

Special Topics in Calamity Physics Study Guide

Special Topics in Calamity Physics by Marisha Pessi

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Plot Summary

Marisha Pessl's debut novel, *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*, focuses around one year in the life of the protagonist and narrator, Blue Van Meer. She is named after the Cassius Blue butterfly, which her mother loved to catch. Blue and her father, Gareth, a political science professor, move around the country every few months after the death of Natasha, Blue's mother and Gareth's wife. A successful book and Gareth's work as a visiting professor enable the traveling. Blue is happy that the entirety of her senior year in high school will be spent in Stockton, North Carolina. Blue will be attending the culturally-focused Saint Gallway School.

In Stockton, Blue meets and befriends a woman named Hannah Schneider, who teaches film at the school. Hannah is friends and socializes with a group of elitist students, known as the Bluebloods. Hannah brings Blue into this group, which accepts Blue over time. Blue and the members of the Bluebloods are all curious about Hannah, who never reveals much of her own past.

In late March, Hannah organizes a camping trip in the mountains. Two of the Bluebloods, Leulah and Jade, believe they are being followed. That night, Blue finds Hannah Schneider dead, hanging from a tree. While the police write off Hannah's death as a suicide, Blue isn't convinced. She goes through Hannah's house and her possessions, and does research into an acquaintance of Hannah's, Smoke Harvey, who died at a party Hannah hosted before she died. Ada Harvey, Smoke's daughter, reveals that Smoke was an investigative journalist who was attempting to bring a group of left wing radicals to justice following the murder of Smoke's uncle, a U.S. senator. Hannah Schneider is actually Catherine Baker, a liberal-socialist radical. Blue theorizes that Hannah was attempting to stage a disappearance during the camping trip, but may have accidentally killed herself in the process.

Blue reveals all of this information to her father, who agrees to go to the police with her. But the next morning, Gareth is gone, along with all of his clothes. Blue discovers that Gareth was a member of the same left wing group as Hannah. Blue tells her father's colleagues at college that he is in Europe due to his mother taking ill, and that he himself is suffering from cancer. Blue goes on with her life, her eyes set on the Ivy League, and financed by a trust fund her father set up for her years before.



Introduction - Part I, Chapter 5

Introduction - Part I, Chapter 5 Summary

Introduction - Blue Van Meer admits to writing about her life during a time of sleeplessness one year after the suicide of Hannah Schneider. Blue, like her father, is naturally idealistic and a free thinker. Blue is in college when she receives a phone call from Jade, who apologizes to Blue, saying that Blue had nothing to do with what happened to Hannah. During her Greek and Roman Epics class, Blue has the sudden urge to write, and she leaves class to do so.

Part 1, Chapter 1 - Blue begins by telling about her mother's death. Blue's mother, Natasha Alicia Bridges Van Meer, dies in 1992 in Mississippi. Blue would have been killed had her father, Gareth Van Meer, a college professor, not picked her up from elementary school. Gareth teaches political science. Blue's mother always enjoyed catching butterflies, Cassius Blues in particular, and so named Blue after them.

Part 1, Chapter 2 - The success of Gareth's book *The Powers That Be*, in addition to the respect garnered from his essays, allows him to be a visiting professor, enabling traveling. Gareth chooses lower-tiered schools, in order to teach students who aren't pompous and arrogant. As they drive, they listen to books and poetry on CDs, talk about literature, essays, vocabulary words, and so on. Gareth also goes through quick romances with various women, whom Blue labels "June Bugs." Gareth also has a penchant for drinking and is somewhat self-absorbed, except when it comes to Blue and Natasha.

Part 1, Chapter 3 - As they travel around, Blue prays to God for something real to happen in her life, because up until then, nothing has really changed despite all of the traveling. Blue says God answers her prayers when she is thirteen and she and her father move to Howard, Louisiana. There, she meets Andreo Verdugo, whom Gareth hires to work on the yard. Blue is smitten with Andreo. Andreo shows up one night, bloodied and wounded from being shot, and Blue calls an ambulance for him and rides in the back with him to the hospital. Andreo is treated and then disappears from the hospital without a word.

Part 1, Chapter 4 - Blue is seeking more stability. Gareth announces that, for Blue's entire senior year in high school, they will reside in Stockton, North Carolina. They take a small mansion at 24 Armor Street. The house is lavishly built, and Blue worries about how they will afford it. Gareth says he has it all in hand. Gareth also manages to have sent to the new house Blue's Renaissance revival table, the price tag of which is \$17,000.

Part 1, Chapter 5 - At Fat Kat Foods two days later, Blue first sees Hannah Schneider, thin, beautiful, and dark-haired, in funeral clothes. While shopping for shoes and clothes, Blue and Gareth comes across Hannah once more. She introduces herself over



trivia about the movie "Casablanca", and reveals she is a teacher at Saint Gallway, where she teaches an elective called "Introduction to Film". Gareth isn't in the mood to talk, so he excused himself and Blue.

Introduction - Part I, Chapter 5 Analysis

The opening of the novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* is juxtaposed between two deaths which have profound impacts on Blue's life: that of her mother Natasha, and that of Saint Gallway School film teacher Hannah Schneider. The death of Blue's mother contributes to a decade-long series of moves she and her father, Gareth, make around the country, never staying in more than one place for a few months. Gareth, a political science professor, is able to afford travel by visiting tenures and a successful book. Blue longs for a little stability and, to her happiness, Gareth announces her entire senior year of high school will be spent in one place: Stockton, North Carolina.

It is the presence of the Van Meers in North Carolina that will put Blue in contact with Hannah Schneider, whose death will affect Blue's life in an even more severe way than that of her mother. This will not be revealed until later chapters, but it is an important event to note beyond the typical emotional distress associated with death.

It is also revealed in the early chapters of the book that Blue nearly idolizes her father, referencing him frequently. Gareth is a very learned man, and his erudition has rubbed off in tremendous ways on Blue, whose own knowledge easily rivals Gareth's. Despite Gareth's womanizing and his penchant for drinking, Gareth provides the sole source of stability in Blue's life. While everything else changes around her - schools, friends, places - Gareth remains her unwavering father.



Part I, Chapter 6 - Part 2, Chapter 11

Part I, Chapter 6 - Part 2, Chapter 11 Summary

Part I, Chapter 6 - St. Gallway school was founded by Horatio Mills Gallway, a rags-to-riches newspaperman, in 1910. It is a private prep school which emphasizes cultural and societal advancement - from scientific discoveries to performing arts. Blue is unusually nervous her first day. She meets Charles Loren, handsome, blonde, and confident. They speak briefly, and Charles already knows her name. Charles invites her to join his study group. Blue also meets Sal Mineo, who asks her how she knows Charles, because everyone wants to know Charles. Charles is considered royalty. She also sees Charles carrying on with Hannah as though Hannah were his girlfriend.

Gareth's alcohol of choice is Bourbon. In "Bourbon Mood," Gareth prattles on - sometimes espousing wisdom. He cautions Blue, during a Bourbon Mood, not to try to change the lives of others, but only herself. Gareth also tells Blue that her story will be the only one to last.

Part 1, Chapter 7 - Blue is taking six AP classes and has only one free period. She has her eyes set on the Ivy League. When Blue does not participate in Charles's study group, he begins leaving her notes asking her to attend once more. She also receives another note from Jade Chirchill Whitestone, one of Charles's friends and a member of the study group, asking her to meet them on the second floor of Barrow House in room 208 on Friday at 3:45. They also list Hannah Schneider as a friend. Blue goes to the meeting place at the appointed time, only to discover that the letter is a hoax. On her way outside, she meets up with Hannah. Hannah invites Blue to her house on Sunday. Hannah cooks for Charles, Jade, and their friends on Sundays.

Part 1, Chapter 8 - Dinner at Hannah's is a tradition that has lasted three years, having begun with Jade and the others taking her film class, which turned into after-class discussions, dinners out, and then dinners at Hannah's house. Jade explains that Headmaster Havermeyer doesn't like relationships between students and teachers, preferring things to be black and white. Jade also explains that Hannah is a shade of gray. Jade also insists she wrote room "308" on the note, and not "208". They arrive at Hannah's, an eclectic sort of old house on a hill. There, she meets everyone - Jade who is beautiful and terrifying, as well as self-centered and self-assured; Nigel, who dresses well but has nervous habits; Milton, slightly overweight and defensive about his tattoo; and Leulah, delicate, pretty, called "Lu" for short. Blue gets the impression that Hannah isn't happy with herself.

On the surface, Hannah is perfect, but upon closer inspection, she is not. Her clothes, which look clean and professional, are slightly worn and distressed upon closer inspection. Blue discovers over time, however, that Hannah chooses to collect old things, saves animals, and is an expert mountaineer. Dinner conversations are rarely intellectual. Hannah also has the ability to inspire others, such as encouraging Jade to



join the school paper, the "Galloway Gazette." Hannah makes Blue feel, as well, that she is not alone. Yet Blue discovers it is very difficult to extract details about Hannah's own life.

Part 1, Chapter 9 - Blue relates that Charles, Nigel, Jade, Leulah, and Milton inspire awe and fear in others at school. The group is referred to as the "Bluebloods." Rumors swirl about Hannah being absentminded, being in a sexual relationship with Charles, and the Bluebloods participating in orgies. Leulah and Jade, at Hannah's insistence, bring Blue to Conscience, a hairdresser's place. Blue is given a makeover.

Blue goes to Jade's house one evening. Jade's family is incredibly wealthy. Jade makes Blue a Mudslinger, Blue's first alcoholic drink, and gives Blue and the other Bluebloods a tour. Blue then passes out from the drink. She assumes the nickname "Retch" for the incident.

Blue continues to wonder about Hannah. There are no photographs on display in her home. Hannah never converses with many other teachers. Blue wonders why.

Part 1, Chapter 10 - Jade questions Blue about her sex life. Jade and Leulah take her to the Blind Horse Saloon to find her a man. Blue discovers that Jade and Leulah engage in sexual encounters with much older men at these places. They also follow Hannah around, seeing her leave a restaurant with a man in his sixties or seventies. Hannah is dressed to perfection. They follow Hannah and the man to a hotel, where Hannah checks in. The assumption the girls share is that Hannah is a prostitute.

Part 2, Chapter 11 - Snooping through Hannah's garbage bin at her house, the Bluebloods find a masquerade charity event invitation, and Nigel slips the invitation onto the dinner table. Hannah dismisses it as something they can't attend, and tells Nigel to respect her privacy. The Bluebloods secretly decide to attend anyways. Hannah is hosting the party at her house, and Blue and the others, in costumes, work their way into the party. They come across Hannah, who is quietly enraged they have attended. They part ways, and Blue thinks she sees her father in costume somewhere in the party.

Nigel suggests he and Blue go to Hannah's bedroom. The bedroom is bare, which is a stark contrast to the rest of the house. Nigel tries on some of Hannah's clothes, while Blue looks around in her bathroom. Suddenly, the music downstairs stops, and upon investigation, Blue and Nigel hear that somebody is dead.

Part I, Chapter 6 - Part 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

Blue begins her school year at Saint Gallway, which emphasizes creativity, invention, and cultural well-roundedness. Her workload at school is tremendous: six AP classes. Blue has her heart set on Ivy League schools - mostly Harvard - and she is prepared to go the distance to get in. She is also inexorably drawn into a group of friends - Charles, Jade, Leulah, Milton, and Nigel - who call themselves the "Bluebloods." They are



wealthy, privileged kids, who at first only put up with Blue because Hannah asks them to do so.

Hannah's relationship with the Bluebloods is strange. In her 40s, Hannah says little about her own past and her own life, and she is a mystery to everyone around her. Indeed, her fraternization with high school kids - 30 years younger - is also suspicious, though Hannah explains it away as her serving as a guide for them. In the attempt to learn more about Hannah, Blue and the others discover she might be a part-time prostitute, and that despite a confident appearance, Hannah appears to be fraying at the edges.

Further trying to learn more about Hannah, and further trying to be a part of her life, Blue and the others crash a masquerade party, during which someone dies. This third death will prove to be a catalyst for Hannah, and will further serve to define the course of the novel.



Part 2, Chapter 12 - Part 2, Chapter 17

Part 2, Chapter 12 - Part 2, Chapter 17 Summary

Part 2, Chapter 12 - Ambulances arrive for a large man, soaking wet, lying on the patio, dead. The desire to flee is stopped by Charles, who says they can't leave a crime scene. Charles is also worried, looking for Hannah, but she cannot be found. Charles goes to see her the following weekend. Hannah is well, but shaken up. Hannah meets Blue and the others for dinner, and puts her foot down, telling them their actions could have gotten her fired, and them expelled. Blue also notices that Hannah is drinking more and beginning to swear more and more.

Leulah asks Hannah about the man who died, and Hannah explains that it was an old friend from Chicago, Smoke "Dubs" Harvey. He was a good man who always could make people laugh. He was a banker and a writer. A newspaper article reveals that he had three times the legal limit of alcohol in his system at the time of his death. Blue and the others wonder how he could have had so much alcohol in his system in so short a time.

Part 2, Chapter 13 - During Study Hall, Zach Soderberg asks Blue to the Christmas Formal Dance. Blue can only nod yes. She wonders about Hannah's sudden turn for the worse.

Part 2, Chapter 14 - Blue and Zach attend the Christmas Cabaret dance. Jade arrives at the dance, drunk, and Blue takes her outside. Jade says the others ditched Blue and the dance to watch a movie at Hannah's. Jade claims she is the only one with loyalty. Jade throws up, and admits to hating everyone but Blue because Blue is decent. Jade, furthermore, believes that Hannah killed Smoke Harvey. Jade doesn't believe everyone needs a motive, that some just kill to kill. She also says Hannah is obsessed with Blue. Jade also believes that something happened between Charles and Hannah, and that sex is a casual, careless thing for Hannah.

Jade compels Blue to sneak into Hannah's classroom to look for evidence of murder. They have to hide when Eva Brewster, another teacher, walks around calling "Blue!" When Eva leaves, Jade wants to know why Eva was only calling for Blue.

Part 2, Chapter 15 - Gareth is waiting up for Blue when she returns home. Gareth is aware of Blue's activities, and is ready to cut the year short and move to Fort Peck, Wyoming. Blue is beside herself, and leaves the house. She runs to a food mart where Larson, a student of her father's, is working. He buys her a root beer Slurpee, and Blue thinks he's a nice guy. She asks to borrow his car.

Part 2, Chapter 16 - Blue goes to see Hannah. Hannah reveals she and Jade had a fight over Jade having college applications in order. Hannah also reveals that each of the Bluebloods have their own pasts: Jade hitchhiked across the country to avoid being



arrested for stealing; Leulah ran away with her math teacher when she was thirteen, and made it to Florida before he was arrested; Milton is twenty-one, and doesn't remember some of his younger years, living on the streets. Hannah explains she brought Blue into the group because she felt Blue was lonely.

Part 2, Chapter 17 - Blue spends the night in Hannah's guest room. Hannah takes Blue out for some food, and then has her call her father. Gareth says they can talk about Fort Peck if she comes home to help him grade student essays.

Part 2, Chapter 12 - Part 2, Chapter 17 Analysis

The death of Smoke Harvey will have unforeseeable consequences for both Hannah and Blue. Jade, who arrives at the Christmas dance drunk, begins unloading all of her suspicions about Hannah to Blue, from Hannah's probably having a sexual relationship with Charles to Hannah's being obsessed with Blue. Hannah's character is growing more and more diverse, as well as complex, becoming only an enigma, with nothing substantial behind her name.

But Hannah counters Jade's rantings. Hannah explains to Blue that each of the Bluebloods has some stain on their past, something that caused them severe emotional distress. Hannah explains that this is why she has befriended them all, because they all need guidance somehow. Hannah admits to bringing Blue into the fold because she felt that Blue was lonely.



Part 2, Chapter 18 - Part 3, Chapter 23

Part 2, Chapter 18 - Part 3, Chapter 23 Summary

Part 2, Chapter 18 - The Van Meers are invited to Paris by Gareth's old friend, Dr. Michael Servo Kouropoulos, over Christmas. There, Kouropoulos tells Gareth he ought to remarry. The contention between Gareth and Kouropoulos, as well as Blue's own desire to leave, causes the Van Meers to leave two days early.

Part 2, Chapter 19 - When school resumes, everyone notices that Hannah has cut off almost all of her hair. Jade believes Hannah will have a nervous breakdown. Over break, Milton and Nigel go through Hannah's garage and find thousands of trail maps, as well as books and articles about disappearances. At dinner, Hannah announces they are going on a camping trip on March twenty-sixth.

Part 2, Chapter 20 - Zach gives Blue photos of both of them taken at Zach's house before the Christmas dance. Two weeks later, Eva Brewster shows up at Blue's house while Gareth is out at dinner with a man named Arnie Sanderson. Eva has been dating Blue's father, which shocks Blue. Eva demands to know where Gareth is, and believes he is seeing another woman. She traipses around the house and drops a gold pen in her purse, and begins going through Gareth's study despite Blue's protestations. She then begins throwing and destroying things, including knocking over the butterfly display cases. Blue grapples with her to stop her, but Eva knocks her aside. She then cries a little, and leaves. Blue knows her father has finally gotten what was coming to him, but is still horrified by it all. Blue convinces Gareth not to call the police, because Eva is a woman who has been disrespected and lied to.

Part 2, Chapter 21 - Blue and Zach grow distant, even as friends. Eva and Blue ignore one another in the hallways. Friday, March 26th rolls around, and Hannah rents a yellow truck to bring everyone's gear to Sunset Views Encampment in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Hannah tells everyone to remember their emergency supplies and their maps. Jade takes the first-aid kit. They will be hiking Bald Creek Trail, past Abram's Peak, to Sugartop Summit. They reach Abram's Peak at 6:15 PM, and can see Tennessee over the state border. They reach Sugartop Summit and begin setting up camp and build a fire. Leulah finds a recently extinguished cigarette butt, and she and Jade want to leave, thinking they are being watched. Hannah attempts to calm them, but she also looks frightened. Blue goes out to use the restroom.

Part 2, Chapter 22 - Hannah goes to talk to Blue; they leave the others at the campfire and head off on their own. Hannah then tells Blue there is something she needs to know. Blue thinks it has something to do with her father. But a sound in the trees behind them interrupts them, and Hannah turns on the flashlight to see the reflection of glasses, and someone dart away. Hannah tells Blue to remain where she is, hands her a map, tells her to wait five minutes, and leaves. After Hannah doesn't come back, Blue goes looking for her, to find her hanging from a tree, dead.



Part 2, Chapter 23 - Blue is treated at the hospital for shock, fatigue, dehydration, and an injured knee following the discovery. Gareth makes sure she is well-taken care of, and Blue talks to police officer Coxley. She informs him of everything that transpired, including that they may have been followed. The other five Bluebloods are missing.

Part 2, Chapter 18 - Part 3, Chapter 23 Analysis

Following a Christmas trip to Paris, Blue returns to Saint Gallway school to discover that Hannah has cut off almost all of her hair. The idea that Hannah is fraying at the edges has become even more apparent, in a much more obvious way: intentional physical self-mutilation. Hannah, to the reader, appears to be disturbed. While the Bluebloods believe Hannah is losing it, Blue feels very defensive of Hannah, and does not believe she is crazy.

Gareth's womanizing ways catch up to him, as Eva Brewster arrives to destroy Gareth's office, including the butterfly collection Gareth and Blue carefully kept - the only piece of Natasha they have left. The emotional distress in Blue's life continues mounting, causing a tremendous rift between her and Zach.

It is at this time that Hannah announces that she has planned a camping trip for them all. During the camping trip, Hannah and Blue head off alone together, and Hannah tells Blue she has something she needs to tell her. The fleeting appearance of someone in the woods nearby causes them to be terrified, and Hannah to separate from Blue. A short while later, Blue goes searching for Hannah, to find her hanging from a tree, dead. Little does Blue know that Hannah's death will be the final catalyst for the dissolution of everything that she holds dear.



Part 3, Chapter 24 - Part 3, Chapter 29

Part 3, Chapter 24 - Part 3, Chapter 29 Summary

Part 3, Chapter 24 - Blue is still mortified by Hannah's death, feeling as though something inside of her has been misplaced. The news reports that Hannah Louise Schneider, age 44, has been found dead. The Bluebloods are all found alive, twelve miles away, having become lost. Blue asks Gareth if he was having an affair with Hannah, which he denies. The school wants Blue to come and talk to their counselor, but Gareth is enraged because of the situation. He surmises that the school doesn't want to be sued for allowing a deranged teacher to bring six kids on a field trip without parental permission. Blue attempts to call Jade, Charles, Nigel, Leulah, and Milton, but none of them wants to speak to her.

Part 2, Chapter 25 - Back at school, everyone is talking about Hannah Schneider, the Bluebloods, and Blue. Hannah, especially, receives the brunt of things. Zach gives Blue a note, saying he is around if she wants to talk. Mr. Moats, who relishes in humiliating students from time to time, attempts to humiliate Blue for not paying attention. But another student in class, Jessica Rothstein, sticks up for Blue. Tim Waters also sticks up for Blue, silencing Mr. Moats.

Hannah's classroom has become a shrine to her memory, replete with flowers, cards, and candles. Blue also runs into Jade, who says it is Blue's fault Hannah is dead, because Hannah was forced to go out after Blue to find her. Blue is incensed because Jade has concocted all sorts of horrific stories about Hannah, only to turn around and pretend as though Hannah were the most important thing to her.

Part 3, Chapter 26 - The coroner rules Hannah's death a suicide, but Blue is convinced otherwise. Blue convinces her father to bring her to the Sluder County Sheriff's Office, where Blue meets with Sergeant Harper, the chief investigator on the Schneider case. Harper reveals that two other couples were camping in the area, but she says that it was a suicide, not murder. Sergeant Harper also reveals that Hannah was an orphan from New Jersey, and had attempted suicide in the same fashion - hanging by electrical cord in the woods - when she was eighteen. Sergeant Harper also tells Blue to go home and live her life, because what happened is between Hannah and God.

Part 3, Chapter 27 - Headmaster Havermeyer holds a memorial day for Hannah. Afterward, Milton goes to talk to Blue. Milton tells Blue that he knows it isn't her fault, and that she needs to go to Hannah's house. Hannah had said they would both understand. Milton and Blue go through Hannah's garage. Each box seems to contain a different phase in Hannah's life, from hippie days to stripping to goth and so on. Milton and Hannah then go through the house. They end up in Hannah's room, strip naked, roll around, but don't have sex. Nigel reveals that Charles, despite what Hannah said, is not adopted; Jade and Leulah did not run away, and Nigel's parents aren't in prison, and Milton is not 21.



Part 3, Chapter 28 - Blue cannot believe that Hannah was insane. Blue reveals to the reader that she had swiped a few things from Hannah's house, not wanting Milton to know. Among them are the missing persons articles Hannah collected. Blue realizes that all of them are disappearances that appear to have been staged. Blue realizes Hannah meant to disappear, not die. Blue also believes that Hannah hoped she would figure it out.

Part 3, Chapter 29 - Blue does research into staged disappearances and lynching. She discovers there is a kind of noose and process that can be done by one person. Blue also tracks down Eva Brewster, Hannah's one teacher friend, to talk to her. Blue convinces Eva by telling Eva that she destroyed the only thing she had left from her mother - the butterfly collections - and Eva agrees to talk. Eva isn't entirely convinced it was suicide, either, but Hannah had a lot in her life to be sorry for.

At school, Charles tells Blue she ruined his life, broke his heart, and he wants to kill her. Jade, Leulah, and Nigel are all condescending toward her - and so is Milton, who declares to the others that Blue is a bad kisser.

Part 3, Chapter 24 - Part 3, Chapter 29 Analysis

Blue's emotional distress has only intensified. While everyone is still alive, no one wants to talk to Blue about what has happened. Despite the distance between them, Zach lets Blue know that he's around if he wants to talk at all. Yet, in true Christian fashion, mere acquaintances whom Blue calls Good Samaritans, defend her in school against a teacher, who bullies her for not paying attention in class.

Officially, Hannah's death is ruled a suicide, but Blue is suspicious. Milton finally breaks his silence and agrees to speak with Blue, to bring her to Hannah's house as Hannah requested. There, Blue discovers, in Hannah's garage, boxes filled with similarly-themed clothes and effects. They are various stages of Hannah's life, making Hannah even more of an enigma. Milton also reveals that all of the things Blue learned about them from Hannah are not true, which only serves to further confuse Blue - and pique her interest.

To add insult to injury, Milton betrays Blue, falling in line with the other Bluebloods against Hannah, further isolating her, further forcing her away - but also continuing to fuel her resolve.

Blue continues to research Hannah, discovering that all of the articles and newspaper clippings about missing people Hannah had collected are what appear to be staged disappearances. Blue begins to suspect that Hannah wanted to stage her own death and disappearance, but may have ultimately killed herself.



Part 3, Chapter 30 - Part 3, Chapter 35

Part 3, Chapter 30 - Part 3, Chapter 35 Summary

Part 3, Chapter 30 - Hannah, to cope with the humiliation from the Bluebloods, returns to attempting to find out more about Hannah. Blue finds the number of Ada Harvey, one of Smoke Harvey's daughters, and calls her up. Ada cannot stand Hannah, and says her family was never friends with Hannah. Ada is convinced her father didn't die from alcohol and medication mixing poorly together. Ada reveals Smoke was an investigative journalist who was working on bringing a counterculture radical group (The Nightwatchmen) from the 1970s to justice for murdering an uncle, Senator Michael McCullough. The radical, George Gracey, supposedly had a partner, Catherine Baker - who went by the name Hannah Schneider - a name lifted off a dead girl in New Jersey. Ada believes Smoke was poisoned, and that Hannah was onto Smoke following her, because she smiled at him one day in a grocery store.

Part 3, Chapter 31 - The outfit that Hannah was wearing in the grocery store when she saw Smoke is the same sort of outfit Blue sees Hannah in beforehand. Blue fears for her father's safety, for Gareth has written about the Nightwatchmen before. Blue tells Gareth not to trust Arnie Sanderson. Blue also does more research on radical leftist groups, including the Nightwatchmen, online. Senator McCullough was apparently assassinated for knowing beforehand about a toxic waste dump that would affect the health and lives of people living in impoverished communities downstream from the site. Gracey later targeted oil companies for poor waste disposal methods, but rather than succeeding, he ended up killing innocent people and making work tougher for regular employees. The movement went underground to structure and reeducate -which is why Hannah must have known so much about Harvey.

Terrorist tactics continued into the 1980s, with the deaths of Ford executives. Catherine Baker/Hannah Schneider had also apparently been the murderer of a police officer in 1987. Blue surmises that the costume party was Hannah's way of bringing together other Nightwatchmen to kill Smoke. Blue sneaks out of her house to go to Hannah's to find more proof.

Part 3, Chapter 32 - Blue goes to borrow Larson's car from the food mart again, and discovers to her shock that Larson says that Gareth had been seeing Hannah Schneider. Larson also says another woman with blonde hair has been around as well.

Part 3, Chapter 33 - Blue confronts her father, demanding to know why he has lied to her. In a fit of rage, she begins hurling books at Gareth. One book hits Gareth below the eye and causes a severe wound. Eventually, Blue calms down enough for Gareth to explain to her that he met with Hannah over concern about Blue's behavior and mental health, but Gareth reveals he soon had discovered that Hannah needed help. Blue then goes into her research and explains that she believes Hannah has been murdered. Gareth listens intently, and tells Hannah he believes her. She then hugs him. Blue



insists on going to the police, but Gareth cautions her that she needs more evidence. Blue doesn't care. She still wants to go to the police.

Part 3, Chapter 34 - Blue wakes up late the next morning. Gareth is gone, and so are all of the clothes in his closet. Blue believes he has been kidnapped. Eventually, she comes to the belief that he simply disappeared of his own free will.

Part 3, Chapter 35 - After seven days have gone by, college officials begin calling to see where Gareth is. Blue tells the college that Gareth's mother has had a heart attack, and won't be alright. Blue has not been attending school, and Saint Gallway's has been calling the house to find out where she is. Ada Harvey sends Blue Smoke's evidence in the mail, which Blue devours. Inside is a Most Wanted sheet for Catherine Baker and George Gracey. Gracey's photo is that of a much younger Servo Kouropoulos. Blue is stunned. She realizes her father is the mastermind of the Nightwatchmen, the thinker of the group. Gareth's ability to afford to travel around and buy \$17,000 desks, Blue believes, must have come from financing from Servo. Blue goes through her father's things and discovers the costume he wore the night of the masquerade ball. She also discovers a trust fund has been set up in her name. Blue also comes to realize that Gareth and Servo loved the same woman - Hannah - and her own mother may well have committed suicide from a broken heart.

Part 3, Chapter 30 - Part 3, Chapter 35 Analysis

Blue continues investigating and researching, getting in touch with the family of the man who was killed at Hannah's party. Smoke Harvey's death will matter to Blue's life, even more so than those of her mother or Hannah. Smoke's death serves as a linchpin to solving a series of mysteries that have been plaguing Blue.

Over the course of her investigation, Blue discovers that Smoke himself was an investigative journalist, who was following up on the murder of his uncle, a United States senator, by left wing radicals. Ada Harvey, Smoke's daughter, reveals that Hannah's real name is Catherine Baker, and that Catherine is responsible for shooting a policeman to death in 1987. Furthermore, Hannah and another man, George Gracey, were part of a left wing terrorist group, the Nightwatchmen. Blue reveals everything to her father, who believes her and agrees to go to the police with her. But the next morning, her father is gone. She believes he has been kidnapped until investigation materials arrive from Ada.

Among the materials from Ada is a wanted poster from the 1980s, with a picture of Gareth's Paris friend and the name "George Gracey" above it. Blue then realizes to her horror that her father is also a member of the terrorist group, and that something of a love triangle existed between Gracey, Gareth, and Hannah - which may have led to Blue's mother killing herself.



Part 3, Chapter 36

Part 3, Chapter 36 Summary

Part 3, Chapter 36 - Graduation rolls around. Mr. Moats compliments Blue's drawing, and tells her to keep up with art. Blue has been covering for her father's disappearance, telling people he is suffering from cancer. Blue is Valedictorian. She gives a speech about looking forward and goldfish being able to live freely in the present, because they can only remember the last three seconds of memory. Zach meets up with Blue later, and tells her he loved her speech. He shields her with his umbrella. Blue says she'll be going away for the summer, by herself, perhaps to visit her grandparents.

Part 3, Chapter 36 Analysis

The final chapter in the novel culminates in Blue being completely free from the hideous past of her parents, though in the process, she has lost her idol and her sole source of continuity - her father. The ending is bittersweet. The potential for a future between Blue and Zach is possible, and what Blue decides to do with her summer is up in the air.



Characters

Blue Van Meer

Blue Van Meer is the main character, chief protagonist, and narrator of the novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* by Marisha Pessl. A pretty girl of sixteen who is ahead in school because of her profound intelligence, Blue has traveled around the country with her father, Gareth, a visiting professor of political science. Since the death of Natasha, Blue's mother and Gareth's wife, both father and daughter have never stayed in the same place for more than a few months. Her senior year of high school, Blue is happy to learn that she will get to stay in one place for the entire year - Stockton, North Carolina, where she will attend the culturally-refined Saint Gallway School.

There, Blue meets Hannah Schneider, a film teacher, who brings Blue into a small group of elitist friends who are known as the "Bluebloods.". At first they are wary of Blue, but ultimately come to accept her. At school. Blue has something of a slight romance with a boy named Zach Soderberg, whom she puts off as she becomes more and more drawn into the world of Hannah and the Bluebloods. At a masquerade party that Blue and the Bluebloods sneak into, a man named Smoke Harvey is killed. This seems to upset Hannah, about whom very little is known.

During a camping trip to the Great Smoky Mountains organized by Hannah, Blue finds Hannah dead, hanging from a tree. While everyone writes off Hannah's death as the suicide of a crazy person sent over the edge by the death of Smoke Harvey, Blue isn't convinced. She does research into Hannah's life, ultimately contacting Smoke's family. Ada, Smoke's daughter, reveals that Hannah Schneider is not actually Hannah Schneider, but Catherine Baker, a left wing terrorist responsible for murdering a police officer in the 1980s. She is partly responsible for killing a U.S. senator - Smoke Harvey's uncle - and Smoke, an investigative journalist, has been attempting to unravel the mystery and bring the radicals to justice. Knowing that they are on to her, Hannah arranges to have a masquerade party, during which time, Smoke is killed by other radicals. Hannah herself apparently hoped to stage her disappearance, but accidentally kills herself in the process.

Blue reveals all of these findings to her father, who agrees to go to the police with Blue. But in the morning, Gareth - and all of his clothes - are gone. Blue realizes her father is also a member of the same left wing terrorist group. Blue receives investigative materials from Ada, including an FBI wanted poster. Hannah's picture, as well as her accomplice, George Gracey, are shown. Blue realizes that Gracey is actually one of Gareth's friends, living in Paris. She also learns that her father set up a trust fund for her years before, so Blue will be financially secure as she goes to college.



Gareth Van Meer

Gareth Van Meer is the father of Blue Van Meer, and widower of Natasha Alicia Van Meer, Blue's mother. Gareth is a womanizer, intensely intelligent and insightful, and an on-again, off-again drinker of bourbon. Since the death of Natasha and the success of one of his books, Gareth has moved himself and Blue around the country, working as a visiting professor. He has taken great care to educate his daughter in all subjects, and proves to be a confident and stabilizing force in Blue's life. Indeed, Blue idolizes him. Superficially, Gareth and Natasha appeared to have a very close relationship as a married couple.

When Gareth discovers that Blue has found out about Hannah Schneider's past, Gareth realizes that she may soon be on to him. Gareth is, in reality, a member of the left wing terrorist group known as the Nightwatchmen who at one time may have had an affair or been in love with Hanna Schneider. This in turn may have meant that Natasha's car accident was actually suicide. Gareth packs up and leaves without a word to Blue, leaving behind only a trust fund in her name.

Natasha Alicia Van Meer

Natasha Alicia Van Meer is the deceased mother of Blue, and wife of Gareth. She was beautiful and free spirited, and an amateur butterfly collector. She named her daughter Blue, after her favorite butterfly, the Cassius Blue. Natasha is killed in an accident years before the events of the book. When Blue discovers her father's past, she surmises that an affair or love between Gareth and Hannah may have meant Natasha's death was not an accident, but suicide from a broken heart.

Hannah Schneider

Hannah Schneider is the beautiful, thin, forty-four year-old film teacher at Saint Gallway School. She has befriended a group of kids known as the Bluebloods, cooking dinner for them every Sunday. She brings Blue into the group, lying to Blue that each of the Bluebloods has a difficult past. Hannah reveals very little about herself to her students, which only raises curiosity about her. Indeed, Hannah is an enigma whom some view as mentally unstable.

At a benefit masquerade party that Hannah hosts, a man named Smoke Harvey is killed, whom Hannah describes as an old friend. Hannah also brings Blue and the other Bluebloods on a camping trip, during which time Blue surmises Hannah attempts to stage her disappearance, but accidentally kills herself in the process.

In reality, Blue discovers, Hannah Schneider is Catherine Baker, a left wing radical responsible for murder. She also more than likely arranged to have Smoke Harvey killed, because Smoke Harvey was an investigative journalist determined to bring her and her fellow radicals to justice for the murder of his uncle, a U.S. senator.



Jade

Jade is a member of the Bluebloods, an elitist group of friends at Saint Gallway, whom Hannah Schneider has befriended. Jade is as beautiful as she is cruel, and she is very cruel. She blames Blue for Hannah's death, but then later calls and tells Blue that everyone knows Blue had nothing to with Hannah's death.

Leulah

Leulah is a member of the Bluebloods, an elitist group of friends at Saint Gallway, whom Hannah Schneider has befriended. Leulah is pretty, dreamy, and free spirited. She is easily frightened, but very loyal to her friends.

Milton

Milton is a member of the Bluebloods, an elitist group of friends at Saint Gallway, whom Hannah Schneider has befriended. He brings Blue to Hannah's house after Hannah's death, where the two of them get naked and kiss. Milton later humiliates Blue in front of the others by telling them she is a bad kisser.

Charles

Charles is a member of the Bluebloods, an elitist group of friends at Saint Gallway, whom Hannah Schneider has befriended. He is attractive, friendly, and outgoing, and may have had a secret relationship with Hannah. Charles is, however, not a nice person. He blames Blue for Hannah's death, telling Blue he would kill her if he could.

Nigel

Nigel is a member of the Bluebloods, an elitist group of friends at Saint Gallway, whom Hannah Schneider has befriended. Nigel is slightly aloof, openly gay, and critical of Blue.

Smoke Harvey

Smoke Harvey is an investigative journalist whose uncle, a U.S. senator, was murdered by left wing radicals. Smoke has vowed to bring his uncle's killers - George Gracey and Hannah Schneider/Catherine Baker - to justice. He is killed at a masquerade party that Hannah throws.



Ada Harvey

Ada Harvey is Smoke Harvey's daughter, and communicates with Blue about Smoke's death. Ada reveals the truth of Hannah Schneider to Blue, allowing Blue to make the rest of the connections in the mystery for herself.

Zach Soderberg

Zach Soderberg is an attractive boy at Saint Gallway School who asks Blue to the Christmas dance. Blue ignores her potential romance with Zach in order to ingratiate herself more with Hannah and the Bluebloods. Despite this, Zach remains friendly to Blue, and the novel ends with romance between the two being a possibility.



Objects/Places

Saint Gallway School

Saint Gallway School, located in Stockton, North Carolina, focuses on invention, creativity, and the cultural aspects of education. It is the school where Hannah Schneider teaches, and the school that Blue, Charles, Jade, Leulah, Nigel, and Milton attend.

Twenty-one Armor Street

Twenty-one Armor Street is located in Stockton, North Carolina, and is the temporary home of Blue and Gareth Van Meer.

Stockton, North Carolina

Stockton, North Carolina is the main setting of the novel. It is where 21 Armor Street and Saint Gallway School are located.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is where Hannah brings Blue, Charles, Jade, Leulah, Nigel, and Milton on a camping trip. It is where Hannah attempts to stage her disappearance, but accidentally kills herself in the process.

Butterfly Collection

The Butterfly Collection of Natasha Van Meer is carefully preserved and taken care of by Blue and Gareth, for it is the only physical possession they have of Natasha. The collection is destroyed by an enraged Eva Brewster.

Books

Books appear to be Blue's closest friends. She uses them frequently to learn and research. She also hurls them at Gareth the night she discovers that Gareth has been lying to her.

Legal Pad

A legal pad is what Blue uses to take notes and scribble down information from research.



FBI Wanted Poster

Sent to Blue by Ada Harvey, the FBI wanted poster contains pictures of Hannah Schneider/Catherine Baker, and George Gracey - who is masquerading as a friend of Gareth's. The poster also helps confirm to Blue that her own father is a member of the same left wing terrorist group.

Orange Electrical Cord

An orange electrical cord is how Hannah Schneider is hung and killed.

Missing Persons Articles

Collected by Hannah Schneider, missing persons articles detail cases of apparent staged disappearances. These articles lead Blue to believe that Hannah was attempting to stage her own disappearance.

Themes

Deception

Deception is one of the three major themes in the novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* by Marisha Pessl. Deception infects every single part of the novel, giving everything - except narrator and protagonist Blue Van Meer - the superficiality of a facade. Indeed, everything in Blue's life is a deception, orchestrated by her father and others around her, all unbeknown to her until the end of the novel.

Deception begins with the death of Blue's mother, which is written off as an auto accident, when in reality, Blue's mother may have killed herself over a broken heart due to Gareth's womanizing. Gareth's finances - which he tells Blue come from the success of his books, and his salary as a visiting professor - are in reality coming from a financier from a left wing radical organization. Gareth, who appears to be a relatively cut-and-dried political science professor is, in reality, the brains of the same left wing terrorist organization from which he receives funding.

Deception continues with Gareth and Hannah, who deny knowing each other, but are members of the same left wing radical group. Indeed, an affair between Gareth and Hannah may have resulted in the suicide of Blue's mother. Hannah, likewise, is not really Hannah, but Catherine Baker, who murdered a police officer in the 1980s. Indeed, the death of Smoke Harvey at a masquerade party hosted by Hannah, was actually a murder orchestrated by Hannah and her fellow radicals.

The deceptions - all of them - are uncovered by Blue with the death of Hannah, the disappearance of Gareth, help from Ada Harvey, and Blue's own research. Definitive answers, however, cannot be found, since many of Blue's conclusions are logically-deduced without hard, empirical evidence.

Knowledge

Knowledge is one of the three major themes in Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*. Knowledge, in thematic form, appears in two ways in the novel. First, knowledge appears in the form of information; and second, knowledge appears in the form of the search for truth. Deception, consistent throughout the novel, is met by Blue's desire for answers. Those answers come about through knowledge.

In the first form, Blue displays her knowledge by referencing various works of fiction and nonfiction, as well as the wisdom of her father. She utilizes these bits of information to reinforce, guide, or deter her ideas, thoughts, and actions. Indeed, not a single chapter passes through without a reference to some book, essay, or word of advice from Gareth.



In the second form, Blue utilizes a search for truth to gain more knowledge. She does this to unravel the deception and mystery around her, to discover the true fate of Hannah Schneider, Smoke Harvey, George Gracey, and Blue's own parents. She utilizes not just books on this search, but person-to-person questioning, as well as the internet.

Coming of Age

The third major theme in Marsha Pessl's novel is that of coming of age. The theme is character-specific, to Blue Van Meer.

Blue's character is originally presented as brilliant, erudite even, pretty, and naive. She has been born into a world of academics, of books, of protectiveness and shelter through her father. Though her life has been touched by the tragedy of the death of her mother, Blue has been carefully raised and guarded by Gareth.

Through the course of the novel, tense friendships, a failed potential romance with Zach, the murder of Smoke Harvey, the death of Hannah, and the disappearance of Blue's own father are a shattering awakening to Blue, all occurring within a period of a few months. Blue is rapidly forced to be able to fend for herself, to make her own choices, to deal with the losses in her life, without having anyone to lean on or depend upon. Her story would be tragic if Blue was not able to adapt so quickly, and deal with situations as they arise, if just barely. She is strong and resourceful by the novel's end.



Style

Point of View

Marisha Pessl tells her novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* in the first person narrative, from the perspective of main character and protagonist Blue Van Meer. This is done because the novel revolves around a year in her life, when everything she thought she knew - from the identity of her father and the stability he meant, to the death of several others, including Hannah Schneider's mother - is a deceptive facade. Because Blue comes of age, and because the experiences she has are new and life-shattering, the novel is told from her perspective in order to allow the reader to follow her thoughts and actions as they evolve, and in order for the reader to relate with Blue on a personal, as well as an intellectual level.

Setting

The setting of Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* is that of Stockton, North Carolina, an upper class town near the Smoky Mountains. The setting is perfect for the novel, because Hannah Schneider uses the mountains and the woods to attempt to escape. The wooded setting of the novel provides a metaphorical device as well: being lost in the woods can be viewed as metaphorical for Blue's being lost in her own life when she uncovers the amount of deception that has plagued it.

Language and Meaning

Marisha Pessl tells her novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* in language that is simple and educated, but that flows well despite the use of large words and cultural references. The language is simple and educated because it is the language of a sixteen-year-old girl who is very well-educated on a level that transcends high school.

Structure

Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* is divided into three parts, and each part is divided into chapters. Each chapter is chronological, though some have references or narration pertaining to events and incidents that occur before the novel. Each part is divided by a life-changing incident for Blue that has to deal with Hannah: the first part ends with the discovery that Hannah may be a prostitute; the second ends with Hannah's death; the third ends with the ramifications of everything that has transpired around Hannah's death and Blue's future.



Quotes

"If it weren't for Dad's anecdotes and observations (his pas de deux and attitudes) I don't know how much of her I'd remember. I was five when she died..."

Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 19

"Stately dignity can be possessed by all, in two ways: 1. Diverting the mind with a book or play. 2.) Reciting Keats."

Part 1, Chapter 6, p. 65

"Sometimes knowledge is damaging -not enlightenment but enleadenment."

Part 1, Chapter 10, p. 144

"Sometimes people say things simply to fill silence. Or as a way to shock and provoke."

Part 2, Chapter 16, p. 246

"That's what happens when you die. Everyone makes a big deal about it. Then everyone forgets."

Part 3, Chapter 19, p. 284

"A liar. A cheat. She called you a liar. And she was right."

Part 3, Chapter 20, p. 309

"Because it wasn't Hannah, it was unreal and monstrous, something no textbook or encyclopedia could ever prepare you for. And yet, it was."

Part 3, Chapter 22, p. 336

"You destroyed the only thing I have left of my mother in the world."

Part 3, Chapter 29, p.416

"You can't just go kill people because you don't like what they're doing. That makes us animals."

Part 3, Chapter 33, p. 469

"And then I walked away -without really realizing it. I headed up the wet hill, across the road. Not upset or crying or anything like that -no, I was remarkably fine."

Part 3, Chapter 36, p. 508



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of knowledge in Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*. How does Blue gain and utilize knowledge in the novel? Where does she do this, and why? Is she successful? Why or why not?

Deception is a major theme in Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*. What are the deceptions that Blue encounters or is forced to deal with throughout the book?

Discuss the idea that Blue comes of age in Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*. In what ways does this occur, and why? Is Blue able to successfully manage a premature plunge into adulthood? Why or why not? Provide evidence to support your claim.

Blue's search for answers in Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* results in few concrete conclusions. What are these conclusions? Why are they not concrete? Do you think Blue will ever find the truth to these conclusions? Why or why not?

The loss of Blue's father in Marisha Pessl's novel *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* is especially monumental for Blue. Why? What kind of relationship does Blue have with Gareth? Why is this so? How does his abandonment affect Blue?