table she wanted to impress. Lee's father, however, pointed out a man and asked if he was the senator. It was not so Lee's father asked where he was. Lee truthfully did not see him. When they went for dessert Lee did see the senator and pointed him out to her father. She was horrified when she saw her father approach the senator and wished she could just disappear. Back at the table Lee criticized him for bothering the senator. Lee's father, clearly tired of her attitude, told Lee she needed to relax. Lee began to loosen as her mother mentioned a person in their hometown who collected autographs. She felt as if they had made their way past their anger.

At the soccer game that same day, Lee told Maria her parents were taking her to dinner at a Chinese restaurant. She had purposefully not suggested the Red Barn Inn. She asked if Maria and Rufina wanted to go with them. After they were finished with dinner Lee decided even though dinner had not been a disaster, it had been a bad idea to invite Maria and Rufina. At campus Maria got out of the car but Rufina questioned where Lee's parents were staying. She indicated she told Nick she would meet him at the Sheraton. Without asking Lee volunteered that her parents could take Rufina to the hotel. Her father, however, was unhappy about the idea of taking a high school student to a hotel where he was sure Rufina would be staying in the room with her boyfriend. He tried to intervene but Lee told him the situation was none of his business.

Lee and her parents did not speak until they had dropped Rufina off at the hotel and returned to campus. Lee's father told Lee he would not be coming to the Sunday activities and that he would see her at Christmas. "You're a disappointment. You're selfish and you're shallow and you have no respect for your mother and I, and I'm ashamed of you" (201-202) Lee's father told her. He ended his lecture by telling Lee he had not driven as far as he had to have Lee treat him as she was. Lee answered inappropriately, telling him that she did not ask him to come. Lee explains how her father got out of the car and demanded Lee get out of the car as well. She complained about how her father had embarrassed her by his behavior. As they are arguing Lee's father slapped her. Lee called her father an "asshole" (203) while he, in turn, called her an "ungrateful little bitch" (203) before he got in the car and drove away. Lee's mother called her early the next morning telling her they were leaving. She asked Lee to call her father in a few days and apologize.

Later, Lee narrates, still in the past tense, that her family called that weekend "the weekend from hell" (204). They never decided if Lee or her father had acted worse but the slap, which was the last time her father ever hit her, marked the beginning of a period of time in which Lee would not cry in front of her parents. Even though Lee knew she could never redeem herself for her behavior she thought she should at least try.



The section closes with Lee seeing a name tag from the Ault weekend on her brother's bulletin board. Her brother's name had been written on it in her father's handwriting. She wondered when her father had gotten the extra tag and imagined him being careful not to bend it on the way home.

## Analysis

One aspect of author Sittenfeld's writing that has not been discussed yet is the way she offers input for all of the reader's senses in her text. She has Lee describe not only what she sees and hears but also what she smells and how things feel. Mr. Kim, for instance "smelled of cologne and cigarettes" (168) when Lee went with the Kim family to eat during a past parents' weekend. When Lee's mother uses the bathroom in the stall next to Lee she "released a long, sighing fart and began to pee" (179). Lee describes the pleated skirt she is wearing to meet her parents as well as the fact she can "feel the coldness of the steps" (176) on which she is sitting through the skirt. When she gets in the car with her parents she describes the smell of the car: "it smelled like car trip, stuffy and sour" (178).

Lee sets up the weekend with her parents by first discussing the way typical Ault parents act during parents' weekend. The mothers and fathers dress well and stay in an expensive hotel. They eat at a fancy, expensive restaurant. When Lee is asked if her parents are coming for the weekend she feels a "welling anxiety" (169) first that someone will ask why her parents are driving 18 hours to get to Ault instead of flying. Lee also fears that her parents "might be bewildered" (175) by her Ault personality. She thinks to herself about how she might have changed since she lived with her parents and considers that "no matter what my parents might think, this — my Ault self — was now my real self" (175). These mentions of how much Lee believes she has changed, her anxiety that her parents are coming to visit and her fear that they will be bothered by the changes they will see in her prepare the reader for the coming clash between Lee and her parents.

Although Lee believes Nick is betraying his parents when he speaks badly of them in the dining hall, Lee thinks nothing of insulting her parents through her behavior when she is with them. She calls her parents's behavior "both truthful and indecorous" (183) and recognizes that this same behavior is part of perhaps the "realest" (183) version of her self but she also notes that she takes pains to conceal these behaviors. Lee's parents, her father particularly, offend her almost immediately by showing interest in the wall of marble panels listing the names of the senior prefects. Lee is next frustrated by her mother's interest in a picture of Lee at Martha's house and her father's interest in a women's magazine in her dorm room. "I felt my irritation with him (her father) blossom into genuine anger" (187). Ultimately Lee's parents embarrass her by being so unlike the other Ault students and parents. She is afraid they will blow the cover she has worked so hard to create for herself.

Even though Lee believes there is no racism at Ault, she continues to make statements based on race. For instance when Lee learns that caucasian Nick is dating Rufina, who



is of Latina descent, she is surprised. “Beauty trumped race, apparently. Or was it possible that my belief about race and dating at Ault had simply been wrong” (201) Lee asks herself. She believes that people of different races do not date at Ault. Along with her new realization that people of different races are attracted each other, even at Ault, Lee also believes that people of different races are somehow excused from traditional Ault behavior. Lee believes it is okay for these of races other than caucasian are not expected to try to live up to Ault expectations. “Their ethnicity made their status as outsiders definitive” (170) Lee believes of these Latina girls. This is not the first time that Lee makes the assumption that people of different races are excused from the traditional behavior at Ault. Lee also makes this same assumption about Little Washington, the black girl who lives in her dorm her freshman year. Another aspect of the Latina girls’ behavior that dumbfounds Lee is that they do not seem to be appreciative of the scholarships they are getting to attend Ault. They also do not appear to be “worshipful of its (Ault’s) conventions” (170) the way that Lee is.

Lee is obsessed with the idea that other students on campus have more money than her parents do. Many of the things for which Lee criticizes her parents for or feels uncomfortable around them for are things that deal with money. Lee is angered when her father indicates it must be nice to have a pool when he sees the picture of Lee and Martha on their dorm room door. Lee is also angered when her father makes a big deal out of meeting the senator. She compares the take out food she knows her parents had eaten on their way to Ault with the cut up fruits and vegetables Martha’s parents brought to eat on their drives from Vermont. Lee is even embarrassed about the car that her parents drive. She has them park in a parking lot that gets little traffic so few people will see it. Notice how Lee describes her self-consciousness about the car. She says it was “something I’d anticipated, something I had to live with but could not acknowledge — a bride descending the aisle with an itchy nose” (178). Lee’s comparison of herself on parents weekend to a bride on her wedding day is perhaps hyperbole but the reader understands what Lee is trying to say.

At the same time that Lee’s parents make their visit to Ault Lee notes she feels comfortable at Ault for the first time. “I still was part of Ault’s universe of privilege; I spoke its language now, I knew its secret handshake. My sense of belonging had perhaps never been as acute as on this evening, and I don’t know if I recognized it then — later, it was obvious — but surely the timing was no coincidence. It was because my parents were coming and because I knew they would not belong. I think it often comes down to nothing but contrast” (175). Lee believes she is finally fitting into Ault for the first time. She believes she feels comfortable there. When she gets older Lee realizes that she perhaps felt so comfortable at that time because she knew there was a situation coming — her parents’ visit — when she would not feel comfortable.

An important symbol in this section of the novel is the nametag that Lee finds on her brother’s bulletin board some time after parents’ weekend. This nametag is a symbol of how proud Lee’s father really is of her. Her brothers did not attend the parents weekend so Lee knows that her father had to have made a special effort to pick up the extra tag. The tag is not bent or dirty so she realizes he took care to get it home without damaging it. Even though he was angry with Lee he did not throw it away but instead took it to his



son and proudly printed his son's name on it, his relationship to Lee and the year Lee would graduate.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the tone of this section of the novel? How did the writer set the mood for parents' weekend?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think Lee overreacts to her parents' presence at her school? Did she see potential for embarrassment in each of their comments and actions because it is really there or is she looking for and expecting them to behave badly?

## Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Lee and her father's behavior. Which one do you think behaved the worst during parents' weekend?

## Vocabulary

abide, antipathy, plaintive, anomaly, disingenuous, validate, placid, gluttony, benign, disheveled, cerulean, batik, genial, contrite, accosted, foibles, apoplectic, decorous, acquiescing, repugnance, atrociously



# Chapter 6: Townie

## Summary

Chapter 6: Townie opens with Sin-Jun being taken to the ER. Mrs. Morino stopped Lee and Martha as they were going into the auditorium to attend a Wednesday lecture. Lee didn't understand at first that Mrs. Morino was trying to tell her that Lee had taken pills on purpose and that she wanted Lee to go to the hospital to see Sin-Jun. On the ride to the hospital Mrs. Morino asked Lee about Sin-Jun's life, if she'd ever been sad or threatened to hurt herself. Since Lee no longer roomed with Sin-Jun she wondered by Mrs. Morino was asking her instead of Clara.

As soon as they stepped off the elevator on the floor of Sin-Jun's hospital room Lee could hear wailing. In her room Sin-Jun appeared to be ignoring Clara who was sitting next to her making the wailing noise. As soon as Lee and Sin-Jun exchanged greetings Mrs. Morino announced she was going back to campus and would come back to get Lee and Clara to the dorm in time for curfew.

Clara announced she was going to stay the night at the hospital even though Sin-Jun said she didn't want her there. After Clara left the room to call Mrs. Morino Lee was able to talk to Sin-Jun. Sin-Jun began crying and acted as if she were about to say something to Lee. Afraid what she might hear, Lee stopped her by suggesting Sin-Jun might want something to drink. When Lee returned, Clara was back in the room. Lee went downstairs to wait for the Morinos.

In the waiting room a man named David Bardo spoke to Lee and showed her his badge proving he was an employee at Ault. He said he worked with the kitchen staff. David asked Lee why she was at the hospital and if she needed a ride. When the Morinos still hadn't shown up at ten-twenty Lee found David and asked if she could ride with him. On the way to campus they David asked Lee how she liked Ault. Lee learned that David was attending community college. When David teased Lee telling her she'd probably go to Harvard she told him she wanted to go to "dog school" (224). Because it was cold in the car David put his gloves on Lee before they arrived at campus. She realized after he dropped her off on campus that she was still wearing the glove.

The next evening Mrs. Morino asked Lee to help Mr. Kim bring his daughter from the hospital to the infirmary. Lee again suggested Clara would better know what Sin-Jun needed but Mrs. Morino said the two weren't getting along. When she went to get Sin-Jun's things Lee saw Clara outside the room she shared with Sin-Jun. Clara was unaware that Sin-Jun was going to the infirmary and seemed upset that Lee had been sent to get things for her. As Lee was putting things in Sin-Jun's duffel bag Clara told her that Sin-Jun had changed since she and Lee roomed together.

Lee rode to the hospital with Mr. Kim. He asked if she would tell her mother and father if she was unhappy at Ault. Lee told him that she would probably tell her roommate. In





Sin-Jun's hospital room she spoke to her father angrily in Korean. Even though Lee felt Mr. Kim had wanted them to wait inside the hospital while he got the car Sin-Jun went outside. She told Lee only that she needed air. Because Sin-Jun had set in motion so many meetings and changes at school because of her suicide attempt, Lee was a little bit intimidated by Sin-Jun. Lee tried to talk to Sin-Jun about depression and things that got her down. She also passed along a message that Clara had given her for Sin-Jun. Sin-Jun denied anything was going with Clara when Lee asked, but when Lee suggested Clara might be a difficult person to live with Sin-Jun squeezed her hand.

The night after Sin-Jun came back to the Ault campus Lee went to the kitchen to return David's glove to him. They talked for a short while before David asked her if she would go to eat with him. They decided on Sunday night. Back in her dorm Lee was disturbed because Martha acted so excited about the date. Lee imagined herself embarrassing herself but Martha encouraged Lee to go with David despite her fears.

While she was eating lunch on Saturday in the dining hall, Lee felt a hand on her back. It was David, sweating and dressed in his apron, telling her they had to postpone their Sunday date. He tried to work out another time with her but Lee's voice was cold and emotionless. When David looked around the table he answered her sarcastically that he "got it" (241) and left. Aspeth questioned Lee about her boyfriend. Later Dede warned Lee that she would separate herself from her peers at Ault if she was going out with a person not from Ault.

When Lee took Sin-Jun's passport to her room in the infirmary as Sin-Jun had asked her to she was shocked when she saw Clara on top of Sin-Jun in the room. They were fully clothed but appeared to Lee to be having frenzied sex. Sin-Jun turned her head and noticed Lee in the room. Her look was one of fright and anger as she told Lee to get out. Lee threw Sin-Jun's passport on the floor and ran.

Sin-Jun did return to Ault for her senior year. The summer before she sent Lee a letter telling her she had ended the relationship with Clara and that they would not room together again. After they were older and Sin-Jun had come out as a lesbian she told Lee the whole story of the relationship between she and Clara. Sin-Jun had pursued Clara even though she believed Clara was straight. As the relationship continued Sin-Jun felt guilty for what she was doing to Clara and tried to break the relationship off but Clara would become inconsolable.

Meanwhile, Lee tried to avoid David for the rest of the school year. When she finally did feel remorse she looked for him in the kitchen but he was never looking in her direction. The next year he was no longer working at Ault. She believed she should have told David she was attending Ault on a scholarship as if that would have made some difference in the way he saw her. Looking back on her actions Lee's adult self realized that the way she had treated David was wrong just like the way she had treated Conchita was wrong. She believed also that these mistakes she made set her up to treat others better.



## Analysis

Lee continues to obsess on the idea she is treated differently at Ault because she is attending the school on scholarship. In this particular section she notes that while she is warned not to have a relationship with a boy not from Ault, she knows Aspeth could have gotten away with the relationship. "Aspeth Montgomery could have gone out with him and gotten away with it, it could have been ironic" (245). Lee thinks to herself that she should have told David that she is attending Ault on a scholarship. She seems to think that this information would have made a difference in how he interpreted her behavior when he approached her in the lunchroom around her friends. In reality, Lee's behavior makes her seem very immature and concerned too much about what others around her think of her. Even though she admits she is shamed by her behavior, she even blames David for her actions at one point: "Partly I felt angry at him for having approached me so publicly, for having made me act bitchy" (242). Lee additionally behaves a way in which she indicates earlier in the chapter is not typical of Ault students. "People unfamiliar with boarding schools probably imagined the opposite, that the students were haughty toward the janitors or the secretaries, but this was not the case at all" (217).

Even though this chapter describes Sin-Jun's suicide attempt her attempt is not glorified. Lee admits that she is a little bit intimidated by all of the commotion that Sin-Jun's suicide attempt causes but knows that commotion will die. "They didn't achieve anything, the drama they set in motion couldn't possibly be sustained. In the end, there was always your regular life, and no one could deal with it but you" (216) Lee says of people who attempt to kill themselves.

Lee continues to describe herself based on how she sees herself sexually. She fantasizes about David kissing her. In her mind she thinks that "my fingers would look small and thin, like the fingers of a girl who'd have a boyfriend" (222). It is almost as if Lee believes there is some sort of body type of physique that a girl must have to attract a boy. If she becomes someone's "girlfriend" she will automatically have these features. Another example from this chapter that illustrates Lee's belief that she will never be attractive to guys states: "I didn't imagine then that I could have had a real relationship with any guy. I thought that by virtue of being me I was disqualified" (245). Lee sabotages her own chances to have a relationship because she believes she is not worthy.

On the theme of sexuality, Lee is surprised when she sees Clara and Sin-Jun together. She would never have guessed that Sin-Jun is gay. In fact it is ironic that during the year that she and Sin-Jun did room together Lee had suspected Lee was gay when in reality one of her roommates was gay. Notice Lee's reaction to seeing Sin-Jun and Clara together. She is not as shocked by what they are doing as much as she is by her reaction to it. "Even with Clara involved, it turned out, sex was sexy" (243) Lee thinks to herself as she watches the girls.



The author continues to use simile and metaphor to illustrate her writing. When the girls in Sin-Jun's dorm see her after she takes the pills Sin-Jun's stance is described in a simile. One of Sin Jun's arms is pressed to her stomach "as if she'd folded up her shirt to carry a bunch of pebbles, or maybe corn kernels, and she was trying to prevent them from spilling" (207). Lee uses a metaphor to describe her feeling of shame because of the way that she treats David. Her shame, she says "was a rock in my gut and would remain with me" (242). The intangible feeling of shame is compared to a tangible substance, a rock, that is both hard and heavy. In a final example notice that Lee also uses a metaphor to describe the moment when David asks her out on a date. "This moment was a monstrous pulsating flower, a purple and green geometrical blossom like you might see in a kaleidoscope" (236-237).

One aspect of Sittenfeld's writing that has not yet been discussed is the way she portrays Lee's habit of overthinking through her sentences and punctuation. An example of this occurs on Pages 237 and 238 as Lee tries to think through why David asked her out and to forecast what might happen during their date. The sentences are sometimes short and choppy as Lee points out things she believes are facts about herself. In other places sentences are long and winding as Lee considers her possibilities. Many times the author uses semi-colons in Lee's thoughts to indicate when Lee makes a statement in her thought process and then rebuffs or expounds on that statement. For instance "This possibility was not flattering to me; it was terrifying" (237) and "I didn't take care of myself like a pretty girl did; I wasn't even one of the unpretty girls who passes as pretty through effort and association" (238). The author also uses a series of rhetorical questions to demonstrate the number of possibilities Lee can come up with for any possible scenario. An example of this is: "had I piqued his interest during that conversation? But why would he have noticed me before, or why would I have piqued his interest then? Was I the best that he could do?" (238).

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Lee's habit of overthinking. How is it portrayed in the novel?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think Lee means when she tells David she plans to go to obedience school after she graduates from Ault and then tells him that she is the dog?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think that David would have thought differently of Lee if he had known she is attending Ault on scholarship? Why or why not?



## Vocabulary

supplicant, hiatus, reciprocate, plausible, rebuke, lanyard, precarious, mitigate, complicit, disingenuous, incarnation, disparaging, feigned, phenomenon, emoting, ephemeral, piqued, lasciviously, rivulets, circumspect, rancid, colluding, candidly, malleable, mercenary, reductive



# Chapter 7: Spring-cleaning

## Summary

In the spring semester of Lee and Martha's junior year Martha was nominated to be senior prefect. On the same day, Lee was warned if she did not pass precalculus she might be kicked out of Ault. Martha did not even tell Lee she had been nominated, Lee heard the news from Nick during lunch. The nomination was a big deal for Martha because Lee did not believe Martha was the type of person who was awarded the position of prefect. Nick told Lee that Martha, Aspeth and Gillian were the three girls nominated for the prefect position. Cross was among the boys nominated for the male prefect position.

Lee made a crown for Martha out of computer paper to celebrate her nomination. Martha noticed it when she was dressing for formal dinner. Although Martha was touched by the crown, she told Lee she did not think she would win. Even though Lee agreed she did not share her agreement with Martha. Lee kidded Martha when she learned it was Cross who had nominated Martha for prefect. She tried to turn the discussion to her crush on Cross but Martha warned Lee she had little chance with Cross if she never talked to him.

Martha asked about Lee's meeting with Dean Fletcher. Lee had a fifty-eight average in math and Fletcher had told her they might need to rethink if Ault was the right choice for her if her grade didn't improve. Martha indicated there was no reason for Lee to worry that she might be spring cleaned, or kicked out of Ault. In her narration Lee explained that despite its name the spring cleaning process took place in the summer and was often not because a student had violated a major rule but often because they had make several small mistakes.

During her study session with Aubrey, a freshman who was tutoring Lee in precalculus, Lee focused more on how she might know if she loved someone that the problems Aubrey was trying to guide her through. Lee shared with Aubrey it really did not matter if she concentrated because she was probably going to be kicked out of school. Aubrey tried to convince Lee that she could pass the test if she really worked hard. Lee thought his belief that she would have to work hard was worse than if he had told her she could not pass. She did not want to have to work that hard. He wrote down some problems for Lee to start with but as soon as Lee saw them she knew she could not even complete those easy problems.

While Lee was filling out a roommate form for herself and Martha Aspeth came to talk about prefect election. Aspeth told Lee she believed Martha would get the votes that should go to her, causing them both to loose the election to Gillian. Aspeth suggested to Lee that Martha should drop out of the election. Lee "impressed by the purity of Aspeth's condescension" (266) and the way in which she believed she should be



named prefect just because she was Aspeth. Even after Aspeth left Lee could still smell the scent of her shampoo.

Lee tried to avoid her precalculus teacher when she saw the woman walking in front of her and Martha but Ms. Prosek motioned for Lee to come talk to her. The teacher wanted to know how Lee's meeting with Dean Fletcher had gone. Lee was uncomfortable because Ms. Prosek was also her advisor and they'd had a close relationship in the past. She had even been the coach of Lee's basketball team and had often taken the girls to eat at fast food restaurants even if they lost their games.

In response to her teacher's questions Lee asked why the dean had waited until so late in the semester to tell her she was in danger of being expelled. When her teacher questioned her, Lee replied she would have done nothing differently even if she had known she was in danger of being kicked out earlier in the semester. Lee was especially hurt by Ms. Prosek's behavior because at the beginning of the semester she had often gone to Ms. Prosek's house to study. She had thought Ms. Prosek was of the opinion that Lee was interesting. One day during a tutoring session Lee had come to the realization that Ms. Prosek thought Lee was just taking up her time. It was the same day that Ms. Prosek told Lee she'd had to send a letter to her parents about Lee's failing grade.

As Lee and Ms. Prosek talked about Lee's bad grade Ms. Prosek told Lee she did not think "they" (272) would spring clean Lee. The comment indicated that Lee could not depend on Ms. Prosek alone to keep her from getting expelled even though she thought that her teacher could fudge her grade to make it appear she had not failed.

The night before Lee's precalculus exam was the night the students voted for senior prefect. On their way back to the dorm Martha gave Lee a piggyback ride. The next morning before roll call Aubrey handed Lee a card wishing her good luck on her exam. During roll call it was announced that Cross and Martha had been elected as prefects. Lee was not only surprised Martha had been named senior prefect she was also dismayed because it meant Martha was not as big an underdog as Lee had thought she was. Instead of going to congratulate Martha, Lee left the room. She considered how she was a little bit jealous of Martha because she had been voted prefect. She wondered if things might have turned out the same for her if Cross had nominated her instead of Martha. She believed it might be easier to learn she had been kicked out of Ault than to watch Martha being named prefect.

After roll call, Lee picked up her test from Ms. Prosek's room. She had three hours to finish it and return it. She'd worked on the test only about 15 minutes before giving up in tears. When Martha returned to the room Lee was lying on the futon eating chips. Martha looked at Lee's exam and then told her she was not turning it in with just the first problem finished, the way that Lee had left it. Martha made Lee come sit beside her and tried to talk her through the problems. Lee convinced Martha that she had no idea how to answer the questions on the test. Although Lee thought Martha could not be cheating for her, Martha began working out answers to the problems.



Later that day when Martha finally saw Lee again she thanked her for cheating on the test. She also congratulated her roommate on being elected prefect but Martha brushed off the compliment. Martha seemed tired and began crying when Lee told her friend she believed she'd make a good prefect. It was at that point that Lee knew Martha would remember that day as the day she cheated, not as the day she had been elected prefect.

Lee ends her discussion with comments that Lee felt Ms. Prosek should have stood up for her more forcefully when her grade was so bad. She requested a different advisor the following year. Aubrey continued to tutor Lee and she maintained a C in calculus the following year. Later when Aubrey was a senior Lee noticed that he had turned into a handsome man. She believed this was ironic because on her graduation day Aubrey, who was still small and prissy that year, had given her a card telling her that he loved her.

Martha and Lee got the best room in their dorm their senior year. In that room they managed to break two full length mirrors. Lee thought of the broken mirrors as representing 14 years of bad luck. She wondered if the bond between she and Martha would be strong enough to bind them together through those 14 years and the rest of their lives.

## Analysis

This section describes two major events that take place in the spring of Lee's junior year at Ault. The author introduces both topics of this section in a dual sentence. This method of presenting the main ideas of this section jointly, instead of in different sections of paragraphs which has happened in the past, indicates how closely joined the two topics will be. Martha is working her way up the social ladder by being elected senior prefect at Ault while Lee barely misses getting kicked out because of a failing grade in math.

The friendship between Lee and Martha is central to this section. Martha values Lee so much that she cheats to help Lee pass her math exam. This action on her part puts her in jeopardy not only of losing her position as prefect but also of being kicked out of school. Martha never discusses with Lee why she decides to put her own future in jeopardy to help Lee. It is completely Martha's decision. Lee does nothing to coerce her roommate to help her perhaps, of course, be pitiful. Lee, in fact, discourages Martha from helping her and is shocked when Lee sees Martha is going to do so despite what Lee asks.

When Lee is threatened with being kicked out of school because of her failing grade in precalculus she acts like Aspath; as if she is entitled to be saved from failing even though she has done nothing to help herself. "I know I'm not great at sports, or I'm not, like, an asset to Ault. But I don't break rules. It just seems like maybe I should get the benefit of the doubt. I don't see why this exam has to be the difference between if I stay or not" (271) Lee tells Ms. Proseck, her teacher, when they talk about Lee's meeting with the dean. Lee's comment shows her belief that if she were a more popular student





at Ault, an athlete or perhaps rich, her failing grade would not be taken so seriously. At the same time Lee thinks she should be given special treatment just because she does not break the rules, she is also secretly angry because Ms. Proseck did not change her grade to make it look as if she was passing.

Even as Lee wonders why no one will step forward and save her from being kicked out of Ault, she realizes that she is to blame for having a failing grade to start with. "It was not an exaggeration to say that I understood virtually none of what we'd studied since late September. I had spaced out during the first week or two of classes and never recovered" (260). She admits that she hasn't paid attention in math as she should have and with the final exam near believes she can not pass. When her tutor, Aubrey, tells Lee that she could pass the class if she were to work really hard Lee indicates she does not want to work that hard. Ironically Lee believes she is more depressed when Aubrey tells her she needs to work hard than she would have been if he had told her she had no hope to pass. She describes what she sees when she looks at her math textbook in a simile. "The pages of my textbook were like a map of Russia with all the towns and cities written in Cyrillic" (260).

Lee's own pending demise is contrasted sharply with Martha's rise to fame. Lee likes Martha because she believes Martha is as big a loser as she is. When Martha is elected to the position of senior prefect she no longer fits Lee's definition of a loser. Lee lets the reader know that those who serve as prefect are basically set up for life. When Lee hears the news that Martha is prefect, she leaves the room without acknowledging her friend. Lee explains her realization about herself at that moment: "And now I knew myself to be generous with encouragement only when I either did not want the thing the other person sought or did not believe the person would really get it" (278). Lee wonders if she had been in Martha's place if perhaps she would have been nominated for prefect and if she would have won the election. Lee reasons that if she had some public recognition she would be a different person: "With evidence that people believed in me, I'd be different, confident; I'd finally be able to relax" (278). It is unlikely, however, that getting a position of respect will make Lee act in a way that proves they deserve that respect.

One of the main issues with Martha's election as prefect seems to be that it is Cross who nominates Martha. "I'm not the one who's in love with Cross. But did you know he was the person who nominated me? Weird, huh?" (253) Martha asks Lee when they talk about her nomination. Lee wonders if Cross might like Martha. It upsets Lee to think that Cross might have a crush on her best friend. It is especially upsetting when Lee considers she is the one who has pursued him in her mind for so long. Despite her hurt, however, she likes to talk about Cross, even in connection with Martha's nomination, because it makes her feel like he is really part of her life.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Martha put her own future on the line to help Lee?





## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the idea that Lee seems to feel she is entitled to be given help to pass her math class? Why do you think she feels this way?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Cross is the one who nominates Martha for prefect? What does it mean that Cross is elected to be the male prefect?

## Vocabulary

aversion, rendezvous, segued, vehement, buoyancy, contradict, angular, feral, volition, enigmatic, slanderous, antagonism, semantics, comported, vestiges, tenuous, rescind, exoneration, montage, capitulated, obsequious, truculent, futile, fraudulent, askew, belligerent, refute, animosity, punitive, luxuriate, exuberant, squalid, arbitrary, vacillated, titillating, feigning, unrequited



## Chapter 8: Kissing and Kissing 285-323

### Summary

In the first section of Chapter 8: Kissing and Kissing 285-323, Lee notes that Cross came into her dorm room at the beginning of her senior year about 3 a.m. on a night when Martha was away touring a college. She was still disoriented and didn't recognize him until he asked if he could lie down with her. They laid in bed and flirted with one another. Lee was surprised when Cross remembered the last time they had talked to each other was when they'd gone to the movies during the surprise holiday. Cross got her to talk about a student who had left school because he had broken into Mr. Byden's house and had been caught trying on women's clothing. They lay and Cross stroked her hair like he did that day in the taxi. He surprised her when he asked if he could kiss her. When he straddled her, Lee noticed that Cross had an erection. When he'd pushed up her nightgown telling her that he wanted to make her feel good, it seemed she'd stunned him when she asked "why?" (290).

When Lee woke the next morning it took her a minute to remember that Cross had been in her room the night before. Even though he usually went to breakfast on Sunday with Martha and generally would have even if Martha was not there Lee could not make herself go into the cafeteria alone because she feared Cross might be there. Lee even skipped chapel that day, the first time she'd ever done that. When Martha wasn't back in time to go with her to dinner Lee went to the common room to fix something when Aspeth walked through asking if Cross had come to her room that night. Aspeth mentioned that Cross had wanted to see Martha but Aspeth told him it was too late to visit. Lee felt then what had happened between her and Cross was the result of a mix up.

Lee met with Mrs. Stanchak, her college counselor, to give her a list of the colleges for which she definitively wanted to apply. Even though she liked Mrs. Stanchak she remembered the students saying that she was the counselor who was assigned to you if "Ault wasn't planning to get behind your college application" (297). Mrs. Stanchak told Lee she could go ahead and apply to Brown but she should also line up some safety net colleges. When Lee asked about Brown a second time Mrs. Stanchak reminded her of the academic records of the students she was up against and told her she wasn't going to set her up for disappointment. Lee burst into tears because she believed Mrs. Stanchak was attempting to separate her from Cross by sending them to different colleges. She thought about telling Mrs. Stanchak why she was really crying but stopped herself believing her secret wouldn't be safe if she were to tell. Mrs. Stanchak suggested she look over the list of colleges and rework it. She was disturbed when Mrs. Stanchak talked openly about money and financial aid.

Since she did not go to chapel, Lee received the punishment of having to do table wipes before that evening's dinner. She heard Cross' voice before she went into the dining room. He was one of the dining room prefects as well. When she asked him what she



needed to do, she believed he was not entirely friendly. A few minutes later he asked if she had wanted an excuse to talk to him. He allowed her to go without requiring that she do any work.

Martha and Lee talked about Cross' actions earlier. Martha believed he'd been being nice to Lee by letting her go. When Lee asked Martha if she could picture him being Lee's girlfriend she says she can't. Martha advised Lee to not be passive in the relationship, to tell Cross what she wanted.

Cross came next on a Saturday morning. Before he even got into bed with her he was kissing her. She and Cross froze when they heard Martha moving in her bed above them. She climbed down and left the room. Before he left that time Lee asked Cross not to tell people what was going on between them. He was quiet for a moment before he agreed with her and was again quiet before agreeing when she told him she wouldn't kiss him in public.

The next morning Martha suggested it wasn't a good idea for Cross to come to their room at night since she didn't want to get into trouble if he was caught. Martha suggested they use the day student room instead. After they kidded each other for not fighting with one another Lee felt she should tell Martha how good a friend she was. She stopped herself and told her only that she was glad they weren't mad at each other.

While Cross was coming to see her Lee slept less and ate less but also studied harder. The third time Cross came Lee told him they couldn't stay there and took him to the day student room. When the long weekend came Lee stayed at Ault instead of going home with Martha because Ault was where Cross had been even if he wasn't staying at the school during the weekend. After Martha left Lee laid on her futon and thought about the night she and Cross had almost had sex. She felt pain as he was stabbing at her with his penis and without knowing so began resisting him. He'd stopped what he was doing and questioned what she wanted. Lee told him she wanted to make him feel good and wanted to make him come. Instead of having vaginal sex with him she gave him oral sex.

Sitting in the dining room that first night of the long weekend Lee thought that she had finally transformed into the kind of person a sophomore or junior might be fascinated by. She got the feeling, however, that no one knew that she and Cross were fooling around.

It was a few days after the weekend was over that Lee and Cross had sex. She was surprised by the pain and also the fact that Cross had waited for the water in the bathroom to warm before he'd brought warm wet towels to wipe the blood off her thighs.

Lee began going to basketball games to watch Cross play. She understood for the first time why people enjoyed watching sports. She came to the conclusion that the truth was in sports. Unlike the rest of the time at Ault, students were allowed to show real emotions when they played sports.



## Analysis

This section is by far the longest section of the entire book — it counts for nearly 30 percent of the text — so it is appropriate to assume the things that Lee observes in this section will be the most significant. While Lee does continue to observe closely what is going on around her, she is more of an active player in this section because she finally has the relationship with Cross that she's desired her entire time at Ault. Notice that even though she's close enough to Cross that she allows him to have sex with her that she still gets her information about him from eavesdropping on other people's conversations. For instance, she learns that Cross will not be staying at Ault during the long weekend by listening to conversations in the dining hall and learning that Cross would be going to Newport.

Although Lee believes her relationship with Cross is a fairytale come true, if the reader looks at the signs, he can see that Lee is only a fling for Cross. "The alcohol on his breath could have conjured up bus stations and old men with dirty clothes and bloodshot eyes, but because I was seventeen and a virgin and because I lived nine months a year on a campus of brick buildings and wooded hills and lovingly mown athletic fields, it conjured for me summer dances at country clubs, lives with wonderful secrets" (286). Lee's future self realizes that Cross' drunkenness the first time he came to see her was not necessarily a sign of a prosperous life as she thought it was at first. Cross also only approaches her under the cover of night. He never tries to be her friend during the daytime or seeks her out during the day. Because of her own lack of self confidence Lee gives Cross an easy out by telling him that he doesn't have to acknowledge her in public. Notice that Cross does not argue with her when she tells him not to make a fuss over her. It is at this point that Lee sets the relationship up for failure because at the same time she tells Cross she doesn't want to go public she hopes that people will realize they are dating.

A pattern has evolved in the book where Lee announces to her reader that she is feeling at ease. Then, a situation arises that causes her to be thrown off balance and she overreacts to the situation. This same pattern is seen in Chapter 5 when Lee tells the reader she is finally beginning to feel as if she fits into the culture at Ault just before her parents come for the weekend. Again, as a senior, Lee says: " For the first few weeks of this year, my senior year, I'd felt the calmest I ever had at Ault. There hadn't been pressure, I hadn't been answering to anyone, trying for anyone" (294). It is as if she is forecasting the calm before the proverbial storm. In this chapter it is Cross' sudden unexplained visits to her dorm room that throw Lee off kilter while in Chapter 5 it is her parents' presence on campus that destroys Lee's balance.

Lee's experiences with sex her senior year fulfill her desire for her education at Ault. Remember that even though Lee told her parents she was going to Ault because of the educational opportunities, she really wanted the opportunity to meet a boy. She is distracted from her studies, to the point that she almost fails precalculus, because she is so boy crazy. "I thought of kissing instead of thinking of Spanish verbs, instead of reading the newspaper or writing letters to my parents" (289). Despite all the thought



that Lee has put into her dream relationship she really has little experience. Cross gives her this experience. She loses her virginity to him and thinks because he waits in the bathroom for warm water to wash her up afterward that he really cares about her. She believes her relationship with Cross allows her to be a better student and be more devoted to school because “homework wasn’t my entire life, in fact it didn’t really matter and was just something I had to do to act normal” (308).

The author foreshadows the demise of Lee’s relationship through Lee’s relationship with Martha. Lee uses Martha as an emotional prop during the time they live together as roommates. The morning after Cross spent the night with Lee the first time, Lee couldn’t even force herself to go to eat breakfast by herself. “Everything wasn’t ordinary. My unease was rising around me like smoke. By the time I reached the dining hall, I was choking on it; I couldn’t go inside” (293). This quote not only uses the image of smoke in a metaphor to represent Lee’s unease but also uses the idea of the tangible nature of smoke to demonstrate how Lee is choking on her own uneasiness. She fears a personal encounter with Cross will destroy or taint the memories of the night before so she chooses to avoid any situations in which she might meet Cross until she has Martha there as an emotional ally.

Martha disappoints Lee as an emotional ally because she does not support Lee’s relationship the way that Lee wishes she would. Martha encourages Lee to be active in her relationship with Cross. She also tells Lee the truth, that she doesn’t think that Cross is good for Lee. She believes Lee could do better. “If I had ever made Dede into my best friend and if I’d then had this conversation with her (and if, of course, Dede herself hadn’t harbored a crush on Cross for years), then in this moment Dede would scheme and bolster. She wouldn’t deflate me like Martha was doing” (304). Lee believes Martha is betraying her by not helping her the way that Lee wants her to help her with her relationship with Cross. Lee wants only encouragement, not honesty. Notice also the way this quote is worded “If I had ever made Dede into my best friend” (304) makes it sound as if Lee believes she has the ability to manipulate people into being what she wants. As if Dede would have been her friend if Lee had just wanted it enough.

Lee believes that now she has somehow attracted Cross to her room to experiment with her sexually that her luck will suddenly change and she will begin getting what she wants. At the same time Lee handicaps herself by her own doubts. For instance, Lee wants to apply to Brown but is hurt when her counselor seems to believe that she doesn’t have a chance to get into that prestigious college. Yet Lee says of herself “I’d gotten as far as Ault, but I wasn’t sure I’d get any further. I wasn’t smart or disciplined the way those kids were, I wasn’t driven” (322).

Lee also foreshadows one aspect in particular that will destroy her relationship with Cross. At the same time she tells Cross she doesn’t expect him to acknowledge her publicly she tells him that she doesn’t expect flowers, a request at the time she saw as unreasonable anyway. She didn’t think there would ever be a time that she would expect Cross to send her flowers. Looking back on this statement Lee’s adult self states: “It would have been better if I had said, It’s not like I expect you to buy me a diamond necklace” (306).



## Discussion Question 1

What do you think about Lee's decision to tell Cross that he doesn't have to publicly acknowledge her? Why do you think she tells him this when she so badly wants people to know she is seeing him?

## Discussion Question 2

Lee believes all along if she has a boyfriend she will do better in school. Her belief comes true in this section of the novel. Why do you think Lee pays more attention to her schoolwork when she is distracted by Cross?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think it upsets Lee so much that Martha does not support her relationship with Cross?

## Vocabulary

conjured, imposed, mandatory, benign, opaque, sardonic, prestigious, surreal, reprimanding, pragmatism, imminent, compromise, precarious, censure, exhilarating, disingenuous, explicit, arbitrary, avert, inglorious, violation, entitlement, inexplicably



## Chapter 9: Kissing and Kissing 323-364

### Summary

In this section of Chapter 8, Lee was at the airport terminal on her way home for Christmas break when Horton Kinnelly asked her for the first time by other Ault students to join them in the restaurant where they usually waited for their planes. She sat with the group for fifteen minutes before she decided it was polite to leave. After she left she came to the decision that Horton didn't have a specific reason for calling her to join them, it had just happened.

On the way home from the airport Lee wondered if her mother could sense a change in her. She planned to treat her family differently that vacation because she believed she had more patience and felt more generous. Before she'd even gotten home, however, Lee was upset because she sensed in the way that her mother was talking to her that she knew Lee had had sex and that it had been with someone who didn't love her. At bedtime that night her mother asked Lee if she had been taught at Ault how to use a condom.

Lee kept herself in check until the night before she was to go back to Ault. She'd gone with her father to pick Joseph up from a roller skating party. When they arrive Lee's father is angry because Joseph isn't waiting outside like his father asked him. Lee tried to avoid an argument by going inside to get her brother. When Lee approached her brother he was testy with her and called her a bitch. Lee cursed him right back and then criticized him for offering the boy beside him a ride explaining that their dad was in a bad mood.

Joseph angered Lee further by getting in the front seat of the car and making her sit in the back. Her father made a sarcastic remark when Lee did get into the back of the car. The remark added to her fury. She came to the decision that she hated them as her father and brother continued to make jokes about her and tease her on the way home. As soon as she got to her room Lee cried releasing her fury.

The time setting of the novel jumps forward to the time prior to Valentine's Day. Lee has been thinking about the Valentine flowers that are sent out by the Ault Social Committee as a fundraiser. Lee had gotten carnations from her friends before but never any roses. She wondered if Cross would send her a rose. The flowers were delivered to the dorms around midnight on Feb. 13 so that students would get their flowers the morning of Valentine's Day. Some people, whom Lee described as anxious, would look through these flowers as soon as they arrived to make sure they were getting something. When Lee asked Martha if she should send Lee a flower Martha picked on her telling her that she was going to send Cross a flower.

Also before Valentine's Day Cross is in the day student room with Lee when the fire alarm goes off in her dorm. Cross hurried to get dressed and get her up. When he





opened the door there was no one in the hall yet so he made it to the fire escape door before anyone saw him. Lee felt abandoned but she did motion to Martha that they hadn't been caught. Once they were outside Lee saw Cross standing outside his dorm. He even had his coat on so she assumed he'd made it back to his room in time to get it. At curfew a few days later, Hillary Tompkins, whose sleeping bag Lee and Cross had been using in the day student room, complained that someone had left a pair of dirty underwear in her room.

At three on Valentine's morning Lee could bear the suspense no longer and went to the common room to look through the flowers. In the first bucket she found only a rose from Martha. In the second bucket she had a rose that she believed was from Cross but turned out to be from Aubrey. Lee felt her situation was even worse when Martha got a carnation from Cross. It meant that Cross had sent out flowers, just not to her.

Lee had pulled back a little after Valentine's Day. She hadn't been going to all of Cross' games so she didn't see the game in which his ankle was injured. Lee had learned about the injury by eavesdropping on conversations in the dining hall. When she'd asked if he was back from the hospital John Brindley told her that Cross was back in the dorm and asked if Lee was going to go see him. Dede, who heard the conversation, wondered out loud why Lee wanted to know about Cross. Lee thought seriously about going to see Cross but decided not to because she believed he would be aloof and polite but not particularly happy to see her.

Cross had not been to Lee's room in nine days when she watched him in his role of Fortinbras in the school's production of Hamlet. It was on the same day that Lee received her rejection letter from Brown that she happened to see Cross outside Dean Fletcher's classroom. He congratulated her on getting into the University of Michigan and Lee believed she'd go there because she already sensed her relationship with Cross was ending. Cross suggested they go into Dean Fletcher's classroom and Lee agreed. He sat and they'd only been there for a minute when Cross asked her to give him a blow job. She felt degraded as she did what he asked. Afterward, he held her against him, the only action he had made that reminded her how much she loved him.

During her spring break Lee visited the University of Michigan with her mother. When she left to go back to Ault Lee felt real pain at having to leave her family again. She almost called her mother to wait for the plane with her but knew her mother would know for sure how truly lonely she'd been at Ault for the past four years.

The story takes a turn when Lee was called to the headmaster's office a month after spring break. Her first thought was that she and Cross had been caught. She went right away, deciding not to put off what she felt was going to be bad news. Mr. Byden started the meeting by asking Lee a few questions about how she'd liked Ault. He told her that he wanted her to be one of the students to be interviewed by the New York Times for a story about Ault. He wanted her to be able to be truthful but still present a positive image of Ault.



Since spring break Lee had seen Cross only once. He'd come to her room but she could sense that they were uncomfortable with each other. They fallen asleep together but he had left earlier than usual. Even though she didn't ask him then if it was over, she felt that it was.

The reporter from the New York Times was named Angela Varizi. Lee met with her in the same classroom where she'd given Cross his blow job. Angela began asking questions and Lee was surprised when Angela began writing when Lee volunteered that she'd been rejected at Brown because she almost failed math one year. She began questioning Lee about her parents and Lee asked why her parents had anything to do with the article. Angela explained she needed the information for context and indicated that much of what Lee said probably wouldn't even be used.

Angela was particularly interested in Lee's categorization as a scholarship student. She wanted to know if Lee felt she was treated differently because she was there on scholarship. She encouraged Lee to talk by telling about an experience where a student lost a black wool coat and just went out and bought another while she was at Harvard. This story prompted Lee to share about the students classifying Ms. Moray as "lower middle class" based on her clothes as well as her experience with girls buying clothes on a trip to Boston just so they'd have something they could hide liquor in to sneak it back to school.

## Analysis

This section of the novel represents a turning point for Lee though she does not seem to realize it. She is given the chance to speak on behalf of Ault for an article for the "New York Times." The headmaster meets with Lee telling her that she is one of a few students he has handpicked to participate in the interviews. He sets up for Lee what he hopes the article will do for the school; that he hopes it will get rid of the stereotypes that people have of boarding schools catering to the rich and being sexist and racist. "The Times is a first-rate paper, of course, but sometimes the media tends to simply reinforce existing stereotypes instead of taking the time to tell the real story. Do you know what I'm saying?" (353) Mr. Byden asks Lee during their meeting. Lee does not seem to pick up on, or else she ignores, Mr. Byden's veiled request to present the school in a positive light.

When Lee begins her interview with the reporter from the "New York Times" it does not seem as if Lee has come to the interview with the intentions to betray her school. She does not expect the interview to take the turn that it takes with Angela focusing her questions on money and the ways that Lee can tell if students are on scholarship or not. At one point in the interview Lee realizes a strangeness: "She wanted me to say something she already knew. And I didn't yet understand that just because you can recognize what another person wants and just because that person is older and more powerful than you are, you don't have to give it to them" (359). In this sentence Lee sums up the idea that Angela already had expectations of Lee and had tailored her questions to fit those expectations. Lee falls into her trap by wanting to please and



wanting to answer truthfully. Note also Lee's surprise when Angela writes down things that she says and asks if those things will be in the article. Angela seems to prey a bit on Lee's naivety and also uses the explanation that anything said to a reporter is fair game to be included in an article.

Angela is unable to conceal her surprise when Lee tells her that money is one of the things that people don't really talk about at Ault. The following exchange between Angela and Lee is interesting for a number of reasons: "People here don't really — ' I paused. 'Money isn't discussed.' / 'Talk about the elephant in the living room!' / 'But that's why,' I said. 'People have so much, so it's like nobody needs to mention it'" (358). First, Lee tries to steer the conversation away by telling Angela that money just is not discussed. Angela pushes her with the metaphor of the elephant in the living room. She knows money, represented by the elephant, is a big part of Ault and its culture. To ignore money and not talk about it would be like ignoring a large beast taking up a good deal of room in one's life. Lee tries to explain and provide an answer for the reporter's question but the reporter just pushes more, asking Lee how she can tell the difference between scholarship and non scholarship students.

Also hitting a turning point in this section of the novel is Cross and Lee's relationship. After a night together that Lee later remembers as their best night, their relationship seems to go downhill. There are three things that may contribute to the crumbling of the relationship. First, Cross and Lee do not get caught one night when there is a fire drill in the dorm when he is in her room. Even though Lee does not necessarily want to get in trouble, she wants someone to catch her and Cross together so people on campus will know they are a couple. Instead, Cross leaves her dorm quickly leaving Lee feeling as if she has been abandoned. "There was, in the swiftness with which he'd slipped from the dorm, something almost offensive" (339) Lee says.

Second, Cross upsets Lee by not sending her a flower on Valentine's Day. This disappointment is doubled by the fact that Cross did send flowers to some girls, even Martha got one from him. Lee realizes she had been singled out intentionally. She finds no comfort in the fact that she earlier told Cross he did not need to feel as if he had to send her flowers. Remember back to the conversation where Lee tells Cross he does not have to acknowledge her publicly. She specifically mentions she does not expect flowers from him.

Third, Lee does not go to check on Cross after he hurt his ankle playing basketball. She does consider going to see him but when she thought through all the scenarios, she decides not to go. She does not speak to him again until they accidentally meet one another in the hall one day. Later Lee rethinks her actions: "For the first time, it occurred to me that maybe it had been rude, maybe I'd been somehow neglectful, not to get in touch with him right after his injury" (347).

As badly as Lee wants a boy at Ault to like her, she seems almost offended when she gets a rose from Aubrey. At this point Lee has decided that Cross is the only boy for her and that Aubrey must have sent her the rose because he did not understand the workings of the flower exchange. When Lee sees a rose with her name on it she



assumes it is from Cross but is disappointed when she reads the tag. She personifies her initial delight in the sentence: “My own delight, born and killed off in front of no one, was humiliating” (342). Even though no one has seen the rose, who it is from or how Lee reacts to it she is still humiliated because of her belief that Cross cares enough about her to send her a tangible expression of his affection.

Even though Lee believes that her relationship with her parents will improve because she is seeing Cross, there is still a chasm she feels has opened between them when she goes home for Christmas break. Lee senses her mother knows she is no longer a virgin during their drive home from the airport. Her mother’s inability or unwillingness to talk to Lee directly about her sexual life seems to frustrate Lee. She is afraid she might blow up on her mother before she even gets out of the car. Lee’s feelings are again hurt when Lee goes with her father to pick up her brother the final night she is at home. “I hated them because they thought I was someone to mock and insult, because of the way they brought out the worst in me and it felt so familiar, it felt like the truth — it made my life at Ault seem like pretense. This was what I was, fundamentally: a petty, angry, impotent person” (335). Lee believes the way her father and brother pick at her undermines who she believes she has become and brings out what she sees as the worst qualities in her.

Lee makes an interesting observation as she sits in the headmaster’s office waiting for him to talk to her about the “New York Times” article. Ault School had been founded in the 1800s by a father in memory of his daughter who died of scarlet fever. Lee wonders why the father believed it was an honor to his daughter to have a school she couldn’t attend founded for her. Lee notes: “Even if she’d lived, she would have had to wait until she was 104 years old before she was allowed to attend” (351).

## Discussion Question 1

What do you think led to the break up of Cross and Lee’s relationship? Discuss how each party might have contributed.

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think the reporter from the “New York Times” is intentionally leading Lee into a trap based on her questions? Does she catch Lee off guard when she asks about money instead of Lee’s classes and education?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Lee’s family make her feel as if she is “a petty, angry, impotent person” (335)? What could each party do to help bridge this gap?

## Vocabulary

anecdotal, fraught, repertoire, irreverent, violating, sanctioned, articulate, benevolent, opine, constricted, mortifying, feasibility, pretense, segued, fixated, titillating, averted, boisterous, apprised, innuendos, arbitrary, passivity, enamored, enclaves, probationary, awry, vetted, malcontents, transcribe, caliber, eloquent, jibe, coveted, diversity, incremental, candor



# Chapter 10: Kissing and Kissing 364-403

## Summary

In Chapter 10: Kissing and Kissing 364-403, Lee confided to Martha that she felt like she'd said too much to the woman who came to interview her. They both wondered why the reporter had asked Lee so many questions about tuition.

Martha left early from a dance to tell Lee that Cross and Aspeth had been dancing together a lot. From that point Lee kept an eye out for Cross and Aspeth. In the final issue of the school's newspaper, however, there was a note that indicated Cross was dating Melodie Ryan. As soon as she saw Martha Lee questioned her about the note. Martha didn't know anything about Cross and Melodie dating but it seemed obvious since Cross hadn't been to see Lee in a month. Martha encouraged Lee to talk Cross about what was going on.

Lee decided to wait until after the weekend was over before she talked to Cross. First she didn't want to ruin any plans he might have and the newspaper article was supposed to run over the weekend. At this point in the narration the tense switches to the present and the older version of Lee speaks telling the reader she wants to tell her younger self to leave Ault at that point and save herself from what is coming.

The tense switches back to past tense as Lee narrates that it was a week before graduation. Lee and Martha discussed which shoes they wanted to wear to the ceremony as they walked to breakfast on Sunday. Lee noticed a strange silence in the dining hall when they entered. Everyone was reading a copy of the "Times." Only one student spoke when he saw Lee. He said "It's the infamous Lee Fiora" (368).

No one answered Lee when she asked what the article said. Martha grabbed a copy of the paper and began reading for herself. Lee also read a copy of the article, the only time she read it in its entirety. By the time she finished Lee realized she had presented herself to Angela as the person she did not want the students at Ault to know she really was. Martha tried to calm Lee by telling her that although people would freak out about the article, Lee had to live her life like normal. Lee felt immediate regret that she had been so indiscreet by giving so much humiliating information to Angela and having her make it public that Lee was attending the school on scholarship and that she was unhappy.

Lee went to bed early Sunday night and woke about 1 a.m. She dressed and went to Cross' dorm room. Cross was not there but his roommate Devin was. He was hateful to Lee about the article but when Lee cursed him she believed she made their conversation "definitively ugly" (372). Lee turned to leave but Devin stopped her by asking if she were fish or cheese. He explained they were keeping a list of whether girls tasted like fish or cheese and showed her the catalog where they'd written by several of



the girls' names one of these options. Devin told her that Cross was the custodian of the game and that he had played Ault better than anyone ever had.

After they read the article Lee's parents also were angry with her. Her father told her plainly that he was angry because they had sacrificed so Lee could have the education she said she wanted yet it appeared that she had been lying all the time that she was happy at Ault. Lee was ashamed because she knew she had lied to her parents but also realized that some of her fault lay in her inability to lie consistently.

Lee intended to talk to Cross after the final formal dinner but he did not attend. Devin told her he was shooting hoops. In the gym Cross was alone. He told Lee when she had come by the room he had been with some other guys. Lee realized he was probably lying. She assumed he was with Melodie and asked if Melodie was his girlfriend. When Cross avoided her question, Lee asked outright if she was fish or cheese. Cross was annoyed with the question and asked Lee not to let Devin upset her.

When Lee asked Cross why he'd never told anyone about them he reminded her that she had been the one who had set the rules for their relationship. Lee began to cry when Cross agreed with her that he would never have been her boyfriend. Cross tried to comfort Lee by telling her that there were some things about their relationship that had been good and that she would like college better than high school. He added that what she'd said in the "Times" article didn't surprise him. He agreed there were some things that should change, but thought Lee should have chosen a different forum.

When Cross mentioned that his roommate sometimes offended him for saying things that were racially charged against Jews Lee realized Cross was Jewish. Cross looked at Lee in a way she described as being "both predatory and tender" (381). Lee responded to Cross in a way she knew was sarcastic and stopped him from kissing her, which she believed he was about to do. She continued her sarcastic tone asking if Melodie tasted like fish or cheese and then angered him by insinuating that Melodie might actually be pretty enough for him to be seen with in public. Cross slammed the ball down and told Lee that she tasted like fish. Before she left the gym Lee told Cross there was no one else who had made her feel worse about herself than he had done.

Back in the dorm Lee called Angela at "The New York Times." She thought the reporter might say something that would make her feel better about the situation but Angela only told Lee she had done the right thing and would be proud of herself later. Angela continued to talk but Lee let the phone disconnect them by not putting in any more money.

At a special dinner on Wednesday Lee clung to Martha but was still unnerved by some comments she interpreted as being hateful. Lee headed back to the dorm while Martha stayed for the rest of the celebration. On her way Lee was accosted by Mrs. Stanchak who told her how brave she was and gave her a hug. Lee began crying. A male took charge of Lee telling her they needed to get out of there. They walked until they reached the steps of the schoolhouse and then sat down. It was Darden who had rescued Lee. He told Lee the reporter was trouble and she'd had an agenda. He believed he had





not fallen for the reporter's trap because as a black man living in a white world he had learned not to make waves.

Martha found Lee in the library to tell her the seniors had found someone to speak at the next days' chapel to refute what Lee had said in the article. Martha encouraged Lee to go anyway because it was the last chapel. After Lee told Martha that she knew she had blown it, she realized from the way Martha answered her that Martha believed she had intended for things to go the way she did with the article. Lee also learns from this conversation that Martha had been the one to suggest to Mr. Byden that he consider Lee as a source for the article. Lee was a little bit angry with Martha that she had never been told that before.

At chapel the next morning Lee discovered it was Conchita Maxwell who had been enlisted to give the talk. Lee was at first angry but then began to tune out what Conchita was saying. When they sang the closing hymn Lee felt her eyes filling with tears. She was relieved when she saw that other seniors were crying as well.

Lee's parents left with her things the day of graduation. Her father at first ignored her and then only talked to her curtly. In a switch to the present tense, Lee tells the reader she went back to Ault for her fifth and tenth year reunions and gives a brief description of how those closest to her turned out. She has not seen Cross again since graduation. Dede had a nose job, Aspath owns an interior design boutique, and Darden is a lawyer. Sin-Jun came out as a lesbian. Martha is an associate professor. Even though Lee was the maid of honor in Martha's wedding the two don't see one another very often.

Returning to the past tense Lee tells her reader she did not open the note that Aubrey had given to her until she was attending the last party of the weeklong celebration. The card made her feel that she was not untouchable. Even after what she had said in the "Times" article, there were still worthwhile things about her.

Lee describes one of the parties she remembered from graduation week. She sat by herself and drank beer but did not dance. At one point Martha came to Lee because she was ready to leave but Lee wanted to stay. She'd been talking to Dede and watching Cross pursue their classmate Horton Kinnely. The two remained a couple through the rest of senior week.

That night Lee stayed in a hotel room with Dede and some other friends. She left before the others woke up and rode the T to Martha's aunt's house. Because she was hungover, Lee was impressed by how huge the world seemed as she waited for the train. In the present tense, Lee tells her reader that as an adult she sometimes still gets a sense of awesomeness when she realizes the vastness of the world.

## Analysis

Even though Lee messes up by offending both her peers and teachers at her school as well as her parents, the author of Lee's story still manages to catch the bittersweet feel common near the time of one's high school graduation. This feeling is illustrated in a



scene where Lee and Martha sit talking to one another in the library the week before their graduation. As they talk, they can hear the sounds of the stage being built for graduation. These sounds of construction remind the girls that they have only a short time left at Ault. For Lee her impending departure is both good and bad. Even though it has not been a particularly pleasant experience for Lee she will still miss Ault. “Looking back on this period, I feel both a retroactive dread and a sense of protectiveness for myself as I was then, for how distraught I felt about Cross, how earnestly sad at the prospect of graduating from Ault” (367-368).

The author uses Lee as an adult speaking in the present tense to foreshadow how bad the consequences of Lee’s article will be for her. She cries out for the younger version of herself to leave Ault before she reads the article and learns just how bad things could get. She gives the reader the idea that after the article comes out, Lee will feel as if she has betrayed her school and her parents as well.

Several students are outwardly hateful to Lee while others do not seem too worried about the article. One student called Lee “infamous” (368) the morning the article came out. He asks her “Didn’t anyone ever tell you that you don’t piss in your own pool?” (369). He infers that Lee has not only offended the other students at Ault but has also made herself look bad. By pissing in her own pool she has made a mess for herself that she must now clean up. After Doug’s open criticism of Lee she continues to overthink her situation and wonders what the other students are thinking but not saying. “What I felt in that moment looking at them was what I continued to feel until graduation — the suspicion, but not the certainty, that other people were scorning me, the sense that their scorn was not unjustified, and also the knowledge that maybe they were not thinking of me at all” (371). Even as Lee believes all of the students at her school now know who she really is, she wonders also if there is a chance no one is really that interested in her. Some students may already be aware of the personality that Lee tries so hard to hide. Cross, for instance, tells her that what she said in the article does not really surprise him.

Lee’s parents also react strongly to the comments in the newspaper article. Even though Lee’s mother is concerned that her daughter does not feel she ever belonged at Ault, Lee’s father is just angry. Even though Lee realizes how small the amount of money her family had to spend on her Ault education compared to what those who did not attend on scholarship spent her father cannot comprehend how Lee would have let him continue to pay for an education she did not appreciate. Lee realizes that her parents are angry because she did lie to them and did not tell them the truth about how she felt like an outsider all along at the school. She notes also that her lies were not the real way she had failed her parents, her school and herself. “My failure resided in my inability to lie consistently” (376) Lee believes.

Lee seems to take out some of her frustration with herself out on Cross. There is no doubt that Cross does deserve Lee’s anger, especially when she learns that the boys have been using the girls in a strange sex game. It is Cross’ roommate, Devin, who tells Lee about the list and the fact that Cross is the custodian for the list. When Devin tells Lee “no one ever played Ault better than Cross Sugarman” (374) she begins to realize



she might have been played as well. It is interesting to note, however, that Cross did not include Lee on the list that Devin showed her.

When Lee confronts Cross, he does not deny any of her accusations but at the same time still seems to appear to like her. He admits to her that he would never have been her boyfriend or gone public with her. He also admits he did not send her a flower because she had told him not to do so. When Cross tries to smooth things over with Lee she realizes all that he is saying to her are just words. "Our relationship, for as long as things were good, and in that moment when they could have been good again, was about the irrelevance of words. You feel what you feel, you act as you act; who in the history of the world has ever been convinced by a well-reasoned argument?" (382). Lee responds by being hateful and sarcastic to him, pushing him away.

Perhaps Lee's best decision throughout the course of the novel is not to confront Martha about her lack of encouragement when it came to Lee's relationship with Cross. "She had made it true! If she'd said she could picture it, it didn't mean it would have happened. But by saying she couldn't, she'd pretty much sealed that it wouldn't. Had she not understood how literally I took her, how much I trusted her advice? She had discouraged me from being hopeful, and how can you ever forgive a person for that?" (392). When Martha had been elected prefect Lee felt the beginning of resentment and blamed it on Martha's lack of support in Lee's relationship with Cross. Here, when Martha tells Lee that she suspects that Lee said exactly what she had wanted to during her interview, Lee does not address the topic at hand but instead flashes back to her frustration with Martha concerning Cross. It is perhaps because Lee keeps her mouth shut in this instance that she saves her friendship. In deciding to not get into an argument with Martha Lee tells her reader she feels like a dog: "I would be good old incompetent Lee, lovably flawed Lee, a golden retriever who just can't stay out of the creek and keeps returning to the house with wet, smelly fur" (393).

The novel does end on a slightly higher note as Lee describes a moment in the train station when she realizes how big the world really is. This image gives the reader positive feelings about Lee as they can see how good it will be to be away from the constrictive atmosphere of Ault.

## Discussion Question 1

Consider Cross' idea that what Lee said is not what made people so angry but it is instead the format that she uses. If Lee had written an editorial for the school newspaper or given a chapel talk do you think that would have been a better format for change? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the tone of this section of the novel. How does the author use words to help establish this tone?



## Discussion Question 3

Are you surprised how angry people are with Lee about the article? How does this speak to their sense of pride in their school?

## Vocabulary

embark, vigilant, admonished, retroactive, infamous, appellation, oblique, pristine, taboo, juxtaposed, palpable, chivalrous, protocol, dubious, transgression, obsolete, elude, commiserated, perspective, salvage, predatory, insular, factual, decipher, insatiable, hypothetically, ephemeral, refuting, premonition, atypical, subjective, incompetent, eccentrically, exception, rhetoric, fathom, anecdote, pundit



# Characters

## Lee Fiora

Lee Fiora is the main character and narrator of this novel. She is a girl of above average intelligence from a small town in Indiana. Lee decides she wants to go to boarding school because she hopes to find a smart, handsome boyfriend there. Lee applies for Ault on her own. After she is accepted and receives a scholarship, her parents allow her to decide to attend or not.

Lee loves women's magazines. She fantasizes about having a sexual relationship. Her first fantasies are about boys in general but by the middle of her freshman year she decides Cross Sugarman, another freshman at Ault, is the object of her desire. Lee centers on Cross because she and Cross wound up going to the same mall during Ault's surprise holiday. At the mall Cross helps Lee when she passes out after having her ears pierced. They see a movie together and then Cross puts his arm around Lee during a taxi ride back to campus.

Lee doesn't have many friends at Ault because she tends to overthink and over analyze social interactions. She generally thinks herself out of having relationships with others. Her best friend is Martha Porter. The two meet near the end of their freshman year and Lee rooms with Martha for the remainder of her time at Ault. Lee often uses Martha as an emotional crutch. Because Lee thinks more about boys than she does about her school work she almost fails precalculus and is in danger of getting kicked out of Ault. Martha saves Lee's Ault career by helping her with her final exam so that Lee gets a passing grade for the class.

During her time at Ault, Lee's relationship with her parents begins to get rocky as she tries to keep up her facade and convince them that she enjoys being at Ault. Their worlds collide for the first time when her parents visit her on campus during the parents weekend of her junior year. Lee is embarrassed by her father's behavior while her father is angered by what he sees as her lack of respect for him.

In Lee's senior year, she finally gets the relationship with Cross that she believes she wants so badly. Cross begins going to Lee's dorm room to have a sexual relationship with her. Lee is at first thrilled that Cross is spending time with her. She tells him that he does not have to worry about acknowledging her in public. Later, Lee is hurt because Cross she realizes that Cross would never have told anyone that she was his girlfriend.

Lee spends a good deal of her time trying to blend in with the preppy students at Ault. Even though she does not understand their ways and resents how different she is from them, Lee copies their behavior and habits. Lee blows her cover when she is interviewed by a reporter from "The New York Times" for an article about boarding schools. It is never fully understood, even by Lee, if she intended to tell the reporter the



reality of her opinion of Ault but she realizes when she reads the article that she is described as the person she had always hoped to hide from the people at Ault.

## Conchita Maxwell

Conchita Maxwell is a biracial girl of Mexican and Caucasian descent who befriends Lee during their freshman year. Conchita stands out during her freshman year at Ault because she wears brightly colored clothes that do not necessarily match. It is through her acquaintance with Conchita that Lee meets Martha, the girl who turns out to be Lee's best friend and roommate for the next three years.

Even though Lee assumes Conchita is attending Ault on a scholarship because she is of Mexican descent, Lee is shocked to learn how rich Conchita and her family really are. It turns out that Conchita's father is the CEO of an oil company. Her mother is accompanied by a bodyguard.

When Lee finds out that Conchita never learned how to ride a bicycle Lee sets out to teach Conchita how to do so. During one of their lessons Lee admits to Conchita that she likes Cross and hopes the Assassin game will bring the two of them together. It is on their final day as friends that Conchita rides successfully. Shortly after her successful ride, Lee tells Conchita that she has decided to room with Martha instead of Conchita. Conchita is both hurt and angry by Lee's refusal to room with her or to consider living with both her and Martha.

Because Lee refuses to room with Conchita, Conchita "kills" Lee because she had gotten Lee's name as her target in the game of Assassin. Conchita had been holding onto Lee's name as a way of protecting her so perhaps she could help Lee get close to Cross. Lee believes her anger at Conchita for knocking her out of the game is equal to Conchita's anger at Lee for not rooming with her.

After the newspaper article for which Lee was interviewed is printed and turns out to be so critical of Ault, it is Conchita who speaks at chapel against the claims that Lee made.

## Martha Porter

Martha Porter is Lee's best friend at Ault. The two room together at Ault for three years. Martha and Lee first meet during Latin class. Even though Martha tries to strike up a conversation, Lee will not talk to her. It is only after Conchita introduces Martha and Lee that the two become friends.

Martha is on the crew team at Ault. Her parents are wealthy and live close enough to the school that Lee goes home with Martha nearly every long weekend. Lee presents Martha as a girl who is a nobody, like Lee believes she is. Lee believes Martha is not popular. She is surprised when Martha is elected as the female prefect of the senior class.



Martha tries to discourage Lee's relationship with Cross because she believes Lee could do better. She serves as an emotional crutch for Lee throughout much of the high school years. Martha additionally puts herself at risk of being kicked out of school when she helps Lee complete her Pre-calculus exam. With Martha's help Lee passes her math class with a "D."

As an adult, Martha works as an assistant professor of classics. She lives in Boston. She and Lee rarely talk.

## **Darden Pittard**

Darden Pittard is a black boy who is in Lee's class. Lee describes Darden as the "class's cool black guy" (41). Darden is among the students in Ms. Moray's English class who present a modern interpretation of a scene from "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Ms. Moray accuses them of being racist even though one of the people involved in the skit, Darden, is black. Darden tries to stop Ms. Moray's comments about self hate on his part by admitting to her that they had made a mistake.

Darden is among the students who is chosen to be interviewed for "The New York Times" article. When Darden sees how upset Lee is after Mrs. Stanchak praises her bravery for the comments she made for the article he takes charge of Lee and walks her away from the crowd. He hugs her and comforts her. Darden tells Lee that the reporter had already pigeon holed all of the students she interviewed before she even talked to them. He believes he did not fall for the reporter's act and give her proof of what she wanted him to be "an angry black guy" (387) because he has experience in not causing waves when dealing with white people.

Darden becomes a lawyer after he leaves Ault. He is also made an Ault trustee when he is only twenty-eight.

## **Ms. Moray**

Ms. Moray is the teacher who is hired as an intern for Lee's English class. Lee and Ms. Moray are a good deal alike because they both come from the midwest and are not traditional boarding school material. While Lee tries to fit in with the other students Ms. Moray does not try to do anything to fit in at the boarding school. She talks about things that are not accepted topics of discussion at Ault and dresses in a way that causes her to be classified as lower middle class.

Even though Ms. Moray and Lee are similar, Ms. Moray gets a wrong impression of Lee because of the way Lee tries to act like the other students at Ault. In fact she criticizes Lee for being stuck up and not socializing with people like Aspeth who Ms. Moray believes wants to be Lee's friend.





Ms. Moray wears a book shaped pin that intrigues Lee. Lee first believes Ms. Moray got the pin as a gift or award but later decides that Ms. Moray bought it for herself. Lee believes the pin is a symbol of Ms. Moray's habit of trying too hard.

## Amy Dennaker

Amy Dennaker is a girl who lives in the same dorm as Lee during Lee's freshman year at Ault. She is an ice hockey player. Lee is a little bit afraid of the athletic girl. Amy is the one who tells Dede and Lee about the school's tradition of giving students a surprise holiday each year and shares with them the day on which she believes the holiday will fall.

When Amy learns that Lee has McGrath as a target in Assassin she tells Lee that McGrath's dorm room is below one of the girls' rooms on their floor. Amy does this so Lee can torture McGrath that he is her target and also so Amy can flirt with McGrath whom she likes.

In Lee's concluding remarks about the students with whom she'd gone to school she tells the reader that Amy became a conservative pundit.

## Cross Sugarman

Cross Sugarman, sometimes called "Sug," is the most popular boy in the Lee's class. Lee becomes obsessed with Cross after they meet up at a mall during a school holiday their freshman year. Three years later Cross is elected as senior prefect, the most influential position in the school.

Cross appears to be somewhat of a play boy because he dates and is seen with a variety of different girls during his time at Ault. Lee particularly notices the different girls that Cross seems to be dating during their senior year. Beginning in their senior year of school Cross begins visiting Lee in her dorm room. Lee seems to think they are having a relationship but in reality Cross seems to be using her for sex. Lee makes it easy for him by telling him that he doesn't have to acknowledge her in public or even send her gifts.

It is after Cross hurts his ankle and Lee does not go to see him that Cross begins to stop seeing Lee as regularly. When Lee confronts Cross about the end of their relationship he reminds her that she was the one who set the terms. It is also during this conversation that Lee learns that Cross is of Jewish descent.

As an adult, Cross works for a brokerage firm.



## Sin-Jun Kim

Sin-Jun Kim is one of the girls who rooms with Lee during her freshman year at Ault. Sin-Jun is from Korea and is characterized by her broken English. When Sin-Jun tries to commit suicide at Ault Lee is the student who is chosen to go and check on her at the hospital. On the day that Sin-Jun comes back to school from the hospital Lee catches Sin-Jun and Clara having sex in Sin-Jun's bed in the school's infirmary.

During that time that Sin-Jun is away from Ault she writes Lee a letter asking that she tell no one what had happened between her and Clara. Lee is surprised their friendship continues after Sin-Jun returns to Ault. The two even keep in touch with each other after they graduate from the boarding school.

Sin-Jun comes out as a homosexual after she leaves Ault. As an adult, she works as a neurobiologist in a research lab.

## Dede Schwartz

Dede Schwartz is one of the girls who rooms with Lee during her first year at Ault. Even though Dede is Jewish and not particularly pretty, she has dreams of being one of the more popular girls at Ault. She follows Aspeth, the most popular girl in the freshman class, hoping that some of Aspeth's personality will rub off on her. Despite Dede's desire for popularity she is a serious student. Lee sees some of her old self in Dede when she considers how dedicated Dede is to her school work.

As an adult Dede lives in New York where she is a successful lawyer. It is after Dede sends Lee a card announcing that she has had a nose job that Lee decides for certain that she likes Dede. Even after they leave Ault, the two meet in New York to eat and talk about men.

## Aspeth Montgomery

If there is a villain in this novel it is Aspeth Montgomery. Aspeth is pretty and blonde. She is the most popular student in Lee's class at Ault. Even though she is popular, Aspeth is also mean and manipulative.

In their senior year when both Aspeth and Martha have been nominated for the position of senior prefect Aspeth sends Martha a warning through Lee that Martha should drop out of the race. Lee gets the feeling that Aspeth expects Martha to do as she is asked just because Aspeth is who she is.

As an adult, Aspeth owns an interior design boutique.



## Rufina Sanchez

Rufina Sanchez and her friend Maria Oldega are the Latina girls whom Lee invites to go to supper with she and her parents during parents' weekend at Ault. Even though it causes an argument between Lee and her father, Rufina asks if she can be taken to the Sheraton to meet Nick.

Rufina is the same girl that Lee remembers sitting next to on the bus on the way back to school from an away soccer game. Lee is surprised when she notices that Rufina is crying. Rufina asks Lee if she believes things would always be the way they were at that moment.

## Angela Varizi

Angela Varizi, sometimes called Angie, is the reporter from "The New York Times" who interviews Lee and Darden, along with a few other Ault students, about their experiences at Ault. She uses the quotes that Lee gives her to prove that even though boarding school officials claim their schools have changed from the boarding schools of the past those boarding schools are really the same as they had always been. When Darden talks to Lee about the interviews he tells her that Angela had them pigeonholed before she even met them for their interviews and had used their quotes to further her agenda.

## Valerie Prosek

Valerie Prosek is Lee's advisor her junior year. She is also Lee's teacher for the precalculus class that Lee almost fails. For a short while Ms. Prosek allows Lee to come to her house for study sessions but Lee believes her teacher sees her only as a student who isn't working as hard as she could be.

Lee is angry with Ms. Prosek because she believes that her teacher could do more to keep her from being kicked out of Ault. One of the things that she believes Ms. Prosek could do for her is fudging on her grade, giving her a D instead of an F.

## Aubrey

Aubrey is the boy who tutors Lee in math. Aubrey realizes Lee isn't putting her full attention into learning math but continues to work with her anyway. During the Valentine's Day flower exchange Aubrey surprises Lee by sending her a rose. When she graduates from Ault Aubrey gives her a card telling her that he loves her. Even though Lee does not love Aubrey in return she is encouraged by the card because she believes it is proof that she is worthy of love.



## **David Bardo**

David Bardo is the kitchen worker whom Lee meets at the hospital when she is there visiting Sin-Jun. David asks Lee out on a date. Later when he goes into the dining room area where Lee is eating with other students and tells her they need to postpone their date Lee is hateful to him. Dede warns Lee that if she is seen dating a townie the other students will talk about her in an unfavorable way. After their encounter in the dining hall, Lee and David never speak to each other again.

## **Gates Medkowski**

Gates Medkowski is the senior prefect who speaks to Lee the day that Lee leaves class in tears because she got the assignment for her history presentation wrong. Gates assures Lee that everyone felt out of place at Ault when they first came. For most of her first semester at Ault Lee is obsessed with Gates to the point she wonders if she is gay.

## **Madame Broussard**

Madame Broussard is the head of the dorm in which Lee lives her freshman year. She is also head of the French department and a native of Paris. When Lee, Sin-Jun and Amy approach Madame Broussard concerning a prank they want to play on McGrath, Lee's target in Assassin, they are surprised that the lady is willing to help them.

## **Little Washington**

Little Washington is a black girl whom Lee meets during her first semester at Ault. Little plays basketball and attends Ault on scholarship. Even though Lee understands the reasons why Little steals money from the other rich girls in their dorm she turns Little in when she learns that Little is the thief.

## **Dean Fletcher**

Dean Fletcher is the administrator who meets with Lee when she is about to be kicked out of Ault because of her failing grades in math. Even though he says nothing about spring-cleaning Lee, Martha believes it is what Fletcher meant when he talked to Lee.

## **Mr. Byden**

Mr. Byden is the headmaster at Ault. It is Mr. Byden who asks Lee if she would be willing to be interviewed for "The New York Times" article about Ault.

## **Tullis Haskell**

Tullis Haskell is the first student at Ault who asks Lee to cut his hair.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Pubic Hair

What Aspeth thinks is pubic hair in the bathroom sink is symbolic of the racism at Ault in Chapter 1. When Lee sees Little, the only black girl in their dorm, combing her hair over the sink she realizes the hair is not pubic hair. It is from Little's head. Blonde Aspeth cannot imagine that the coarse black hair in the sink is anything other than pubic hair.

## Flowered Bedspread

These flowered bedspreads are symbolic of the rich girls at Ault. In Chapter 1, Little is able to recognize that Lee is on scholarship because she does not have a bedspread with flowers on it. After Little points out the coincidence to her, Lee begins to notice that all of the popular girls do have flowered bedspreads. Lee asks for a bedspread like the rich girls. She believes it will camouflage the fact she is attending Ault on a scholarship and will help her fit in with the other Ault students.

## Green Jacket

A green jacket at the beginning of Chapter 2 is a symbol of the surprise holiday. Once a year the students will see the green jacket at roll call indicating that is the day of the holiday.

## A Pillowcase

This pillowcase is a symbol of the way the rich girls at Ault use and destroy their things without thinking of the cost or waste. During the game of Assassin, in Chapter 3, it is suggested to Lee that she use a pillowcase to send a message to McGrath, her next target. The older version of Lee considers how the act is Aultish because the girl suggests writing on the pillowcase without even considering the cost.

## Silver Pin Shaped like a Book

Lee decides that Ms. Moray's silver pin that is shaped like a book symbolizes the teacher's desire to try too hard. The pin is a central symbol in Chapter 4 because Lee spends much of her time in English class trying to decide how Ms. Moray came to have the pin. At first, she thinks some mentor had given her the pin. Later, Lee comes to the decision that Ms. Moray bought the pin for herself. Lee's thinking about the history of Ms. Moray's pin parallels what she thinks about the teacher as a person.



## Luggage

Lee's parents' luggage is symbolic of her life before she came to Ault. She remembers how she and her brothers once played in those suitcases when they were children. This luggage appears in Chapter 5.

## Datsun

This rusted out white Datsun is a symbol of how poor Lee's family is in comparison to the other students who attend Ault. Lee is embarrassed by her parents' car every time they are on campus including both when her father dropped her off in Chapter 1 and when both her parents come to campus for parents' weekend in Chapter 5.

## A Name Tag

This name tag that Lee finds on her brother's bulletin board is a symbol of how proud Lee's father is of her. Lee notices he had filled out the tag in his own writing during the parents' weekend that had gone so badly. It is not until Lee sees the tag during a Christmas break on a visit described in Chapter 5, that she realizes her father had even made the tag for her brother.

## White Marble Panels

The white marble panels which bear the names of the senior prefects are symbols of prestige and accomplishment at Ault. The panels are mentioned in Chapter 5 when Lee's parents express their desire to look at the names on these panels, even though Lee thinks they are being silly. Lee thinks again of these panels when Martha is nominated for the position of prefect in Chapter 7.

## Shampoo

The scent of this shampoo, the kind that Aspeth always uses, is a symbol of Ault. It reminds Lee of her high school days even years after she has graduated. This shampoo and its scent is noted in Chapter 4 when Lee cuts Aspeth's hair and then again in Chapter 7 when Aspeth suggests to Lee that Martha needs to drop out of the senior prefect election.

## A Card from Aubrey

Lee believes a card that she gets from Aubrey, the boy who tutored her in math, on the day of her graduation is proof that at least one boy at Ault believes she is worthy of affection. Lee reads the card in Chapter 8 only when she comes across it in her luggage during a week of parties hosted for the seniors. Lee first mentions the card in Chapter 7





when she shares her memories of Aubrey and tells the reader that she was surprised when he turned into a big, handsome man.

## **Rose**

A rose is a symbol of love. Although Lee asks Cross not to give her flowers, she is very upset and hurt when he does not send her a rose on Valentine's Day. It is in Chapter 8 that Lee describes her hurt when Cross did not send her a flower.

## **A "New York Times" Article**

This "New York Times" article is a symbol of Lee's true feelings about Ault. Although she did not intend to do so, Lee tells the reporter her true feelings about the school and her opinion of herself as a scholarship student. She believes it destroys the facade of herself that she has tried so hard to create over the years to impress her peers.



# Settings

## Ault

Ault is the name of the boarding school in Massachusetts that Lee chooses to attend because she believes she will meet a handsome, studious boy there. Much of the action of the novel occurs on the campus and the buildings of the school including the dormitories, chapel, and school house.

## Westmoor Mall

Reluctantly, Lee goes on a class outing to a mall to get her ears pierced. Cross helps her when she faints in the store. Afterward they get a milkshake and watch a movie together with some other boys from their class. On the way back to the school in the taxi, Cross puts his arm around Lee's shoulders. It is the start of Lee's obsession with Cross.

## The Hospital

It is while Lee is at the hospital visiting Sin-Jun after her suicide attempt that Lee meets David Bardo, a man who works in the kitchen at Ault.

## Martha's House in Burlington

Lee usually spends the long weekends, including Thanksgiving, at Martha's house in Burlington. While her parents are at Ault for parents' weekend Lee's mother comments on a picture of Lee taken in the swimming pool at Martha's house.

## Dean Fletcher's Classroom

Dean Fletcher's classroom is the place where Cross asks Lee to give him a blow job. It is in this same room that Angela Varizi, the reporter from "The New York Times," interviews Lee and the other students.



# Themes and Motifs

## The Silent Power of Money

Even though money is not openly talked about at Ault, Lee tells her reader that evidence of money and its power is everywhere on the campus. One of the perfect examples of the power of money is the way that Conchita is treated at Ault. Even those people who do not have much money sense the power than money has. For instance when Lee's father realizes how much Lee hates Ault he threatens to pull his funding from the high school. Lee's description of the way that scholarship students are treated at Ault also indicates those who have money are preferred to those who do not.

Because her family is rich, Conchita Maxwell gets special treatment at Ault. Even though Conchita tells Lee she has a private room because she has insomnia, Martha assures Lee this is not the case. Conchita's private room, along with the phone she is allowed to have in her room are just some of the benefits that Conchita gets because her family is so rich. Martha leads Lee to believe that the officials at Ault hope that if they are good to Conchita, her parents will donate a good deal of money to the school.

In addition to the staff at Ault being more lax with students whose families are rich, the students who are rich are given special consideration by other students. Aspeth, for instance, is one student who Lee believes get away with things because she is rich. First, when Aspeth is running against Martha for senior prefect Aspeth suggests to Lee that Martha should drop out of the race. It is apparent she expects Martha to drop out just because she suggests it. Also, when cafeteria worker David speaks to Lee in the dining hall Dede tells Lee people will talk badly about her if she is caught going out with a person not from Ault. Lee believes, however, that Aspeth could pull off dating this type of man.

Outsiders, like the reporter from "The New York Times," are surprised to learn that money is a topic that is not often discussed at Ault. Lee indicates that while it is obvious there is a good deal of money invested at Ault, money is not usually seen or discussed though "you caught a glimpse of it sometimes in things that were shiny, like the hood of the headmaster's Mercedes, or the gold dome of the schoolhouse, or a girl's long, straight blond hair" (12). As Lee explains to Angela during her interview for the newspaper, a person's socioeconomic status can usually be determined by things like the quality of their clothes, the furnishings in their dorm rooms, whether they do their own laundry or not, and even what sport they play.

## Blindness to Racism

Lee says often that there is no racism at Ault but it might be more proper to say the students, particularly Lee, are blind to the racism at their school. Lee makes her own racial assumption about Conchita when she prejudices the girl because she is Mexican.



Some students in Ms. Moray's English class flirt with racism when they give an inappropriate portrayal from the novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Finally, when Lee is interviewed for the "New York Times" article she makes some charged statements about the way races are handled at Ault.

Lee believes that just because Ault allows students of all different races and nationalities to attend the school there is no racism at the school. Lee proves this wrong when she makes improper assumptions about Conchita. Just because Conchita is Mexican and does not appear to fit in with the other students Lee assumes she is on scholarship. Even after Lee sees Conchita's dorm room, which Lee realizes cost a good deal of money to furnish, she continues to believe the stereotype she has created. It is not until Martha tells Lee that Conchita is rich that Lee realizes her judgement is wrong.

Darden, a black boy who is in Lee's class, also has experiences in which he comes face to face with racism at Ault. When he talks to Lee just before graduation he explains to her that the reporter from the "New York Times" had him pegged as an angry black man. He was able to recognize her agenda and shut it down because he was familiar with people of her type. Perhaps some of his experience come from an instance in Ms. Moray's English class where he, Aspath and Dede dressed and acted like a pimp and prostitutes to portray a scene from the novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The teacher made them stop their presentation and accused them of racism. Even at that time Darden had not fought back against the teacher's insinuation that he was harboring self-hatred because he was making fun of the black race. He instead admitted to the teacher they had made a mistake and asked that the subject be dropped.

Perhaps, some of the most charged statements that Lee makes to Angela when she is being interviewed for the "New York Times" article deal with race. Even though she had a learning experience with Conchita it does not stop Lee from telling Angela "It's just sort of known that people from certain minorities are almost always on scholarship" (362). This indicates these minorities are poorer and generally do not have the funds to pay for their education. Lee digs herself in deeper when she suggests that more white students do not have scholarships because: "We don't add diversity to the school. And there are plenty of white kids whose parents can pay" (362). In this statement Lee indicates the officials at Ault not only are concerned about diversity and allow some minorities to attend so they can keep up appearances but also that the bottom line in student recruitment is money.

## Unfavorable Consequences of Honesty

Even being honest can have unfavorable consequences Lee learns in the novel Prep. After her comments about Ault appear in an article in "The New York Times" both Lee's peer and her parents are angry with her. In addition to her own honesty hurting her, Lee learns that the honesty of other people can hurt her as well. When she finally confronts Cross about their relationship she is perhaps more hurt by the truth than by the lies she believed.



Lee's honesty is tried during her first semester at Ault. She learns the identity of the person, Little Washington, who has been stealing money from other students living in her dorm. Lee has the unhappy opportunity to meet the girl as she is stealing and trying to set one of Lee's roommates up for the crime. Even though Lee could have gone along with Little's plan and gotten Dede, whom Lee did not like, thrown out of school, Lee is honest and turns Little in instead.

Because Lee is so honest in her first test, it is no surprise she is also honest when she is interviewed for an article in "The New York Times." She is honest about her experiences at Ault and her belief that students who have more money are treated better than students who do not. In this case honesty is not the best route for Lee. Both her peers and her parents are angered by her truthfulness. Her fellow students are angry because they believe she has marred the name and reputation of Ault. Her parents are angry because they spent four years believing their daughter was happy at her boarding school when in reality she has not been happy at all.

Finally, Lee learns how much the truth can hurt. It is not until Lee confronts Cross about their relationship and the way it ends that she truly understands what happened between them. She learns that Cross is the school play boy who is the custodian of a strange sexual game played by the boys on campus. Although he has not included any information about her on this list, Lee wonders if their relationship was just a fling for him. He seems to confirm this when he tells her that he would never have publicly acknowledged her as his girlfriend.

## Lee's Sexual Curiosity

Lee chooses to go to Ault because she wants a boyfriend. She believes her chances of finding a boy who is both handsome and intelligent at a boarding school are better than finding one fitting this description at her public high school. With this in mind Lee bases her entire high school experience on her relationship with boys. She thinks about kissing instead of studying. When she finds herself harboring a strange affection for a girl Lee even thinks she might be gay.

Even though she does not tell her parents, Lee goes to boarding school to find a boyfriend. She could probably be classified as being boy crazy. After she has a positive encounter with Cross Sugarman, a boy in her class, she decides Cross is the boy for her. She spends the rest of her school years stalking Cross and eavesdropping on conversations to get information about him but refusing to talk to him in person. When he begins coming to her dorm room in the fall of her senior year Lee believes her dream has come true.

Lee has always been a big fan of women's magazines and is finally able to use what she has read in these magazine when she is with Cross. It is from her reading, for instance, that she knew how to give Cross a blow job. She is embarrassed because she has so little sexual experience and wonders if Cross realizes how inexperienced she is.



He works with her slowly over the period of several visits and gets her to agree to have sex with him.

Lee is sexually curious not only about straight relationships but also about relationships between homosexuals. When she learns that Clara and Sin-Jun are having a relationship, for instance, Lee wonders how the two, who are roommates, decide when they should mess around and when they should study. She is curious not only about the mechanics of sex but also the minute details of life between a couple in love.

Lee's curiosity about Clara and Sin-Jun is ironic since there was a point that Lee thought she might be homosexual. Because Gates, a girl in the senior class when Lee was a freshman, spoke to Lee and was kind to her Lee developed an unusual obsession with Gates. When she saw a pamphlet in the school's infirmary about homosexuality Lee wondered if she was attracted Gates because she was homosexual. Lee decides she isn't homosexual when her obsession with Gates passed.

## Lee As An Outsider

From her beginning days at Ault, Lee realizes that she is an outsider. She is not rich like the other girls and does not behave like they do. In order to compensate for not being like the other girls, Lee decides to observe the others and match her behavior to theirs. Through the course of the novel Lee continues to meet people whom she also sees as "outsiders" — Conchita, Little and Martha — and wonders why they are content with their statuses.

When Lee first arrives at Ault with her father in their old Datsun Lee realizes that she is out of her league. Because she has told her parents she wants to go to boarding school, had applied on her own, been accepted and even given a big scholarship Lee is determined to see her education at Ault through. Even though Lee struggles with feeling out of place through almost her entire high school experience, her parents do not find out about her unhappiness until almost the last few weeks of school.

In order to keep herself from standing out from the other students, Lee does things she thinks will help her to fit in. She does not worship the rich girls like Dede, one of her roommates does, but she does study their behavior so that she can act like them. For instance when she learns that scholarship students can be identified because they do not have flowered bedspreads, Lee has her parents buy her a flowered bedspread.

Through the course of the novel Lee meets people whom she believes are outsiders just like she is. Even though it would appear Lee would want to meet people who are like her she seems strangely suspicious of them. She has a good reason to be suspicious of Little Washington because Little turns out to be the person who is stealing money in the dorms but Lee also recognizes in Little a "longing and sadness" (36) that Lee herself recognizes. Even though Conchita seeks Lee out to be friends Lee is suspicious of her. Conchita tells Lee that she felt as if she had landed on another planet when she arrived at Ault. Even when Lee learns that Conchita is rich and in Lee's mind



not really an outsider at Ault, she wonders why Conchita acts in ways that sets her apart from others.

Lee also believes that Martha, a friend she met through Conchita, is an outsider. Even though Lee knows Martha's family is rich, the two seem to connect with one another. Lee seems to become frustrated with Martha when Martha begins getting accolades at Ault, like being elected senior prefect, for which Lee is not considered. Lee seems to be wondering if she misclassified Martha and if they are really more different than Lee thought.





# Styles

## Point of View

Lee tells her own story from the first person point of view. This point of view lets the reader get to know Lee very well. The reader knows that Lee is narrating her story from some point after her high school graduation, but Lee's age is when she tells her story is not directly stated. Lee does tell her reader that she has attended both her five and ten year reunions at Ault so it can be inferred that Lee is at least twenty-eight.

A good deal of Lee's narration is focused on her own thoughts, emotions, and memories. She tells about her interactions with teachers and fellow students and the way she reacts to these interactions. It is interesting that in her descriptions Lee tells the reader about the appearance of many of the people with whom she attends school without giving any clues about her own physical appearance. She tells her reader that she does not believe she is attractive, and the reader must take her at her word. The only hint she gives about herself is that she gained weight during her first year at Ault.

In the conclusion of Lee's story where Lee tells the reader what happens to her classmates after Ault, Lee does not include information about her own career. She tells her reader she has a job and that she finished both college and graduate school but does not mention what she studied. However, she shares the career choices of many of her classmates. Lee's decision not to tell her reader about her own career requires the reader to make a decision about Lee's "success" in life.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is the language of the prestigious, religious boarding school. The students attend chapel each morning and sing hymns. These references to religion appear to be the extent of religious rhetoric. The students have a barrage of words to describe different things that happen only at the school. To be "spring cleaned" is to be kicked out of school in the summer, between sessions. Violations of school rules result in students being assigned to do "wipes" or before dinner cleanup. The time before classes start is called "roll call," even though roll is never called. There is a small amount of foul language in the novel as might be expected from high school students. "Fuck" and "bitch" are the worst words used, and they appear sparingly.

One of the things the reader might notice while working his way through this novel are the names given to the particularly affluent students. These names are pretentious and sometimes ridiculous sounding. The senior prefect the year that Lee is a freshman has the first name of Gates. Cross Sugarman is the boy on whom Lee has a crush. Lee even notes that her roommates in college ask what kind of name Cross Sugarman is when Lee tells them that was the name of her first crush. The most popular girl in Lee's class is named Aspeth while another student's first name is McGrath.



Also of significance in the novel in the area of language is the way Korean student Sin-Jun is characterized as speaking very poor English. Even after she graduates from college and becomes a neurobiologist, Sin-Jun's English has not improved. An example from a conversation between Lee and Sin-Jun years after Ault still has Sin-Jun speaking brokenly: "She says she love me so much,' Sin-Jun said. 'But I think she just love sex'" (244). Lee notes at one point in the novel that even Sin-Jun's parents spoke English better than their daughter did. In fact, when Lee first met Sin-Jun she wondered how much English the girl really understood. Sin-Jun's weak grasp of the English language may be the author's way of presenting a stereotype about foreign students.

## Structure

This novel is divided into eight chapters, each of which describes a certain point in Lee's school experience at Ault and covers one specific incident or a set of related incidents. Chapter 1, for instance, covers the fall semester of Lee's freshman year. It's focus is the thefts that take place in Lee's dorm as well as her discovery of who is the one doing the stealing. Three chapters are dedicated to Lee's freshman year, one chapter to her sophomore year, two chapters to Lee's junior year and one chapter to her senior year. At 118 pages the chapter dedicated to Lee's senior year is by far the longest chapter.

Lee tells her story in a basically linear format beginning with her freshman year and ending with her senior year at Ault. As Lee narrates, however, she does have a habit of going back in time to fill her reader in on things that have happened in the past. Sometimes these flashbacks are vital to the plot, like in the case where Lee talks about the night Little was asked to leave Ault in Chapter 2, while some seem trivial. While the novel is written in the past tense, Lee, who is narrating the story as an adult, tends to intersperse some statements and observations in the present tense from her viewpoint as an adult.



## Quotes

This was the moment when I actually believed that the money had been stolen, or at least I believed that Dede believed it.”

-- Narrator (Thieves)

**Importance:** When Dede first announces that she has had \$40 in cash stolen from her dresser drawer in the dorm, Lee does not believe her because most of the students who attend Ault are so rich they have no reason to steal money.

I imagined that if I left South Bend, I would meet a melancholy, athletic boy who liked to read as much as I did and on overcast Sundays we would take walks together wearing wool sweaters.”

-- Narrator (Thieves)

**Importance:** Even though Lee tells her parents that she wants to go to Ault for the educational experience she really wants to go because she hopes she will find a boyfriend with similar likes as she.

It was more like — this dawned on me as I looked at her — she was pretending to be regular. Even though she was special, she was pretending to be like the rest of us.”

-- Narrator (Thieves)

**Importance:** Gates Medkowski impresses Lee when she is a freshman because she is nice to Lee even though she is the prefect of the senior class, ultimately the most popular girl in school. Lee likes Gates because she believes the older student is pretending to be like the other students even though Lee believes Gates is special.

I couldn't tell them about Cross, I thought. I couldn't tell them because Dede liked him and because she wouldn't believe or understand it, and I couldn't tell them because I myself was unsure what there was to believe or understand.”

-- Narrator (All School Rules are in Effect)

**Importance:** Lee knows she can't tell Dede and Sin-Jun what happened between she and Cross at the mall during the school's surprise holiday because not only did Dede like Cross, Lee also is not really sure what did happen between them. Cross had been friendly to her and put his arm around her but he hadn't kissed her. Looking back, Lee isn't sure if his actions counted for anything or not.

What I wanted was to be a cocky high-school boy, so fucking sure of my place in the world.”

-- Narrator (Assassin)

**Importance:** As Lee listens to two boys kid each other about the school-wide game of Assassin during roll call one morning Lee wishes she were a boy. The boys that Lee



sees at Ault seem to be very sure of themselves with no insecurities. She wishes she had the same self-confidence.

I thought about how much money it must have cost to furnish this room, and then I thought about how maybe it was a cultural thing, how even though her family didn't have a lot, they were willing to pour what they did have into objects that were tangible and conspicuous.”

-- Narrator (Assassin)

**Importance:** Even though Lee realizes that it must have cost a good deal of money to furnish Conchita's room, she still believes because Conchita is of Mexican descent she is attending Ault on a scholarship.

I think that she accepted her status as an outsider, that perhaps she had done so even before she came to Ault, while I remained perpetually hopeful that circumstances would conspire to make me beloved.”

-- Narrator (Assassin)

**Importance:** Lee outlines what she sees as the main difference between Conchita, the Mexican girl who tried to befriend her, and herself. She believes Conchita is not resentful and has accepted herself as an outsider at Ault, giving her peace. Lee does not enjoy this same peace because she thinks things will change and she will be accepted at Ault.

Because, undeniably, the qualities that I usually lamented in myself — my invisibility, my watchfulness of others — now served me well.”

-- Narrator (Assassin)

**Importance:** Some of the things that Lee most hates about herself are her self-consciousness and her feeling that she is invisible. When she begins playing Assassin, however, these hated personality traits make Lee good at the game because it requires that she sneak up on her “target” person and place a sticker on them, indicating she has killed them without anyone seeing her.

And understanding this confused everything else I knew about her. Why did she need to act weird? Why did she mention her Mexicanness so often, why did she talk about feeling like an outsider? If she was rich, she belonged at Ault.”

-- Narrator (Assassin)

**Importance:** It is when Lee is riding in the limo with Conchita and she hears the way that Conchita speaks to the driver that she realizes Conchita is rich. She is confused by this realization because Lee's image of Conchita has been formed based on the idea that Conchita was a scholarship student like Lee. Lee is unable to understand why Conchita acts so strangely or why she feels like an outsider when Lee believes that the fact she is rich unquestionably ranks Conchita as an insider at the school.



She was colluding in my attempt to win, and then she stopped colluding. Or maybe it was more complicated than that, maybe she killed even more people to get to me and offer protection.”

-- Narrator (Assassin)

**Importance:** It is only after Conchita “kills” Lee that Lee realizes that Conchita had been helping her out in her quest to reach out to Cross through the game. Lee believes Conchita’s act of knocking Lee out of Assassin is unforgivable because she blocks Lee’s crush.

Racism didn’t exist at Ault.”

-- Narrator (Cipher paragraph 143)

**Importance:** Lee shares this fundamental belief of those who attend and work as official for Ault when Ms. Moray accuses Darden, Aspeth and Dede of being racist in their portrayal of a scene from the novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Even though it is believed racism doesn’t exist at Ault Lee knows it is more prevalent than anyone wants to admit.

They were losers! They were bigger dorks than I was! The trick, of course, would be to remember this at roll call when I saw them from far away, seeming coolly impenetrable.”

-- Narrator (Cipher)

**Importance:** When Lee observes the way that Aspeth and Cross, the most popular kids in her school, recite childhood limericks and act childishly as she cuts Aspeth’s hair, she realizes how they are really no different from her.

In the end, I went back up to the common room, borrowed a broom and dustpan, swept it up, dumped it in the trash — as I did so, I had a fantasy of transporting it across campus and dumping it instead in Aspeth’s bed, but this probably was a disciplinary offense and even if it wasn’t, it was highly Audrey Flahertyish — and then returned the broom to the dorm closet.”

-- Narrator (Cipher)

**Importance:** To test Martha’s statement to Lee that she is letting people take advantage of her Lee asks Aspeth to help her clean up after Aspeth’s haircut. Lee knows Martha was right when Aspeth refuses to help her clean up. Lee cleans up by herself and keeps herself from retaliating as she would like to do.

Even if I didn’t know the reason, I was glad that Ms. Moray had chosen me to freak out on because I would only tell Martha about it, I wouldn’t spread it all around the school.”

-- Narrator (Cipher)

**Importance:** Lee seems to believe that had Ms. Moray freaked out on another student like she did on Lee when Lee turned in an essay with a note at the bottom that the topic she addressed was not really one that she cared about, that student would have spread the news of Ms. Moray’s strange behavior throughout the school. Lee believes Ms. Moray is lucky because Lee is not one to tell others about her teacher’s indiscretion.



Her lack of affect seemed ridiculous, a parody of a moody teenager.”  
-- Narrator (Townie paragraph 231)

**Importance:** Lee observes Sin-Jun’s lack of emotions just after her suicide attempt and believes Sin-Jun’s expression would be comic if the situation was not so serious.

If a guy believed my value to lie in my looks, it meant either that he’d somehow been misled and would eventually be disappointed, or that he had very low standards.”  
-- Narrator (Townie)

**Importance:** After David Bardo asks Lee out on a date Lee tries to determine what positive features he might have seen in her to prompt him to ask her on a date. Lee points out in this quote how unattractive she believes she is.

People will definitely talk if you’re dating a townie.”  
-- Dede (Townie)

**Importance:** Dede warns Lee that if Lee dates someone not from Ault her fellow peers will talk about her in an unfavorable manner. Dede confronts Lee with this information after David Bardo approaches Lee in the lunchroom to tell her they will have to postpone their date.

But later — Sin-Jun was one of the few classmates I stayed in touch with after Ault — after she’d come out to the extent that it was clear to everyone except her parents she was a lesbian (she kept her hair short and spiky, she wore silver hoops up one ear), I did learn the whole story.”  
-- Narrator (Townie)

**Importance:** It is only after they have graduated from Ault that Lee learns the story of Sin-Jun’s suicide attempt. By that time Sin-Jun has come out as a lesbian, a sexual orientation Lee had suspected when they were at Ault especially after she saw Sin-Jun and Clara together.

Because the thing was, Martha wasn’t cool. She was exactly the kind of girl who got overlooked, not rewarded, by Ault. And being a prefect was Ault’s biggest reward, a stamp of approval that would set you up, it seemed, for the rest of your life.”  
-- Narrator (Spring-cleaning)

**Importance:** Lee describes why it surprises her so much that her roommate, Martha, is nominated for the prestigious position of senior prefect.

This desperate aversion to seeming like you wanted anything, or worse, to going after it, stayed with me for years after I left Ault.”  
-- Narrator (Spring-cleaning)

**Importance:** While attending Ault, Lee picks up a habit of pretending as if she does not want the things she actually does want, a habit that follows her through her life. Lee



mentions this in the context of prefect elections where those nominated were not allowed to campaign for the position.

I often messed up with people, it was true, but it rarely happened because I was reading them wrong; it was because I got nervous, or because I could see too clearly that I was not what they wanted.”

-- Narrator (Spring-cleaning)

**Importance:** Although Lee prides herself on being able to read people well, she seems able to read them only based on her own expectations. She expects people not to want her or like her. She shares this information in the context of telling her reader how he has learned how to manipulate Aubrey into doing her math work for her.

Because, I could see, that's what this day was to her — not the day she'd been elected senior prefect but the day she'd cheated.”

-- Narrator (Spring-cleaning)

**Importance:** Because Lee is failing precalculus and is in danger of getting kicked out of Ault Martha takes charge of Lee's final exam in math when she sees that Lee will not pass the exam on her own. Martha first tries to help Lee with the questions but when she realizes Lee really doesn't understand the math she winds up doing the problems for her. At Ault cheating is a violation that can get them both kicked out of school. Also, by cheating, Martha puts herself into a precarious position because she has just been named senior prefect. It would look especially bad for Martha, as the prefect, to be kicked out of Ault for cheating. Although Martha should be able to remember that day as one of her best, Lee knows she has marred it by causing her roommate to feel she had to cheat to save her place in the school.

I think adults forget just how much faith teenagers can have in them, just how willing to believe that adults, by virtue of being adults, know absolute truths, or that absolute truths are even knowable.”

-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** Lee is being counseled by her college counselor, Mrs. Stanchak, when she begins crying because she believes she and Cross will be separated once they go to college. For a moment Lee believes she can confide in Mrs. Stanchak and that the woman might be able to give her some usable advice in her boyfriend situation.

And it's not like I'm skeptical because I don't think you're good enough for him. If anything, you're too good. I'm just not sure he realizes that.”

-- Martha (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** Martha tries to discourage Lee's crush on Cross because she thinks Lee deserves better.

I didn't have the impulse, just because I could get away with it, to act any differently at the airport than I did at Ault.”





-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** At the airport when Lee sees other students at Ault smoking, a habit that is against the rules at Ault, Lee prides herself in being the same person away from Ault that she is while at the school.

This was what I was, fundamentally: a petty, angry, impotent person.”

-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** When Lee is trying to interact with her parents and brother during the Christmas break of her senior year, she believes they bring out her true personality, one she doesn't like.

I hated them because they thought I was the same as they were, because if they were right, it would mean I'd failed myself, and because if they were wrong, it would mean I had betrayed them.”

-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** After Lee is hurt by the way her brother and father treat her during Christmas break, Lee faces a true paradox when she considers how her parents feel about her. If she is the same sort of person as her parents, Lee knows that means she has failed in her attempt to be like the other students at Ault. In the same respect, if Lee has managed to become like the other students at Ault, she believes it means she has betrayed her parents.

It wasn't that Cross hadn't sent flowers; it was that he hadn't sent flowers to me.”

-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** Even though Lee had at one point told Cross not to send her flowers, she is still upset with him because he did not send her a rose on Valentine's Day.

The person I was as of this moment, the person the article made me, was the precise opposite of the person I had, for the last four years, tried to be. It was the worst possible mistake I could have made.”

-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** After the reporter from “The New York Times” releases her interview with Lee, Lee realizes that the article makes her out to be the very person she has tried so hard at Ault not to be. In the article, her real self is revealed.

People at Ault were angry at me for making critical remarks in a public forum, but my father's displeasure was, obviously, personal.”

-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** After the interview with Lee runs in “The New York Times,” Lee's schoolmates are angry with her because she said bad things about the school. Also, her



father is angry with her because he spent so much money on her education when it appears she did not appreciate it or enjoy it.

Black people who live in a white world learn to be careful,' he said. 'You learn not to make waves.'"

-- Darden (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** When Darden tries to comfort Lee concerning the "New York Times" article, he tells her that he did not fall into the reporter's trap because he knew to be careful around white people. Darden's words and actions prove that racism did exist at Ault. However, Darden had figured out how to act so that he did not cause trouble by being black.

But by saying she couldn't, she'd pretty much sealed that it wouldn't. Had she not understood how literally I took her, how much I trusted her advice?"

-- Narrator (Kissing and Kissing)

**Importance:** As Lee and Martha talk to one another in the school library on one of their final days at Ault, Lee realizes that she resents Martha because earlier that school year Martha had discouraged Lee's relationship with Cross. Lee believes that Martha began a self-fulfilling prophecy when she told Lee she did not believe Cross would ever be Lee's boyfriend.