

Towers Falling Study Guide

Towers Falling by Jewell Parker Rhodes

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Plot Summary

NOTE: This guide specifically refers to the hardback copy of *Towers Falling*, written by Jewel Parker Rhoades and published by Little, Brown, and Company, New York, USA, 2016.

During the summer, Deja and her family moved into a homeless shelter. Now, Deja is starting fifth grade at a new school. On her first day of school, she meets a boy named Ben and a girl named Sabeen who seem to want to be her friend. At first she is defensive, afraid they will not like her when they learn she is homeless. By the end of the first day, though, Deja thinks she is going to like the school.

Brooklyn Collective Elementary is more progressive than any school she has ever attended. The teachers are young and creative. They teach concepts like critical thinking and introduce a controversial topic -- the 9/11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center Towers. It is the fifteenth anniversary of the attack and the school believes including it in curriculum will help students who were not even born at the time have a better understanding of the magnitude of the attacks as they kicked off the nation's war on terror.

But Deja's Pop does not want her learning anything about the Towers. He even walks her to school one day with the intent of transferring her to another school. When he talks with her teachers and principal, however, he decides against it; but he still will not talk with Deja about why the Towers upset him so much. She eventually finds a name tag in his suitcase that shows he was employed at the Towers, but she dare not bring it up to him for fear of upsetting him more.

It is not until Deja and Ben skip school to visit the Tower Memorial that Pop sees just how determined Deja is to know more about the Towers. He finally tells her his story. He was a security guard in the North Tower. He was able to save one elderly lady but the building completely collapsed right after he got her to the ambulance. He has felt guilty for sixteen years about not being able to help save more of his work family. His honesty with her builds a bond of trust between the father and daughter and she sees that her dad is not a loser; he is a hero. Her encouragement seems to help him recover.

At the end of the story, Deja has two great friends and a family that is putting itself back together again. They are leaving the shelter for a subsidized apartment, and the family is rebuilding its bond while also forming ties with the families of Deja's friends.



Chapter 1: New School

Summary

Pop has been having nightmares and is groaning in his sleep while Ma tries to comfort him. Leda, Deja's little sister, squirms but she calms her back to sleep as they share a bed. Raymond is asleep on the floor. Nothing wakes him. Pop is unemployed and Ma works as a waitress. Her money barely covers food for the family. They live in a shelter called Avalon Family Residence. The narrator notes that the name sounds nice, but the place is nasty. The paint is peeling and the narrator, her two siblings, and their parents all share one small room with no water, refrigerator, or stove in it.

Ma tries to remain positive and encourages Deja not to complain because complaining solves nothing. Still, Deja feels angry. As the oldest child, she is responsible for her little brother and sister. She gets them ready every morning for daycare. After school, she babysits her siblings because her father does nothing other than stand on the street corner. He doesn't talk to any passersby and he frequently has really bad headaches. When he gets a headache, Pop lies down, sometimes all day and night. He also has a bad cough and cannot breathe.

Deja starts her new school today. She worries whether she will make friends. At her last school, her best friend stopped talking to her when Deja's family became homeless. Deja angrily recalls that it is not her fault that her family is homeless. What she sees in the shelter makes her angry. It is full of sad, nice people and creepy, bad people. She explains that homeless shelters have gangs. Unlike street gangs, they are not involved with guns and drugs. Shelter gangs plunder and steal from other shelter residents. She says they try to jump people to steal their shoes or money. She walks down the halls with her fists clenched, in case they attack her.

Ma wakes Deja and hands her a pink ribbon to wear to school on her first day. Deja hates pink, but she knows it's the thought that counts. Her mom either found it or bought it very cheap. On Deja's first day of school, her mother gets the two youngest kids ready for daycare so Deja will not be late on her first day. Deja worries that her mom's boss will yell at her for being late. Deja also worries that school does not help with real life. She thinks about how Pop is no help and how there is never money to buy her brother and sister ice cream. There is no television to watch and no clothing that is not patched. She balls up her fist in anger. Then, she grabs her clothes and kisses Ma and goes to get ready for school. She must get ready in the public women's restroom, so she hopes to beat the others to it. She worries that there might be boys trying to look inside the restroom.



Analysis

This chapter contains a lot of information, even though it is only four pages long. The setting is a homeless shelter for families. Deja is the narrator and main character of the story. She has a lot going on in her life with her family's recent move to the family shelter. She is angry that Pop does nothing to help the family. He does not have a job, and he does not take care of the children. In their family, Ma and Deja do all the work.

When Deja expresses her anger about not being able to buy ice cream for her brother and sister, she is actually revealing that she has a much more mature role in her family. At this point, we do not know Deja's age, only that she is the oldest. She is worried about the family's finances, something that a parent or an adult should do. She distances herself from the role of child when she does not include herself in the comment. She does not say "We cannot even get ice cream," only that she cannot afford to buy it for her brother and sister. She has taken on a very adult role in the family out of necessity. Since she babysits her brother and sister every afternoon, she is responsible for telling them they cannot have ice cream. Again, it is not her fault that her family is homeless, but she very much has to deal with the consequences for herself and her siblings. She is angry that she even needs to worry.

Deja also shows how mature she is when her mom gives her the pink ribbon as a gift. For the first day back at school, all Deja got was a ribbon. She did not get to go back-to-school shopping. Deja does not complain and she maturely appreciates her mother's effort.

Deja tells the reader a lot about her mom. Her mom works hard as a waitress for a demanding boss. She never smiles any more. She is always tired and always has dark circles under her eyes, indicating lack of sleep and worry.

Deja tells the reader a lot more about her Pop in this first chapter. He has nightmares. He does not talk with other out-of-work men. He has severe headaches and a cough along with some breathing issues. She does not come right out and say it, but it is clear that Deja believes her family is in the shelter because of her dad. Since Deja talks so much about Pop's health and his other problems, it foreshadows that they will become an important part of the story.

There is another instance of foreshadowing when Deja worries that school does not help her with real life. It is a simple statement and she does not expand on it at all, but this simple comment actually foreshadows the entire impact of the book.

Deja's name also offers foreshadowing. Deja, in French and Spanish, means remember or remembrance. So, the reader knows from the very beginning that remembering will be an important part of this story.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Deja talk more about Pop than Ma in Chapter 1: New School?

Discussion Question 2

How do you know that Deja is angry? What is she angry about in this chapter?

Discussion Question 3

What does Deja mean when she says school does not help with real life? Do you think she is right?

Vocabulary

comfort, squirms, nightmare, shelter, complaining, asthma, homeless, gangs, thieves, smudges



Chapter 2: Homeroom

Summary

Deja enters her homeroom class with her arms crossed and mouth clenched. No one notices how mean she looks because they are all giggling and having a good time talking with friends. She hopes the teacher does not ask her to write an essay about what they did on summer vacation. She would have to say that her family was evicted and moved to a homeless shelter. She notes that her family has never had a vacation. She remembers an afternoon the family spent in Central Park before Leda was born, though. Her brother, Raymond, had an ice treat and she had a pretzel. She remembers her parents hugging and that her father even smiled. Deja does not want to write an essay because she has nothing good to say.

Deja says she has eight years until she turns 18, so she is 10 years old while narrating the story. She looks forward to turning 18 so she can live on her own and take care of herself. She vows to never be evicted.

Deja notices all the other children are wearing new, name brand clothing and shoes. Her t-shirt is too tight and her toenails are not painted like the other girls. She thinks about how the homeless shelter is in a good part of town, better than any other neighborhood she has ever lived in. There is a grocery store and people of all races in the neighborhood. In her old neighborhood, everyone was black.

Deja finds a chair on the back row and the boy next to her introduces himself. His name is Ben and he is wearing cowboy boots. He is also new and thinks she is, too, since she's sitting on the back row and is also not talking to the others. Deja gave him a mean stare. He teases her about not talking. She wants to punch him, but he is doughy and soft and nice in a dumb way. Ben smiles at Deja like he is her new best friend. She classifies them both as losers, but she notes that she could be cool if she had nice clothes. However, she thinks that Ben will never be cool. He is too nerdy with his freckles, glasses, and cowboy boots in New York City.

Analysis

For a girl worried about not making friends at her new school, Deja does not attempt to be friendly when she enters the classroom. She was very hurt by the rejection of her best friend at her old school last year when she and her family became homeless. She purposefully keeps her arms crossed across her body and scowls to make her look unapproachable. When Ben approaches her anyway, she quickly decides he is not very smart since he did not pick up on unapproachable body language. She sits on the back row, hoping to avoid attention. When Deja mentions that Ben smiles at her like they are suddenly best friends, it foreshadows the strong friendship that the two will develop throughout the book.



Deja thinks quite a lot about Ben's cowboy boots. She says that no one wears cowboy boots in New York City. Ben's choice to wear them makes him seem very unaware about life in New York City. Adding to this idea is that he admits that he is a new student. Deja also notes that Ben's hair is so short that he looks like a soldier. This foreshadows something the reader will learn about Ben in an upcoming chapter.

Deja reveals her age in this chapter. She is 10 years old and has adult concerns, like taking care of her siblings before and after school, in addition to her childhood concerns about making friends and adjusting to her new school. She is very bitter about her family's eviction and vows to never be evicted when she is an adult. She really does not want to be assigned an essay about summer vacation because that is when her family was evicted and became homeless. Summer has no fond memories for her. The last fun she can recall was before her baby sister was born when the family enjoyed a day at the park.

Deja makes typical childhood observations and balances them with adult maturity when she sees all the other students wearing new clothing on the first day of school. Even though her shirt is not new and is too tight, it is clean. And even though she lives in a family shelter, it is in a better neighborhood than anywhere she has ever lived. Still, she ends the chapter with the thought that she and Ben are losers because they are new to the school. With all the other students laughing and talking, she believes that she and Ben will never fit in with the group of students who have obviously known each other since kindergarten or first grade. Deja also believes what many children do, that clothes can make a person cool. She believes that with nice clothing, she could fit in. Maybe she would, not because clothing matters to the other students, but because Deja would feel more confident about herself if she dressed more like the other students. She believes Ben is beyond help from clothing. She says he will never be cool, which leaves the reader thinking that maybe Ben will actually be cooler by the end of the book.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the actions Deja takes that make her seem like she does not want to make friends. What is ironic about her actions?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ben strike up a conversation with Deja?

Discussion Question 3

What observations does Deja make about her classroom, the students, and her neighborhood? Why are those observations important?

Vocabulary

eviction, wheezing, knuckles, deli, wimpy, stubby, exhale, boring, soldier



Chapter 3: Miss Garcia

Summary

Deja compares and contrasts her new teacher, Miss Garcia, to her former teacher. Miss Garcia wears high heels and red lipstick. Her old teacher, Mrs. Baker, wore tennis shoes and always complained about her feet hurting from running after students all day. Deja thinks Miss Garcia looks like a Barbie doll, only with curly black hair. She surprises Deja when she claps her hands three times and all the students immediately get quiet, sit up in their seats, and fold their hands on their desks. When one kid gets up to grab his backpack, the teacher stares him down and calmly makes him take his seat.

Deja notices that Miss Garcia seems nervous. Her forehead is sweating, so she taps her finger on her desk. When she makes her nervous smile, Deja notes that it is a big smile, like on Mrs. Potato Head. Ben notices that Miss Garcia is nervous too, making Deja realize maybe he isn't so dumb after all.

Deja says that Miss Garcia seems bubbly, except that she is obviously nervous about something. At her old school, the teachers were either old and wrinkly or young and pimply. She notes that Miss Garcia has clear skin and wears her hair loose. Finally, Miss Garcia announces that the principal wants all lessons to be integrated. Deja thinks she means integrated in terms of racial diversity. She thinks the statement is odd because the school has so many different races and culture represented already.

Miss Garcia says that the principal reminds them that history is alive and relevant. Ben raises his hand and asks Miss Garcia if she is going to introduce the new students. Deja is angry because she does not like the attention when all the other students turn around and look at them. She points out that she does not have a backpack or a pencil. When the students turn to look at them, Deja gives her meanest stare, hoping to frighten people who might make fun of her. Instead of being treated badly, though, the students are friendly and one girl wearing a head scarf waves to her and Ben. Ben introduces himself as Benjamin Rubin, the third, but asks the class to call him Ben. Deja says she is "Just Deja. The original. One and only (13)." She leaves out her last name because everyone in her old neighborhood knew that the Barneses were poor. She reveals to the reader that her family of five slept in their car for a month before getting a room at the family shelter.

Miss Garcia relaxes and tells the class they will have an interesting lesson that will be "special." Deja notes that the tone of her voice makes the word "special" seem like a bad thing. The teacher announces that the date is September 6 and that it is an important week and month.

Miss Garcia announces the first assignment -- an essay about summer vacation. Ben hands Deja a pencil without her asking. The girl with the head scarf, Sabeen, passes out sheets of paper for the students to use. Sabeen decides to sit between Ben and



Deja in one of the two empty seats separating them. She sits in the chair closer to Ben, which Deja says is good, because if she'd sat closer to her, she was going to yank off her scarf.

Analysis

Deja notices several differences between her new teacher and her old teachers at the other school. From her descriptions, it sounds like her former teacher, Mrs. Baker, was disgruntled. She was tired and complained about chasing after students, something that Deja never actually saw her do. Mrs. Baker was just complaining. The fact that Miss Garcia seems so different symbolizes the new life Deja will have at her new school. Miss Garcia is healthy and vibrant, symbolizing a school year that is likewise healthy and vibrant. Despite the healthy and vibrant attitude of Miss Garcia, she still comes across as nervous to Deja. The nervousness that centers around Miss Garcia's conversation about September alludes to the book's title and foreshadows a very valuable lesson that Deja will learn. When Miss Garcia says that the principal wants students to see that history is both alive and relevant, it also foreshadows events to come. The statement even plays into a comment Deja makes in the first chapter, that school does not help with real life (4). With the foreshadowing around this idea doubled now, the reader can be certain it will play a vital role in the story.

Miss Garcia says the lessons will be integrated. What she means is that the teachers will work together to teach their particular subject based on one common theme. The theme is not given in this chapter, but Miss Garcia does reveal that it has something to do with September and this special week of September 6. Deja shows the reader how diverse her new school is when she confuses the definition of integration. She was thinking about racial integration, where students of all races and cultures attend school together.

Deja is afraid her new classmates will make fun of her, so when she is introduced to the class, she glares at them. She refuses to tell them her last name out of embarrassment. In her old neighborhood, the Barnes name was associated with extreme poverty and the humiliation of eviction. She is angry about both -- poverty and eviction -- because they both bring her more stress and anxiety than she wants to deal with as a child. Her desire to have new clothes like the other classmates is about more than just having new things to wear. She wants to be average and without the worries placed on her shoulders by her family's financial situation.

For someone who says she just wants to go unnoticed, introducing herself as Deja, the original, one and only, called attention to herself. In identifying herself as "one and only," she was actually trying to distance herself from her family. She is bitter about her father's role in the family, how much her mother has to work, and how there is no happiness in her home. While she loves her family, she is embarrassed by her little sister's raggedy doll, the fact that their belongings were literally thrown out of their apartment when evicted.



Deja's worst fear comes true when Miss Garcia assigns the essay about their summer vacation activities. She accepts the pencil offered by Ben and wonders why she took it, symbolizing that she may also take him up on his offer of friendship after all.

Deja is surprised that Sabeen, whom she has assumed is the teacher's pet since she was picked to pass out papers, chooses to sit between her and Ben. Deja's tough attitude comes through when she says if Sabeen had sat in the chair closer to her, she would have yanked off her head scarf. This toughness seems like Deja is trying to cover her disappointment that the girl actually chose to sit closer to Ben. Continued reference to Sabeen's head scarf, along with her name and the fact that Deja talks about how diverse her classroom is, alludes to the fact that Sabeen may be from a culture in which women and girls wear a hijab, a traditional scarf that covers the head and shoulder/neck area when they are in public. If such is the case, yanking Sabeen's scarf off would be very disrespectful, and Deja does not seem like that kind of girl.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Deja's current teacher with her past teacher. Which would you like better and why?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the idea that history is alive and relevant. What does that mean?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Deja call herself the "one and only"?

Vocabulary

dashes, whiteboard, sergeants, integrated, murmur, raggedy

Chapter 4: Lunch

Summary

Deja notices the cafeteria is busy with kids opening their cool lunchboxes or eating a nice spaghetti lunch. She has no money to pay for lunch and she did not take a lunch either. While her stomach makes a hungry rumble, Deja looks around the hallway. She expects her class' summer vacation essays will be hung on the walls. She plans to leave her page blank because she had no summer vacation. She also sees a world map bulletin board. Students pin their place of origin on the map and stretch yarn from it to the location of their school, Brooklyn Collective Elementary. Sabeen and Ben join Deja in the hall.

Sabeen shows that her string is from Turkey to Brooklyn. She was not born in Turkey, but her grandparents were born there. Ben is from Arizona, so Sabeen helps him put in his pin. Then they add a pin to Mexico because his grandmother was from there. Deja says it is stupid and "sappy like syrup (20)." Sabeen suggests that Deja is from Africa, and she asks why all white people think about slavery when they see a black person. She says she is also Jamaican. Sabeen is excited because the school does not already have a student with Jamaican heritage. As Sabeen marks the spot on the map while Ben offers Deja half of his tuna sandwich. Sabeen gives her a cookie. Deja thinks about how her mother told her not to take anything from anyone. She does not think her mom would mind since Ben and Sabeen are nobodies, just kids.

Deja takes the food and is grateful because she did not have breakfast. Ben comments that America is a land of immigrants. Deja says that some were forced to come here. Sabeen agrees and says that slaves were forced. Ben talks about the Apache tribe that was overrun and their land stolen. Deja says she had never thought of that and thinks that it is worthless information since it does not buy her lunch. Sabeen mentions the Lenape that they learned about in third grade. She says it was the tribe that first settled New York. Deja adds another pin for her African heritage, too. She thanks Sabeen and Ben for sharing with her. As they walk to class, Deja thinks about how she hates the family homeless shelter but how much she likes the school. She is amazed that Ben and Sabeen decided to be her friends.

Analysis

The magnitude of Deja's poverty is seen during lunch. Not only does she not have lunch or lunch money, she also did not get to eat breakfast. Even though she did not ask, Ben and Sabeen offered to share their food with her. Deja's acceptance of the food was symbolically her acceptance of their friendship. Deja also recalls that her mother does not want her to take anything from anyone. This shows that her family is trying to maintain their pride during this rough time. This may make the reader wonder if that is why Deja did not have lunch. Maybe her school offered free lunches but her family had



too much pride to sign up for them. Ironically, skipping meals for long might have made Deja even more angry about her circumstances.

Deja's thought about not accepting food from anyone expresses something else -- that kids are nobodies. She feels like a nobody in her family because she has no control over her family's situation. Ironically, Deja is a vital part of her family. Without her, Ma could not go to work to earn money for the family. Seeng Sabeen and Ben as "nobody" also allows Deja to take their offered food without breaking her mother's rule.

The map symbolically represents the diversity at Deja's new school. It symbolizes the importance of different cultures; collective is even part of the school's name. Deja becomes defensive when Sabeen mentions Africa as her homeland. She is quick to point out that not all black people are African or slaves. After seeing that her friends meant no disrespect by the comment, she admitted that she did indeed have some African heritage by putting her pin on the African coast as well as in Jamaica. Deja may be feeling extra defensive about the slave association because she feels like a slave. She is a slave to her family, charged with caring for two young children without the help of her father. She is a slave to poverty with her family stuck in the homeless shelter.

At the end of this chapter, Deja compares school to Avalon Family Shelter. She likes the school environment but does not like Avalon. She is happy to be in an environment full of so many interesting things. Her home environment is depressing and crowded. Her family sent her to school with nothing to eat, but new friends at school shared food with her. Deja is starting to see how school can have a positive impact on her life.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the differences between students at Deja's school and her family experience at the shelter. Why does she like school more than Avalon?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss three ways that Ben and Sabeen gain Deja's friendship.

Discussion Question 3

Explain how the hallway's world map works. What is its purpose?

Vocabulary

bustling, rumbles, graffiti, curse, slaves, sappy, immigration, scowl, linoleum, gobbling



Chapter 5: Avalon & Chapter 6:Friday

Summary

In Chapter 5: Avalon, Raymond has finger paint all over his shirt when Deja picks him and Leda up from daycare. He tells Deja he was painting a monster. Deja says that Pop will shout “monster” when he sees him. This scares both Ray and Leda. Deja is immediately sorry she said it; she did not mean to scare them. She says that Pop does not hit, but, nonetheless, he is scary when angry. His anger can be caused by just about anything – cold coffee, too much rain, too little rain. Deja knows she will have to clean Raymond’s shirt. Her dad will not do it, and her mother will be tired from work.

Deja reaches into her pocket and pulls out the cookie that Sabeen gave her at lunch. Her brother and sister do not care that it is nothing but crumbs. They enjoy the cookie anyway. When Deja gets her brother and sister home, they choose to sit outside in the heat instead of going inside. There is no air conditioning in the shelter, but they do not go inside until their mother gets home. Deja thinks her dad might be upstairs, possibly with a bad headache. Ray has fun jumping up and down the steps with some other boys. Deja makes sure he does not get bullied or hurt. While sitting outside, she notices all the people at the shelter. There are big families and small ones. Some are clean but a little shabby, which is how she describes herself and her siblings. Others are downright dirty and stinky. Some are drinking beer and she is glad her father does not drink. Deja decides to tell Leda a story about the Lenape. Leda squeals and claps with delight. She and her siblings are having fun. Deja declares it has been a good day.

In Chapter 6: Friday, Deja talks about how full her mind is already after just the first few days of school. Miss Garcia is a good teacher who explains things to the class. She also walks and watches the students work so she can help point out any mistakes they may be making. This embarrasses Deja, who imagines that Miss Garcia, when she stops to help the other students, must be secretly telling them all how dumb Deja is. Ben sees that Deja is having trouble with decimals and offers to help her after school.

Miss Garcia encourages the students to think critically. She asks the class to discuss what is memorable about New York. They mention the Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center, the Rockettes, and horses in Central Park. Deja does not know what the Rockettes are and she has never visited the Empire State Building or Rockefeller Center. Charles mentions the naked cowboy that wears only underpants, boots and a cowboy hat. Deja thinks he is making fun of Ben and she is fighting mad. She shouts at Charles not to make fun of Ben and stands up with her fists clenched. Miss Garcia tells Deja that there really is a naked cowboy in Times Square. Tourists take pictures with him. Deja thinks it is stupid. Ben passes a note to Deja that says “thanks” since she thought she was standing up for him.

Miss Garcia shows the students a black and white poster of Manhattan. She points out all the buildings in the poster. Then, she calls the students to the window, points to the



Manhattan view and asks them to find what is different. Ben is the first to notice that the two tall towers are no longer in the skyline. Deja asks where they went and the other students give her a strange look. Some of the students mumble about how terrible it is. Ben points out that Sunday will be the fifteenth anniversary. Angel says her cousin died. A boy makes an explosion sound and is scolded by the teacher. Miss Garcia tells the students they will learn about what happened on September 11, 2001. Some of the students say they do not care since it happened before they were born. When Pete says that Muslims did it, Sabeen says that both is and is not true. Miss Garcia holds Sabeen's hand and tells the students to observe slowly; they will not rush the study. She says that one day they will cross the Brooklyn Bridge to go see the memorial.

Miss Garcia assigns homework. Each student must create a depiction of their home by drawing or building an example. They get art supplies from the art teacher. Everyone likes the assignment except Deja. Miss Garcia asks Deja to stay after school for a few minutes. Ben offers to wait for her, but Deja makes sure he knows she does not like him. He says he does not like her either. Miss Garcia tells Deja she does not have to depict Avalon; she may depict her former home. Deja insists she will depict Avalon because it is her home now. Miss Garcia tells her that she must do a project. She can change it for her but she must do it because she needs writing practice. Deja asks what home has to do with the skyline. The teacher explains that home is the starting point for connecting to history. Deja notices Miss Garcia's expression is complicated. If she was a kid, her expression would mean that it's her secret and Deja's to find out. As Deja leaves school, it begins raining. Ben waves to make sure she is okay. Deja waves back, and the two went their separate ways. She thinks that if she had a real home, Ben would probably race her home.

Analysis

Chapter 5: Avalon gives the reader a closer look into Deja's home life. As hungry as she was at lunch, she saved the cookie Sabeen gave her to share with her little brother and sister. The author builds Deja's character slowly and the reader sees her change as she is changed by her new school and her new friends. She even tells Leda the LBehind the tough exterior she tries to portray is actually a kind, giving girl.

In addition to her compassion for her siblings, the reader sees just how afraid Deja is of Pop. She is so worried about bothering him if he feels bad and not disturbing him with Raymond's messy shirt, that she and Raymond and Leda stay outside in the heat just to avoid conflict. Whether he knows it or not, Pop is the antagonist of this story. His inability to work or help with house chores is a big burden to Ma and Deja. It even affects the two younger children. They become very afraid when Deja makes an off-handed comment about how mad Pop will be with Raymond's messy shirt. When she realizes how scared they are, Deja feels bad for making the comment. She is happy to calm them by letting Raymond jump on the steps and telling Leda a story. Since Ma can handle Pop better, they wait outside until she returns home from work. Her description of Pop in this chapter, how he quickly loses his temper and has extreme headaches, sounds a little more like a mental or emotional illness instead of a physical one. She



also cleverly lets the reader know that he is not an alcoholic when she compares him to the men at Avalon who are drinking beer. Despite her fear of dealing with Pop right now, Deja declares that she has had a good day.

Deja reflects that her mind is full from the new things she is learning at school. She likes her teacher, and she has made two good friends. Deja goes back to school the next week and faces her new-student fears again. When Miss Garcia whispers tips to her as she is working on assignments, Deja imagines that she whispers to the other students about how stupid Deja is. Ironically, Miss Garcia is helping all the other students, too. Deja feels self-conscious again, though, and fears that she is the only student who needs help.

Deja really feels stupid when the class talks about New York. Even though Ben has lived there for a short time, he has seen and done more in the city than she has as a lifelong resident. The truth is, Ben has seen and done the touristy stuff. He has visited many of the famous landmarks. Deja has lived among them all her life and they have never seemed very special. This is also due to the fact that her parents cannot afford to take the family on outings.

Ben sees that Deja will be a loyal friend to him when she stands up to Charles, who she mistakenly thinks is making fun of Ben. Deja is not the only one standing up to the other students. Sabeen stands up for herself when one child proclaims that Muslims blew up the Twin Towers. Sabeen knows it is complicated and tries to express that. The teacher sees Sabeen's anguish and gives her a comforting hand squeeze to tell her the class will get through this study together. Miss Garcia is a very observant teacher. In this chapter, she tends to Deja's and Sabeen's special needs. and tries to comfort them both.

It seems that all the other students know something about September 11, 2001, but Deja does not. She is very curious about it. The fact that she knows nothing foreshadows her finding out that the information has been intentionally kept from her. Deja takes advantage of her time alone with Miss Garcia to ask how the skyline relates to home. Deja says Miss Garcia's reaction is that it is a secret that she must uncover. This also foreshadows a secret at home that Deja must also uncover.

Miss Garcia tries to help Deja again when she gives her the chance to do a different assignment for her homework project. Deja can either use her old home or she can get a different assignment from Miss Garcia. Deja decides to stick with Avalon because she knows she will not be able to hide the fact that she lives in a shelter forever.

When Ben and Deja tell each other that they don't like each other at the end of Chapter 6: Homework, they mean in a romantic way. Deja is concerned that Ben will think she is his girlfriend. Ben is growing on her as a friend, but Deja just is not interested in him romantically. By telling each other this, Ben and Deja are actually solidifying their friendship.



Discussion Question 1

If Ben knows about the naked cowboy in Times Square, why is he not laughing when Charles brings him up in class?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Miss Garcia want her class to take their study of the Manhattan skyline and the Twin Towers slowly?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Deja refuse Miss Garcia's offer to change her homework project or to allow her to create a project based on her former home?

Vocabulary

reducing, decimals, smack, memorable, disrespected, mournful, clammers, slouch, snotty, nerd



Chapter 7: Ruined Weekend, Chapter 8: Small Groups, & Chapter 9: Principal's Office

Summary

Deja reveals on Saturday that she has not yet begun her homework project. She is sad that she does not have much to depict. She thinks about all the blankets and tablecloths from her mom's hope chest that they had to sell. She also says it is hard to keep a clean house without a sink. They have clothes and broken toys in boxes around their room, no chairs, and only the two beds on which to sit. The only neat thing in the room is Pop's locked suitcase with contents she has never been allowed to see. Ma says it is only stuff from Pop's last good job. Deja does not even remember Pop having a good job. To her, he had just seemed to hold one for a few months here and there. Once again, Deja wonders why Pop can't at least clean their room; even Ray tries to help.

Deja thinks her mom had a better life in Jamaica. She says she came to America for a better life, but Deja does not see anything better about her family's situation.

Pop notices that Deja is working on a project and he asks about it. She notices his smile and hopes he is feeling better. She explains that Raymond and Leda are helping with her homework. Raymond is cutting out a paper doll for each family member. Leda draws an open mouth on each, no eyes or nose. Pop asks Deja about her school. She does not tell him how much she likes it because she does not want him to settle for living in Avalon forever. He says he bets Deja is the smartest girl in class. She says she thinks Ray should also go to school. Pop asks Ray when he got so big. Leda jumps in Pop's lap. Ma comes home from work. She is happy to see Pop interacting with the kids. When Ma asks about the project, Deja explains that it depicts their room at Avalon. Pop's hand shakes, then his head lowers when he finds out the project is related to the Twin Towers. Pop gets angry fast and shouts that Deja is too young to know about the Twin Towers. Ma glances at Deja. She knows that is her cue to take Ray and Leda outside. Deja feels very guilty about making Pop sick; she blames herself for ruining their nice family moment.

On Sunday, Ma makes the kids play outside all day long while she works an extra shift. Deja teaches Ray to play tic-tac-toe and tells him that some day they will see a Disney movie. Ray knows this won't happen until Pop is no longer sad.

In Chapter 8: Small Groups, Ben, Deja, and Sabeen work in class as a group to discuss their home projects. Sabeen has a three-story house. Her grandmother lives in the basement. Her uncle lives in the attic. Sabeen lives on the first and second floors with her parents and brother. Ben shows his drawing in a sketchbook. It is a ranch house and with horses and other animals in the yard. Deja points out there is nothing like that



in New York City. Ben explains that the house is where his dad is. Deja shares her clay project. The clay dried and cracked, leaving her with a crumbling mess. She shows them the paper dolls that Ray and Leda helped with and tells them she did not write an essay. Sabeen appears to be shocked and sad. Deja gets sarcastic with Sabeen then gets up from her desk. When she does, her chair falls over, making the entire class get quiet. Deja says she hates the school. Miss Garcia sends her to the principal's office.

Deja slams the door on her way out. She hopes they do not call Pop.

In Chapter 9: Principal's Office, Miss Garcia asks Deja to come with her. She takes Deja back to the classroom. Deja likes the classroom. Miss Garcia asks Deja to tell her about the project. She compliments her on letting her brother and sister help. Deja says it seems like Miss Garcia sees and understands her, and that makes her nervous.

Deja rambles about how smart Ray is and Miss Garcia says that he is the only one who made a home. She explained that "home" is more about people than buildings. Miss Garcia helps Deja realize that the special things in her homeroom are Deja's friends, Ben and Sabeen. She tells Deja that if she misses one more homework assignment, she will have to meet with her parents. Deja knows this would be a hardship. Pop struggles around people and Ma would have to miss work and lose pay. Deja offers to do the essay right then. Miss Garcia shares her sandwich and snacks with Deja and they both have a working lunch in the classroom. Deja tells Miss Garcia that the reason she does not get free lunches at school is because she does not want to stand out from the other students. In her old school, most students did get free lunches. Deja realizes she really likes her teacher, school, and friends. She wants to be a good student, too.

Deja writes a short essay, but Miss Garcia tells her she can do better. She helps Deja write a strong thesis statement. Deja tells Miss Garcia she is going to apologize to Sabeen. She realizes she was just jealous of Sabeen's family and nice house.

Analysis

Deja has a difficult time starting her homework project in Chapter 7: Ruined Weekend because it is depressing for her to think about. Their home is one room, they have no furniture other than beds, and no nice blankets because her mom sold them from her hope chest. Mentioning that Ma's hope chest is broken symbolizes the family's broken hope of working out of poverty. The fact that they sold the blankets and tablecloths from it symbolize that the family has had to sell their hopes just to survive.

Deja mentions Pop's suitcase again and the reader can tell she is intrigued by it. She is also a little bitter. She never remembers Pop having a "good job" so she cannot imagine what might be in the case. Bringing up the suitcase in this chapter helps build the plot's rising action by creating more foreshadowing. The reader can assume this is an important case because the children are not allowed into it and it is the only item the family has kept through eviction. Ma sold items from her hope chest, but Pop has never sold items from his suitcase. Ma's items were things she had collected for the family, but



Pop's items belong only to Pop, symbolizing that Pop is selfish. Is Pop selfish? This is another question the book will answer.

Deja spots an example of irony in her mother's life. Ma moved to the United States to have a better life. Deja thinks she should have stayed in Jamaica instead because their life is not that great. But Deja's thought is actually much bigger than that. If her mother had not moved to the United States, she would not have met Deja's father; Deja and her siblings would have never been born. Their poverty is so bad that the only way out that Deja can see is if their lives had never happened at all. Of course, Deja knows nothing of the economy in Jamaica. She is only basing her argument on the family's current situation and on a comparison and contrast of the beautiful Jamaican ocean waters and the dirty Hudson River.

Just as Pop appears to be the worst person in the world, he interacts with the children in a way they all enjoy. Deja is happy to see him smile and he even compliments her when he suggests she is the smartest girl in class. This is the family interaction the children want. Ironically, it is Ma's questioning about the assignment that starts Pop's rage again. She is usually the one who keeps him calm. He is very agitated at the mention of Avalon and the Twin Towers. He even shouts that Deja is too young to know. At this point, the reader sees that he is trying to protect Deja from something, possibly something related to the Twin Towers. It is difficult to know for sure at this point because Deja has said in the past that he angers quickly about anything.

Jealousy of Sabeen's house and family makes Deja cause a scene in Chapter 8: Small Groups. Sabeen's house project shows a drawing of a three story house. She explains that her grandmother lives in the basement, her uncle lives in the attic, and the first and second floors belong to her immediate family which includes her parents and one brother. Deja's anger about her own situation in comparison to Sabeen's causes her to knock over her chair. When the teacher sends Deja to the office, she does so to remove her from the room, not to punish her. Miss Garcia knows Deja is adjusting to life in the shelter.

In Chapter 9: Principal's Office, Miss Garcia takes Deja back to homeroom so she can write her essay. Deja likes her homeroom at school. Ironically, her home is a single room at Avalon, another play on the word "homeroom." Miss Garcia's kindness inspires Deja to be a better student and friend. The reader also learns that Deja is eligible for free lunches at school, but her family does not make her accept them. Deja does not want to be embarrassed by being the only one who gets a free lunch. The fact that her family does not make her take the free lunch shows that they value their pride more than they do their health or wellbeing. Perhaps her Ma feels like Deja has a hard enough time living in a shelter without the stigma attached to getting a free lunch. Maybe Ma and Deja believe that skipping lunch makes Deja tougher. The book does not say why her parents allow Deja to miss lunch at school. Thankfully, her teacher shares with her.

Miss Garcia works with Deja on expanding her essay and writing more concisely. No other teacher has done this before. Miss Garcia is having a positive impact on Deja.



Discussion Question 1

What upsets Deja about Sabeen's homework project? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism and irony associated with Ma's hope chest.

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Deja's homeroom at school with her "home room" in the Avalon Family Shelter.

Vocabulary

linens, proper, crocheted, Babaanne, skyline, thesis, asserting



Chapter 10: Homeroom & Chapter 11: Recent Past, Far Past

Summary

In Chapter 10: Homeroom, Deja apologizes to Sabeen, who quickly forgives her. Deja is happy because Sabeen and Ben make homeroom feel like home because they are best friends. Miss Garcia tapes Ray's paper dolls to the board, and she tells the class that Deja best expressed home in her project because she included people. Deja feels proud. She clutches hands with Ben and Sabeen so they are holding hands like the family of paper dolls. Miss Garcia follows. Soon, all of the students in the class are holding hands like a paper doll family. Miss Garcia tells them their home is homeroom. Miss Garcia says families are social units and asks the students for the number of social units each belongs to. Deja lists only family and school. She does not want Avalon to be her social unit. After asking Deja to read the definition of social unit from a dictionary, she asks her to explain the definition. Deja says that everyone is part of something larger. She asks Deja to draw a circle graphic organizer to show her idea. Deja realizes she is part of her family, her friend group, her school, her Brooklyn community, New York City, and New York state.

The students realize they are all different, but all very connected. As the students expand on the idea, Deja wonders if this kind of education would make Pop mad. Deja asks Miss Garcia where the Towers' people went. Angel says her cousin was killed. Deja knows the others know more about the subject than she does and she feels dumb. She asks why, if history is living, the people in the Towers are dead. Ben adds to the graphic organizer to add a circle for Americans. As Americans, everyone in the class connects to the people who died in the Towers. Miss Garcia says 2,753 people died in the Towers. Deja asks why she should care since it happened before she was born. Ben answers that it is because they are Americans. Deja looks at the Manhattan skyline from her class window. She wants to improve her life. She struggles to see how this lesson can help her improve her life.

In Chapter 11: Recent Past, Far Past, Deja is mad because she has to babysit Ray and Leda on the day she is supposed to work on a group project at Ben's house with him and Sabeen. Ma needs to take Pop to the clinic. Deja shouts that Pop is always ruining her life, and Ma makes her apologize. Pop apologizes for being sick. She wonders why Pop never gets well. He uses an inhaler when he can afford one, but other than that he only takes occasional aspirin. She thinks if he were seriously sick, he would take some kind of medicine or see a doctor regularly. She would ask Ma, but Ma only changes the subject when she tries to ask questions about Pop's health.

Deja is tired of being responsible. She keeps older kids from picking on Ray and worries that some day they may jump her because there are four of the seventh graders and only one of her. But Ray promises to be good, and with Ma's pleading eyes making her



feel guilty, Deja agrees to take Ray and Leda with her to Ben's house. Deja thinks about how Pop is anxious on the subway and closed spaces. She says she is anxious living in Avalon. Regardless, she gets her siblings ready to go. She wears an "I'm Irish" shirt that her mom bought at a thrift store.

When they arrive at Ben's house, his Leda jumps out of the stroller and onto the floor to feel the carpet. While he also rubs the floor, Ray notes that they don't have carpet. They hear Ben's mom in the other room yelling on the phone while talking to his dad. Ben explains that his parents are divorcing. Ben's mom, Dora, loves that Ray and Leda have come along, too. Sabeen's mother drops her off. Dora is happy to have a full house. She takes Ray and Leda to make snacks.

Deja is impressed with Ben's room. It includes a bed just for him and a computer on a desk. She sees that Ben has covered his room with his charcoal drawings, mostly of farm life, but none of his dad. Deja asks Sabeen about her mom's apparel. Sabeen explains it is a niqab, a garment for modesty. She says she may wear one someday. They begin brainstorming, but Deja struggles with the importance of studying history. Sabeen asks her what she wants to do in the future. Deja would have said she wants to buy a house, but Miss Garcia taught them houses are not important. So, she says in the future she does not want her family or herself to feel bad. Ben says he is going back to Arizona when he's old enough to drive because he does not like New York. The girls tell him that they like having him in New York. They finally get down to work, brainstorming ideas about the differences between Americans past and present.

Sabeen tells them that on 9/11 her family stays indoors, unless they absolutely have to get out. Deja asks why and Sabeen starts to cry. Ben tells Deja she is dumb for someone so smart. Sabeen asks to call her mom to go home early. When she leaves, Ben explains to Deja that Sabeen's family stays inside because of the Towers. Deja plans to leave too. While Dora takes Ray and Leda to pack snacks to go, Ben shows Deja the video of the planes striking the World Trade Center Towers. She sits in Sabeen's chair to get a better look. Deja imagines the scene inside the Towers.

Analysis

Deja, who was worried that her project would not be as good as the others since she lives in a shelter instead of a house, is pleased when Miss Garcia brags on it to the class. When Miss Garcia points out that Deja's paper dolls represent a social unit, a family, the classmates also join hands to resemble the paper dolls, symbolically representing a family. Miss Garcia connects their homeroom with a home. They all realize they are part of something bigger. Deja wonders if the lesson she learns will make her Pop angry. She still has not really connected what it is that angered her father when she was working on her assignment. She thinks he might simply be mad that she is learning. To her, he seems to want to keep her ignorant and, thus, impoverished. Deja knows her way out of poverty is through education, and she is excited to go to a school like Brooklyn Collective where education is like none she has ever experienced previously. So, since Pop does not want her learning about the Twin Towers, she thinks



his problem is with her learning. He actually has a problem with her learning about the Towers. Because Deja has heard nothing of the Twin Towers' tragedy, she cannot find a way to connect it to her life, which foreshadows that the Towers tragedy probably has a big connection to her life.

When Deja cannot understand how the people who died in the Towers relate to her, it is ironically Ben, the newcomer to town, who explains that they are all Americans. For the first time, Deja realizes that she is not so very different from her classmates, even though they all live in apartments or homes and she lives in a shelter. Deja also knows that education can improve her life; but she cannot see how knowing about people killed in the Towers will improve it, another example of foreshadowing as the book progresses.

Chapter 11: Recent Past, Far Past shows just how much Ma and Pop depend on Deja. Even though Ma has the day off work, thus giving Deja a day off, Ma has to take Pop to the doctor because he cannot ride the subway alone. Deja is furious. It is her one day to be a kid, without the responsibilities that their family's poverty and her dad's sickness thrust on her. When Deja shouts that Pop is always ruining her life, he does not get angry. He actually apologizes for being sick. One would think that if he angers as quickly as Deja has described, that her words would have really made him mad. Deja does not see the prospect of him getting well any time soon because he cannot afford the inhaler that helps him breathe and he never takes any medication other than an occasional aspirin. This makes her think that he is not seriously sick. Ironically, this indicates that he cannot afford to be treated for his physical illness and suggests a mental or emotional illness as well. Deja does not consider the evidence of her father's anxiety in closed in spaces like the subway. She only thinks he is a wimp for not being able to handle it because, at only 10, she rides the subway alone. Knowing she cannot refuse to babysit, she reluctantly agrees. Her only recourse for revenge against Pop is to hope that the clinic gives him some really yucky medicine, demonstrating that despite her mature responsibilities, she is still a kid at heart.

Deja's childlike grammar shows through in this chapter, too. Since the story is told in her first-person point of view, there are frequent sentence fragments because that is how her mind thinks. However, Chapter 11 shows an example of poor subject/verb agreement. As she is leaving Avalon with Ray and Leda, she sees another child about Leda's age who is alone, drinking juice from a sippy cup. Deja wonders "Where's her parents?" (78) When you break down the contraction for "where's," Deja is asking "Where is her parents?" The correct grammar would have been "Where are her parents?" But, it is a typical mistake that children make and serves as another example to remind the reader that, despite all of her family responsibilities, Deja is still just a kid.

At Ben's house, Deja learns that his parents are divorcing. He has a nice house and a really nice room, but only has one parent. She notices something his mom has in common with her mom -- they both smile too big when pretending that nothing is wrong. While Deja does not know anything about the Twin Towers or about New York City tourism, she is good at analyzing people. Deja is interested in the fact that Sabeen's mother is covered in black cotton garb with only her eyes showing. Asking Sabeen



about it allows Deja to expand her knowledge of the Muslim culture. Deja, without any knowledge of the Twin Towers, holds no preconceived notions about Sabeen's religion like some of the other students in their class who have credited Muslims for the Twin Towers falling. Leda also has no preconceived notions when she climbs into Dora's arms "like she's climbed into a white lady's arms a thousand times" (81). This shows that age and experience affect the way we see others. At age 10, Deja sees Ben's mom as a friendly white woman. Leda simply sees her as a friendly woman.

Even though she knows they are all Americans, Deja spots differences in her friends. First, Ben has a lot of technology in his room; she has not TV much less a computer. Sabeen is very goal oriented and strives to make perfect grades. Deja wants out of poverty, something with which neither of her friends has dealt. Her goal was to buy a house, but after learning in school that people are what make a home, she has decided her goal in life is to not feel bad. This speaks volumes in terms of the effects of poverty on Deja. Deja feels bad most of the time. She feels bad that Ma has to work so much and so hard. She feels bad that Pop does not work and that he rarely gets out of bed. She feels bad that she cannot give ice cream to Ray and Leda. She feels bad that they all live in one small room. Deja does not even say that her goal is to be happy; happiness is a concept out of her grasp at this point. Not feeling bad is the best thing she thinks she can achieve.

While Deja is the only one of her friends who feels bad because of poverty, it does not mean that her friends do not feel bad about different things. Ben's room is covered with drawings of the home he left. He says he wants to go back. Deja notes to the reader that there are no drawings of his dad. Maybe he is mad at him, just like Deja is mad at Pop. Sabeen feels bad about the events of 9/11 and they directly relate to her because some people in the public blame Muslims for the events instead of blaming terrorists. Out of fear of retaliation, Sabeen and her family do not even go anywhere on 9/11 if they don't have to go.

Deja sits in Sabeen's middle chair to get a better view of the video of the Towers falling. She literally puts herself in Sabeen's place while figuratively doing so, too. Seeing the destruction of the Towers gives Deja better understanding of why Sabeen's family basically hides on each anniversary of the terrorist attacks. She imagines the impact of the smoke and fire that engulfed the inside of the Towers. Her focus on imagining the interior events foreshadows that they play an important role in the plot.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Deja's, Ben's, and Sabeen's mothers.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss one example from each chapter in this section that shows the impact Deja's new school is having on her.



Discussion Question 3

How does watching the video of the Towers change Deja's understanding of the events?

Vocabulary

clutches, relationship, synagogue, diagram, shrug, subway, slurping, embarrassing, divorcing, soured



Chapter 12: Stuck Inside my Head & Chapter 13: Bogeyman Dreams

Summary

On the way home, Deja and her siblings walk instead of taking the subway. All Deja can think about is the plane hitting the Tower and both Towers burning. Knowing that it happened in Manhattan, Deja reasons it could happen in Brooklyn any time, too. Deja thinks she should have let Dora and Ben walk them home and recalls that Dora scolded Ben for showing the video. She remembers what Ben whispered on her way out -- it was done by Muslim terrorists; that's what upsets Sabeen. Suddenly, the Towers relate to Deja.

Deja knows about terrorists because she knows the United States has been fighting Iraqi terrorists. Even those the Twin Towers fell in the past, their history is alive because of video., she thinks. Still, she tries to understand why it is important to her. She thinks of the circles they drew in class. The attack happened in the U.S., in her state, in her city. She knows Sabeen is not a terrorist and wonders why she and her family do not feel safe.

Back at Avalon, she realizes that as much as she hates the place, she would not want it bombed. When they get back to their room, they find Ma and Pop sitting on a bed holding hands. Deja likes seeing them happy. When asked if she had a good time, Deja replies that Ray and Leda did but shrugs off her own feelings. She says she learned to hide her feelings just like Ma.

Pop tells them it is time to shower. As he heads out with Ray, he hugs Deja and tells her he loves her. She blurts out that she knows about the planes hitting the Towers. Pop is no longer happy, and he tells her she is not allowed to go to Ben's house again. Deja protests that Ben is her friend and homework partner. He also insists that Deja gets transferred to another school.

Deja protests, and Ma backs her by saying this is the best school she's ever attended. Pop insists Deja is not old enough to learn about the Towers and that as long as she is under his roof, she will do as he says. Without thinking, Deja tells him that they are not under "his" roof. Her parents are shocked and Ray and Leda are frightened by her outburst. The room is literally divided, Deja stands alone with the others facing her.

Deja takes Ray and Leda for their showers while Ma tucks Pop into bed. He is curled into a fetal position with his face buried in the pillow. The chapter ends with a simple statement: "I hate my life" (106).

In Chapter 13: Bogeyman Dreams, Leda sleeps with Ma and Pop that night, leaving Deja the bed all to herself for a change. She thinks she should allow Ray to move from the



floor into her bed, but he is burping in his sleep so she leaves him there. Deja thinks that she wishes she could see how Pop is sick. If he had a cast, she would know and she says she would sign it. She thinks that he is wrong about her not needing to know about the Towers. She knows that Ben, Sabeen and her all felt something important when they learned about the Towers in school, and she also thinks they all felt different things. She thinks how Sabeen is the nicest girl she has ever met and how she would never think of her as a terrorist. She thinks about Ben's drawings. They show all the things he has lost. Deja feels like she has lost her family because of the way they reacted in Chapter 12 when she pointed out to Pop that she does not live under his roof (105).

Analysis

In Chapter 12: Stuck Inside My Head, Deja cannot unsee the video she watched about the Towers falling. Suddenly, she has the knowledge that her life could change in an instant, at the hands of others. She already has some experience with this. After all, her family's eviction is not her fault. Her life changed suddenly when her family was put out on the street. Even then, Deja had her family, though, which reinforces the fact that home is one's family, not the building in which they live.

Even though the Tower attacks affected people in her country, state, and city, Sabeen brings the event closer to Deja. She finds it difficult to believe that people could ever think of Sabeen as a terrorist. The idea is ridiculous to her.

Deja is learning to hide her emotions, just like her mother. So when she gets home, she hides from her parents the fact that she saw the Tower video and how much it upset her. When she blurts out to Pop that she saw the video, she is not trying to be disrespectful. When he hugs her, she feels comforted. Not accustomed to feeling comforted, especially by her father, she breaks down quickly. She wants to cry, but instead, she blurts out what is troubling her. Of course, Pop did not comfort her after hearing that she saw the video. He is furious and intends to transfer her to another school. This is his second insistence that Deja is too young to know about the Towers, indicating more than ever that the event is part of her family's past.

When Deja comments that she is not under his roof, it strikes Pop extra hard. Not because she is being disrespectful, but because it is true. She ends the argument with her comment because it sends Pop to bed again. Seeing Deja's words shock Ma and Pop so much frightens Ray and Leda and they cling to their parents. This divides the room -- Deja against her family. Where she was once alone at school, she is now alone at home. She feels like her family is broken because of her.

In Chapter 13: Bogeyman Dreams, Deja sleeps alone because Leda is still frightened of her. Deja feels like the family sees her as some kind of monster, like a bogeyman. As she tries to fall asleep, she makes several realizations. She realizes there are many hidden feelings stuffed into their tiny room. She thinks that she and her friends each felt something different when they saw the Tower video. She has made Sabeen's



connection, but this statement by Deja foreshadows that she will discover connections for Ben and her as well.

Deja wishes she could see her father's illness, indicating that she realizes now it is deeper than some physical ailment. She wishes his illness was something that a doctor could put a cast on, making it visible and showing specifically what is wrong. In this comment, Deja is not wishing her father had a broken limb. She is simply wanting a visual clue to her father's illness. Something that requires a cast also indicates a predictable healing time. Pop's unseen illness has no predictable healing time. Also, he had a cast, Deja says she would sign it, symbolizing solidarity. She wants him to get well soon. She wants him to be healthy. She does not intend to make him mad by learning and she means no harm to him.

Deja feels like her family is broken. After her comment to Pop, it seems like it is them against her. She feels like it is her fault for breaking the family. Ironically, it is her parents who are at fault for not being truthful with her about whatever their secret is. Their unwillingness to talk about Pop's illness with her has taught her to hide her emotions and to not trust them.

Discussion Question 1

Explain the meaning behind the title of Chapter 13: Bogeyman Dreams.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss why Deja wishes Pop had a cast. How would that help her?

Discussion Question 3

Refer to the diagram in Chapter 12 on page 101 (the circle graphic organizer). How many ways can Deja relate the Towers to herself in the graph she created? Explain how each one relates to her.

Vocabulary

stomachache, maneuver, shattering, social, clang, looms, Adam's apple, stunned



Chapter 14: Sabeen & Chapter 15: School

Summary

In Chapter 14: Sabeen, Deja has the day off from school for teacher in-service. Instead of staying home alone with Pop, she invites herself to Sabeen's house for the day. She has another motive for inviting herself over. She wants to tell Sabeen that she is a good person and should not let terrorists make her feel bad about herself. Sabeen and Mrs. Demir pick Deja up at Avalon. When they arrive at Sabeen's house, Deja discovers that her mother speaks English. She had heard Sabeen translate for her before and thought she did not know the language. Mrs. Demir tells her that she speaks English, Turkish, and Arabic, but has Sabeen translate for her to keep her languages sharp.

Deja meets Sabeen's family. Her dad is a dentist. She also learns to remove her shoes when she goes to Sabeen's house. She is embarrassed that she has no socks. Even so, Sabeen's grandmother tells her she is a lovely girl and pats her cheek. Deja feels like she passed a big test just by being herself. Deja enjoys seeing the family laugh and smile together.

Sabeen's mother and grandmother prepare a traditional lunch for the family and they eat sitting on the floor on a special rug. Deja thinks it is like an indoor picnic, better than eating carry-out chicken on the floor. Sabeen explains that the dish is like pizza but made with lamb. Deja likes the food, but can't get the song "Mary Had a Little Lamb" out of her head. Mr. Demir tells Deja that his family is his heart and she replies with something she heard Sabeen say at school: "Home is divine." (117) Mr. Demir tells Deja she would be a good Muslim. Deja blurts out that she just wants to be good. He tells her that she is and that she is always welcomed in their home. She feels bad that she gets angry at Pop, wishes her family was like theirs, and that she wishes Pop also worked.

Sabeen's grandmother asks Deja if she prays, but Deja says they only pray when Ma takes them to church. Deja quickly adds that she wishes for things, though. Sabeen's uncle asks what she wishes for right then and she says more shish kebab. Sabeen's grandmother claps and tells her she is a good girl with a good appetite, then serves her more.

When Sabeen's brother arrives from school, the adults hug him, ask him about his day and if he is hungry. Deja thinks this is paradise. When she got ready to leave, Mrs. Demir packed a basket of food for her family and said she hoped they would all come with Deja next time. She can't see her family relating to Sabeen's. Mr. Demir and Sabeen drive Deja home. She can't wait to share the goodies with Ray and Leda. She thinks they will like eating with their hands.



Pop walks Deja to school in Chapter 15: School. They don't talk at all as they walk. Deja thinks Pop and Ma should move since crowds make him nervous and New York is so crowded. At one intersection, Pop grabs her hand like he must protect her, but she's the one maneuvering them through the crowd. She fears he will embarrass her at school. She's glad he dressed nice for his school visit. He took a tie out of his secret suitcase.

When they get to school, Pop finally talks. He says he is looking out for her. Deja is happy, but thinks he is wrong. She tells him she does not want to leave the school. He just grunts. When they get into the school and crowded stairwell, Pop breaks out into a sweat and looks scared. It takes him a long time to get up the steps to the second floor. They finally get to homeroom. Deja points out Miss Garcia, but Pop walks over to the windows, staring at the skyline. Miss Garcia talks to him, but he does not move. She asks Michael, the homeroom helper for the week, to walk him to the principal's office. Impressed with Michael's kindness toward her father, Deja realizes how much she is going to miss this school.

She goes through the school day expecting Pop to remove her from class. In history class, Mr. Schmidt brags on Deja's critical thinking in their group project. He asks the class to write an essay about why history is relevant, alive, and personal. Deja signs her first and last name to her essay. She writes that she is better and better than she thought she was. She also writes about the fact that her father wants to take her out of the school. She finishes her essay by noting that she believes the Towers somehow play a role in her history, and sometimes history is not happy. Looking at her essay makes Deja see her own feelings better.

In science class, they watch videos of how the World Trade Center Towers were constructed. They learned that 60 people called skywalkers died during the building process. After watching, the teacher challenges them to make a skyscraper from straws, pipe cleaners and paper clips. It must be strong enough to hold a golf ball. Deja, Ben, and Sabeen work as a group. They start by making a design; the other students jumped in without a plan. Sabeen was the leader in the project and their skyscraper supported the golf ball. They win the class competition.

As they sit with their completed project, Deja realizes that each of them has their secrets. They know that Ben hurts and misses his dad. They know that Sabeen is not always happy, and that Deja tries to act tough when she is frustrated.

At the end of the day, Miss Garcia tells Deja that Pop is waiting for her outside. She assures Deja that she and the principal will not let her leave the school without a fight. Before they leave, Sabeen shares a bag of Turkish Delight with Ben and Deja.

Outside, Deja sees that Pop has been crying. He tells her that Miss Garcia was a fifth grade student who saw the Towers fall through the school window. Ashes fell onto the playground for many weeks afterward. He says the principal promises that she will see pictures but no video of the event. She does not tell him she saw the video at Ben's house. He is crying again, so Deja assumes Pop must have seen it too. But since he



does not like computers, she figures he must have been there. This changes Deja's world and makes history really relevant, alive, and personal.

Analysis

Chapter 14: Sabeen is about comparisons and contrasts. Deja sees that Sabeen's family is everything she wants hers to be -- loving, fun, and in a safe environment. Even though her family is in a shelter, they could be loving and have fun if Pop was well, or if he worked like Sabeen's father. Her trip to Sabeen's house is a wonderful cultural experience for Deja. She learns that Sabeen speaks multiple languages as does her mother. She enjoyed some Turkish food served in the traditional eating setting, sitting on the floor.

When Sabeen's brother returns home, the adults flock to him to ask about his day and offer him food. This never happens in Deja's family. She thinks Sabeen's family is divine when actually it is pretty normal or average. Her family's impoverished living conditions make it difficult for that to happen. Her father's emotional, mental, and physical health is not good. Her mother is tired from working so much, and Ray and Leda need too much care themselves.

The reader learns through Deja's conversation with the Demir family that she feels like she is not a good person. These feelings stem from her feelings toward her father. She finds herself angry at him often, wishing he were like other fathers, and wishing her family had a home. When Mr. Demir assures her she is good, he is letting her know that her feelings are normal. Since she has no control over her family, all she can do is react to their circumstances. Knowing she is welcomed in the house at any time also offers Deja the hope of some respite from her own situation.

Unlike Ben's house where Ben, Deja, and Sabeen went to his room that was fully-loaded with technology, Sabeen and Deja just played checkers in the living room when Deja went to visit. Deja thought checkers was boring, but she loved hearing the adults talk in a friendly, loving manner.

Deja is very open to learning about new cultures, especially when her friends are involved. She did not balk at removing her shoes when asked to do so, even though she was embarrassed by not having any socks. She did not make comments about the differences in food, despite repeatedly thinking of the song "Mary Had a Little Lamb" while eating the dish made of lamb. To do either of these would have been in poor taste. Deja wants to be a good guest and she wants to know more about her friend's family.

The Demirs are a religious family. They see that Deja's family is not when Sabeen's grandmothers asks if she prays. Deja says she wishes for things instead. Sabeen's family does not seem to judge her for her family's lack of religious practice even though it is a focal point in their own lives. They are happy to entertain Sabeen's friend. They even send her home with a basket of food to share with her family. Deja is anxious to



share with Ray and Leda, who will enjoy eating with their hands. It is ironic that Deja thinks she is so bad when she clearing has such a big heart for sharing.

Pop walks Deja to school in Chapter 15: School with the intention of transferring her to a different district. He is unhappy that she is learning about the Twin Towers in school. Deja realizes her father is affected by crowds. When he grabs her hand at the intersection and holds on to seemingly protect her, it is ironically Deja who is doing the protecting. As they walk to school, she realizes how ironic it is for a man who hates crowds to live in New York. She says, "Him and Ma should move." Apparently, Deja really likes her school (121). Otherwise, her statement would have been "We should move." It may also indicate that she is just as upset with Ma as with Pop for their family situation since she wants them both to move. She apparently believes she can take care of herself. She does anyway.

When he enters the classroom, he is drawn to the window and the skyline where the Twin Towers once stood tall. The fact that he does not talk or move foreshadows a deep impact the Towers have had on him.

Deja is doing well in school. She draws praise from the history teacher and is proud of her work. When she started school this semester, Deja hated writing essays. Now she's getting better and learning about herself in doing so. The image of her essay shows that she scratched through the line that said "By Deja" and changed it to "By Deja Barnes." (127) She happily signs her last name now because she is not embarrassed to be a Barnes. Her family is part of her social group.

Deja's group gains praise in science, too. This time it is for Sabeen's planning of building a tower to support a golf ball. This is a great day at school for Deja and it would be a shame for her to have to leave her inspirational setting and friends.

When she finally talks to Pop after school, she learns he has waited there for her all day. He says the principal promises that Deja will not see video of the Towers falling. This is very important to him. The fact that he wants to protect her from this sight is additional evidence of foreshadowing. She can see he has been crying. He tells her that Miss Garcia saw the Towers fall as a fifth grader through the window at her school. This shows he has talked with Miss Garcia and explains why she has been so nervous about teaching this section about the Twin Towers.

Pop's insistence that Deja not learn about the Towers shows just how much he wants to keep the information from Deja. When he explains that the principal promises she will not see the video, it signifies to Deja just how much Pop is trying to protect her, especially since she has seen the video at Ben's house and was traumatized by it. She does not dare tell him that she has seen it for fear that she will not let her be friends with Ben any longer. Deja begins reasoning in her mind why this is so important to Pop. Since they have not had a computer in her lifetime, she assumes that Pop must have been at the Towers to have known the extent of the devastation.



Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the family lives of Ben, Deja, and Sabeen.

Discussion Question 2

Why did Ben, Sabeen, and Deja win the science class competition?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Pop decide not to remove Deja from the school?

Vocabulary

multistory, squashed, marvel, silences, pitying, dagger, intersection, charm, Yoda, anthem, steel, planks



Chapter 16: Suitcase, Chapter 17: Secrets, & Chapter 18: Sour

Summary

Deja notices that the suitcase moves from day to day. She assumes Pop is opening it occasionally. She has only seen him touch the suitcase once. One night as she's trying to fall asleep, she hears a squeak and realizes Pop is opening the suitcase. She sees him sit on the floor and open the case with a key. As he lifts things out of it, he muffles his sobbing with his other hand. She hears the wild crying and wonders how much louder it would be if he wasn't covering his mouth. She wonders again if Pop was at the Twin Towers when they fell.

In Chapter 17: Secrets, Deja waits behind while the rest of the family goes to the cafeteria for pancakes on Saturday morning. When they leave, she gets Pop's key and opens the suitcase. She sees his work clothes, folded, neat, and clean. Beneath them, she finds a picture of her dad and three other men. They were dressed alike and Pop looked healthy and vibrant. They linked their arms like paper dolls.

She also finds plastic bags. A walkie-talkie is in one and it is melted on one side. Another bag holds a cracked flashlight. Another bag holds a dusty wallet. The final bag is full of black and gray lumps of some kind of waste. Just as she is about to lock it up, she finds something in the top pouch. It's a nametag that says World Trade Center, James Barnes

She slips everything back in place then rushes to the cafeteria. Her head aches and she's about to cry. She realizes Pop is a 9/11 survivor.

In Chapter 18: Sour, Sabeen brings a tin of Turkish Delight to share at lunch. Ben says he read about the dish in a book called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. When Sabeen says she will read it, he warns her that it is "pretty Christian." (148) She is offended by his remark and he explains that he does not want her to get in trouble. She says her father believes in sharing ideas. He has also told her, though, that since 9/11, Muslims have to be careful because some people think they are all terrorists. Ben and Deja know Sabeen and her family could never be terrorists. Sabeen reveals that sometimes the store clerk often tells her to go back to Saudi Arabia. Sabeen explains to her friends that her homeland of Turkey is two countries away from Saudi Arabia.

Deja blurts out that her father survived 9/11. Her friends are shocked. They decide they want to know more about 9/11, not just the Towers. Ben calls them to another table and shows them video on his smartphone. Ben explains that there were four planes -- one hit the Pentagon, one crashed in Pennsylvania, and the two at the Twin Towers. There were 19 terrorists involved, 15 from Saudi Arabia, two from the United Arab Emirates, and one from Lebanon and Egypt. Ben tells Sabeen to cover her eyes when the second



Tower hits. People were jumping from windows to escape the increasing heat and smoke. Deja starts to cry. She asks Ben if he's seen it before. He says his dad is in the military. He explained that the buildings burned and collapsed because the planes, with their gas and oil, were like burning explosives. They melted the steel frames. The whole attack on the two Towers took 102 minutes, according to Ben. When the bell rings, the three friends go to class, but have the videos in their minds.

Analysis

When Deja hears her father's attempts to muffle his heavy crying while looking in the suitcase in Chapter 16: Suitcase, she determines she must see what is inside. Her parents have proven that they do not want to communicate at all about whatever it is that is upsetting Pop, so she does not bother asking about the suitcase. Instead, she makes an opportunity to look for herself in Chapter 17: Secrets. The clothing and the bagged items she finds tucked safely inside the suitcase are not enough to let her know their importance. It is the name tag that explains what she needs to know and provides the climax for the plot: her father is a 9/11 survivor. It is not clear yet if Deja links Pop's health problems to the terror attacks, however, she now understands that history truly is relevant, personal, and alive. She realizes that Pop's history affects hers. She at least is beginning to understand his fear of crowds and, most importantly, why he is trying so hard to protect her from knowledge of the trade center attacks. He wants to save her from the horror he experienced first-hand.

The picture she finds in the suitcase gives her a look into Pop that she has never seen. He was a bright-eyed, happy-looking man in the photo. He shared a bond with the other four men in the picture with him. They stood, smiling, with their arms linked like paper dolls. Just like Deja's paper dolls in her previous class project, this image symbolizes that these people are his social group, a family of some sort. Since she knows the items are from his last good job, she can safely surmise that the men in the picture are his work family.

Chapter 18 is ironically named Sour despite the fact that the friends are enjoying a sweet treat with each other. Their conversation turns sour when Ben warns Sabeen that a book is "pretty Christian." (148) She is offended that he thinks her family is narrow-minded, but they quickly work out this difference. Sabeen reveals her father's concerns about their safety since 9/11. She has experienced this kind of hatred herself from an ignorant store clerk. The clerk makes generalizations about Muslims that are obviously incorrect. Deja understands now that discrimination happens to people other than those who are black and those who are poor.

Ben is a wealth of knowledge in all things related to 9/11. He has seen the videos and has heard much talk about it because his father is in the military. At this point, that is all the girls know of Ben's knowledge with 9/11. They just assume it is because he knows so much about so many different things., but his mention of his father's military experience foreshadows that there is another connection to 9/11 for Ben.



Deja wants to see more of the 9/11 attack after finding out that her father was there. She wants to know what he saw, heard, and felt. However, she knows he is not likely to talk about it; or, he might get mad and withdraw her from the school. Seeing the video shakes up all three friends this time because they have a direct link to the attack.

Discussion Question 1

How and why is the past important in Deja's life?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it important that the man pictured with Pop in the photo found in his suitcase have their arms linked? What does it mean?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the discrimination Sabeen faces for her religion impacts her and her family. Why does the family not feel that they are protected by every American's right to freedom of religion?

Vocabulary

tilted, beige, drive-by, margarine, claw, pouch, delight, canister, cuticles, skydiver, suffocating



Chapter 19: History & Chapter 20: Pact

Summary

The setting of Chapter 19: History is in Mr. Schmidt's history class. They are studying attacks on American soil, dating back to the Revolutionary War. Deja was surprised to learn that the World Trade Center was first bombed in 1993. The truck bomb used failed. When it comes to September 11, 2001, Mr. Schmidt says the country has been involved in a war on terror. Angel asks why the terrorists hate Americans. He does not answer and it makes Deja mad. She thinks he should be tough enough to tell them the whole story. She closes her eyes and imagines the buildings collapsing. She decides history is dead since they don't teach the whole story. She also imagines her paper dolls from her home project. She sees Pop as a paper doll on the end, weak and barely holding on, with the rest trying to support him. She is mad that Pop never told her about his 9/11 experience and mad that the teachers are not teaching the whole story to them. She gets up and her chair hits the floor. She walks out with Mr. Schmidt calling after her.

In Chapter 20: Pact, Ben catches up with Deja. He tells her to come outside for recess. She says she does not like his boots. He's not offended; he knows they don't fit New York. Then she says she is such a jerk. They go outside and talk. Deja thinks about how her situation is the best it has been in a long time. She cannot get any poorer. She's got good friends and likes her teachers and school. She's afraid she's going to blow it. She tells Ben she must see the new World Trade Center, called Freedom Tower. Ben tells her there is nothing left of the old Towers to see. When she asks how he knows so much, Ben reveals that the attack is the reason his father joined the Marines. He served in Afghanistan.

Deja tells Ben she cannot go to Freedom Tower on Saturday because she would have to take Ray and Leda with her. She decides to skip school the next day to go. Ben says he will go along and bring money for the subway. This is their pact, the inspiration for the chapter's title.

Ben also reveals that his dad loves someone else and might remarry. Deja wants to hug him, but does not want him to think she likes him as more than a friend. Instead, she pats his back. Once their plans are made, they play a quick game of chase and she enjoys acting silly. Deja thinks about how she feels grown in a kids body. She says she needs to learn what to do to help Pop, Ray, and Leda.

Analysis

in Chapter 19: History, Deja is happy to learn more about 9/11 in her history class, but gets disgruntled when the teacher, Mr. Schmidt, ignores a girl's question. She believes history is only alive and relevant if they know all the facts about history. Now that Deja knows Pop survived 9/11 in the Towers, having more knowledge about the event is very



important. She knows she cannot get that knowledge at home, so she depends on school for it. She is so frustrated that she gets up and leaves the room. Right now, her school life is so much better than her home life, that it is double crushing that this teacher has let her down. The title of this chapter is "History" because it takes place in her history class. Ironically, her enrollment there may also be history if she keeps making a scene and storming out of class. She worries about that after she has already stormed out into the hallway.

Deja is a smart girl and her school lessons definitely stick with her. She thinks about her paper doll family from her home project. She imagines Pop as one of the dolls at the end, weak and barely holding onto the rest of the family. They lift him up as best they can. Now she understands why Ma has been understanding beyond belief with Pop's inability to work or help at home.

Trying to hide her frustration, Deja is mean to Ben when he catches up with her in Chapter 20:Pact. She quickly apologizes, though, indicating that she is getting in touch with and understanding her own emotions better after learning more at her new school.

In Chapter 20: Pact, Ben agrees to go with Deja the next day to the Freedom Tower that has been built in place of the Twin Towers that were attacked. She feels like she needs to go there to get a better understanding of what her father went through there on 9/11. Ben, who is full of knowledge about everything, is a good partner to take on her mission. He also offers to bring money for the subway and for lunch. Deja knows she has good friends in both Sabeen and Ben.

Deja also learns Ben's special connection to 9/11. His father enlisted in the Marines because of the attacks. He wanted to help fight for America and to fight terrorists in Afghanistan.

At the end of the chapter, Deja reflects on how she feels much older than she really is. She has many adult responsibilities because of her family's financial situation. She believes she is old enough to understand and cope with all the details of her father's survival story. But this is not all about her or her curiosity. She wants to learn about Pop's role in 9/11 so she can help him, Ray, and Leda.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Deja get so mad in history class? How could she have handled the situation better?

Discussion Question 2

At the end of Chapter 20: Pact, Deja mentions that she must learn about 9/11 to help Ray, Leda, and Pop. Why does she not mention Ma?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the importance of Ben's willingness to join Deja on her school-skipping adventure to the Freedom Tower.

Vocabulary

mission, clench, shudder, slump, Al-Qaeda, ideologues, incapable, tumultuous, overlapping, dunks, energy



Chapter 21: Field Trip & Chapter 22: Subway

Summary

Deja skips across the school's steps so she can say that she did go to school that morning. It is getting cold and she does not have a coat yet. Deja reflects on some recent past events at home. Ma says Pop is depressed so when she is not working, she stays in the room to take care of him instead of taking Deja shopping for a coat. She overheard her mom crying on her cell phone one night, telling Auntie Rita that Pop might have to go to the hospital. Deja suddenly realizes that every September, Pop gets worse.

Deja begins to question whether or not she is doing the right thing by skipping school to learn more about 9/11. She starts to see their life right now is not so bad. She thinks that in high school she can get a job at McDonald's to buy things for her siblings and give her pay to Ma. Deja hears a mourning dove and is able to spot it in a tree. Ma once told her that does fly straight and powerful and that they are not really sad. She thinks that if they are sad, it does not stop them from flying. The birds take off and so does she, because moving is better than being stuck. She meets up with Ben, who has packed a backpack.

In Chapter 22, Ben is really prepared. The chapter starts with him giving Deja a pair of gloves. It is a very cold day and she has no coat. No one notices two kids traveling alone on the subway. They have to stand on the subway, but Deja is happy that it is warmer than Avalon inside. She begins to worry about her adventure, but she is impressed with Ben's travel skills. They begin talking about how Ben had never ridden a subway until he moved there from Arizona. Deja asks him about his horse and Ben tears up. She feels bad for making him feel bad. He reveals that he will not be going back to Arizona any time soon. His dad hardly ever calls. His mom told him that some people try to forget the past. Deja realizes their dad situations are similar. He knows what is happening to his dad, but Pop is also disappearing little by little through his depression.

Ben says he likes New York because he can go places himself without waiting for his mom to drive him. Deja gets cranky when she realizes Ben knows a lot more about New York City than she does. She only knows about Brooklyn. Deja has a wide range of thoughts on the subway ride. She thinks about how some of the people on the subway look like beautiful billboard models. She considers that it is easier to look better when you have money. She suddenly realizes her family's trip to Central Park before Leda was born was free.

Ben senses she is getting emotionally worked-up so he shows her his drawing. He is drawing the different people he sees on the subway. Deja relaxes and says Miss Garcia



would be proud of them for finding a social group in their fellow subway riders. Ben writes "Americans" on the drawing like it is graffiti.

They talk about the towers. Ben says his mother told him it was targeted because it represented capitalism and opportunity. He continues drawing as they talk. Deja points out how different America is since its founding fathers developed the Declaration of Independence. He sketches Ben Franklin and his own grandmother above his drawing, like they are looking down from Heaven. Deja can tell Ben is a little lonely. She wonders what it is like being an only child. She tells him his grandmother and mother are brave. He had never thought of it that way. He says they are in New York because his mom has a dream.

Deja wonders if Pop has dreams, other than the bad dreams that torment him. She thinks maybe their whole family should move to Arizona so they could enjoy the nature and ride horses.

Sabeen sent a container of baklava for Ben and Deja. She wanted to go along with them, but she does not break rules. Ben gives a piece to a woman then Deja gives the whole container to a homeless man on the subway. The man passes the tin around to the others in the subway car. As they get off the subway, Deja and Ben both admit they are scared.

Analysis

Deja told Miss Garcia when she was given the option to write about a home other than Avalon that she does not lie. Deja lives up to that, technically at least, in Chapter 21: Field Trip. When she leaves the house for school, she tells her parents that she is "Off to school." She does not say she is going to school, because that would imply all day, which would be a lie. Deja does go to school. She skips across five steps and decides that is enough to not count as a lie. Of course, it is a lie because she is skipping school. She just does not see it that way.

In previous chapters, Deja has mentioned that she hates her life, hates Avalon, wants something more, etc. Now, however, she begins to see her life as not so bad. Her family is together, unlike Ben's. On top of that, Ben is an only child which makes his family extra small. She does not suffer from the religious discrimination that Sabeen does. She likes her school and her friends. She considers that maybe Pop is right. Maybe she does not need to learn more about 9/11. She hears a mourning dove and recalls the things Ma has told her about them. Mourning doves are not really crying and they are not really sad. They flight straight and powerful. Deja takes these words to heart. If she roosts where she is, comfortable or complacent in her own situation, she will not move forward or out of it. She will be stuck. She also realizes that her family's situation is bad, but she does not have to be sad or mournful. She can also fly straight and powerful like the mourning dove. When it takes off, so does she, ready to move forward and get out of the rut of poverty.



Deja has a lot to deal with in these two chapters. In addition to needing to know more about the World Trade Centers, she has overheard Ma telling Auntie Rita on the phone that Pop may have to go to the hospital because nothing has helped him. She has finally connected Pop's illness with the World Trade Center because she realizes that his illness gets much worse each year in September. Deja wants to know more so she can help Pop and help her family.

Deja learns a lot about Ben in Chapter 22: Subway. In Arizona, Ben had to wait for his mom to drive him places. In New York, however, he can explore on his own, thanks to subways. He misses the wide open spaces of his hometown, but he enjoys getting to travel underground. She senses he is lonely when he talks about his grandmother. He tells her they moved to New York to pursue his mother's dream, but does not say what the dream is. Deja realizes she has never heard talk about having a dream. She wonders if he does. She wonders if their whole family should move to Arizona for the wide open spaces since Pop hates crowds. This is the opposite in what she said in Chapter 15: School, when she suggested Ma and Pop move (121). This symbolizes Deja's willingness to accept her father's health for what it is and instead of bitterness toward him, she now shows love and concern.

She also learns that their fathers have something in common. Both are disappearing. Pop is disappearing from Deja slowly. His disappearance is mental and emotional in some ways he is physically present, but not active in her life or in a family role. Physically, he will disappear if he has to go into the hospital. Deja has no idea how bad his physical health is or if he is dying or not. Ben's dad is disappearing because of his divorce from Ben's mother. He seldom calls to talk with Ben, showing that he is choosing not to stay in contact with his son. Ben reveals that he loves another woman and apparently spends all his time with her instead of calling to talk to him or going to visit.

Ben and Deja each take a piece of baklava that Sabeen sent with them. Deja is not crazy about it, but does not want it to go to waste. Ben passes a piece to an elderly lady. On their way off the subway car, Deja passes the entire container to a homeless man that she spotted riding with them. She knows he is homeless because he is wearing all his clothes. He thanks her. When she looks back into the car, she sees that the homeless man is passing the container around to share with all the others on the car. This shows that homeless people, who so many label as takers, also have a giving heart. Sometimes they just do not have anything to give.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Deja's father to Ben's.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the mourning dove and how it relates to Deja in Chapter 21: Field Trip.



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the importance of Deja's thought that, perhaps, her whole family should move to Arizona. What has led her to consider this?

Vocabulary

hoodie, distant, skyward, mourning, maple, inhale, lamppost, tilt, sling, grazed, mesquites, independence



Chapter 23: Our Stop & Chapter 24: Subway Home

Summary

Ben and Deja make their way through crowds of adults to get to the Freedom Tower. Deja is surprised by the crowd and by the variety of languages she hears people speaking. Everyone is polite, but serious. Ben and Deja hopes no one confronts them about being there without adults. Deja sees hundreds of young oak trees and hears nothing but a large waterfall. A brochure they have describes the waterfall as a 30 bottomless waterfall that is a void, a space unfilled or not occupied. It reflects the absence of the former Towers.

Deja is drawn to the water. They see the base of the two Towers that collapsed in the 9/11 attack. There is no ceiling or roof above them. Deja imagines their former outlines. A man standing next to them is crying. Deja tells Ben that the site is also a gravesite since many people died there and were buried under the rubble. They turn their heads down. Deja wonders if there are still pieces of bones and building there. She thinks it is both horrible and beautiful.

Deja thinks about how nothing beautiful happened at the World Trade Center on 9/11, but it has become a beautiful site. Ben sketches the site and Deja encourages him to add the water, too. She thinks it makes the site clean. The surrounding forest needs water to live, Deja reasons. She tells Ben it is a metaphor -- water is life. Ben likens the water to tears that are constant. The man beside them who was crying adds that crying helps you heal. The man asks if he can have Ben's sketch. Of course, he gives it to him. The man says he is from Kansas and his daughter died there on 9/11. He points to her name on the ledge. He shows Ben and Deja a photo of his daughter and points out the name of her friend, also inscribed on the ledge.

Ben and Deja continue making their way around the memorial, looking at more names. Deja notices white roses sticking out of a few places in the names. She asks Ben why they are there. A policeman standing behind them explains that white roses are placed by the names on their birthdays. There are nine on this day. The policeman reminds Deja of Pop, except his spirit is not gone. Ben gets Deja to go back to the other Tower site. He reminds her that they are supposed to be in school. The policeman approaches them and asks where their parents are and tells them they should be there with an adult. Deja yells for Ben to run and they both bolt away, back to the subway to go home.

Ben checks his phone in Chapter 24: Subway Home and sees that he has received 22 text messages and 16 voice mails from his mother. Deja says it would have been better if she had gone alone, because the teacher would have just thought she was sick. With both of them absent, though, it created suspicion. But she is glad he went; they both are. Even though they know they are in trouble, Deja points out that it is not as bad as



the man who lost his daughter on 9/11. She thinks about how the footprints of the Tower bases are now horrible beautiful. She wonders if Pop only remembers horrible.

Analysis

Ben and Deja strike out on their own in an adventure to Freedom Tower. Deja is surprised at the diverse crowd at the memorial. The sight really reinforces her understanding that America is made up of many different people. Even if not everyone there was American, they at least were sympathizers with America.

Freedom Tower is full of symbolism. Oak trees symbolize strength and might. There are several old sayings about oak trees that can be applied here as symbolism. One is "From the tiniest acorn grows the mightiest oak." Oaks are known for their ability to grow without much tending or fuss, right from where an acorn falls. In this case, the symbolism implies that the Towers fell right there and in their place grows something mighty and strong, the memorial to honor the victims. It also symbolizes that the two falling Towers made America stronger by planting the seeds that began the nation's war on terror. Another saying about oak trees is "The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree." Normally, people use this to imply that a person is very much like another because he/she has been part of that person's culture. The old adage has a similar meaning here. The people who died in the Twin Towers on 9/11 fell close to those Towers, literally. From their deaths grew a spirit of patriotism and national pride as the country vowed to fight terror.

The water also carries symbolism through metaphor, which is discussed in detail by Ben and Deja. Deja says the water is cleansing or purifying and that water is life. Ben believes it also represents endless tears that are still cried on behalf of the victims of the attacks. The water also acts to reflect what is no longer there, making it a point of reflection for all those who visit the memorial. The white roses placed by names of victims on their birthday symbolize pure love and innocence. All of the victims on 9/11 were innocent. The policeman at the center reminds Deja of her father. This foreshadows an event yet to come in the book.

In Chapter 24: Subway Home, Ben checks his phone to see he has missed many text messages and calls, but does not bother to read or answer them. He knows he is in trouble and chooses not to address it at the time. Instead, he and Deja continue their conversation about Freedom Tower. Ironically, their day of independence and freedom at Freedom Tower may result in Ben and Deja getting punished.

Deja thinks about how the Tower bases, the footprints, are horrible beautiful -- horrible because of what happened there, but beautiful because of the memorial. In her search for why history is relevant, alive, and personal, she fails to make the connection to her own footprints. The 9/11 attack at the World Trade Center left footprints in her life, too. They are her father's footprints. Her father is one of the bases of her family (Ma is the other). She, Ray, and Leda are the memorial, the beautiful that came after the tragedy.



Deja hits the nail on the head when she ponders if Pop only remembers the horrible aspects of the event.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the meaning of the oak trees and the 30-foot waterfall at Freedom Tower.

Discussion Question 2

Explain what Deja means when she describes Freedom Tower as both horrible and beautiful (193).

Discussion Question 3

What do Ben and Deja learn from the victim's father whom they speak to at the memorial? Why is this meeting with him important?

Vocabulary

swirl, swiping, ledge, cascade, descending, pooling, glisten, charcoal, spirit



Chapter 25: Pop & Chapter 26: The Talk

Summary

Ben and Deja exit the subway and immediately see Dora and Pop waiting for them. Dora runs to Ben and simultaneously scolds him and asks if he is okay. She is more worried than mad. Pop, however, is mad. Deja is glad that he did not call Ma to make her miss work. Deja says nothing to him. They lock eyes and he gives her the biggest hug ever. As Dora and Ben walk away, Pop calls out to thank her. He smiled at Deja and told her they would talk when they got home. She sees a difference in him and the way he is able to act in public.

Back at Avalon in Chapter 26: The Talk, Pop pulls the suitcase out to talk with Deja about what is inside. He says Ma wanted him to tell her years ago, but he just wanted to protect her. She realizes Pop is being brave. He pops open the suitcase and tells Deja his story.

The picture of him with the other men who had linked arms were his coworkers and friends, his work family. Their names were Luis, Big Kelly, Hernandez, and O'Brien. He said he has felt angry and helpless ever since 9/11.

Pop says Luis and his wife just had a little girl. Pop and Big Kelly were saving money from each pay check to buy them a wind-up swing.. They were the World Trade Center security team. They greeted people, signed for packages, and helped the workers in the Towers. They got to know all the people in the North Tower. Deja tells Pop she understands that his job was like a home, because the people who worked there were like his family. Pop hugs her and says she has a great school.

He worked at the North Tower for five years. He really loved that job and the people he worked with there. He apologizes for not telling Deja sooner, but he still sees, feels, hears, and smells that day. He says he dreams about it and he sees it everywhere, even clear skies because the sky was clear the day it happened.

He says he heard Luis and Big Kelly call for help on the walkie-talkie. The building shook and they began getting distress calls. Luis and Big Kelly took the elevator. He tried to get them to take the stairs instead. He never knew if they made it out of the elevator or not. He also shows her his broken flashlight. When they went to the elevator, he headed for the stairwell. It was already filled with dust and smoke. He recognized all the people rushing down and told Deja how scared he was. People were still trying to help each other, he adds. He went up 10 flights of stairs and kept going. Soon the fire and police departments arrived and he stayed to help them. He felt the metal handrails so hot they were starting to melt.

Mrs. Able fell against him. It was scary to move the frail, older woman, but he inched down the stairs with her. Pop tells Deja that stretching metal shrieks. He says he could



hear the Tower dying. To move faster, he scooped Mrs. Able up in his arms and carried her down the stairs. They heard the second Tower get hit and barely made it out of the building alive.

Pop says that he got Mrs. Able to the ambulance then noticed both Towers were completely gone. He shows her the bag of gray lumps -- ash and concrete dust that was left. He keeps it to remind him of what is in his lungs causing him to cough. Deja realizes he has a real reason to cough.

He says it also reminds him of how worthless he was that day because he could not protect or save everyone. Deja tells Pop she thinks he is a hero; that saving Mrs. Able affected all her friends and family. She reminds him that if he had not made it out, Ma would have married someone else and life would not be the same. He remarks that it would be better.

She reminds him that she would not have existed and she is Deja, the original, one and only. She calls him her brave Pop and kisses his face all over. He laughs. She asks him why the terrorists hate America. He says he does not know. Deja feels guilty for having been so angry with Pop in the past.

Deja tells Pop she thinks terrorists hate American because Americans believe in freedom for everyone. Pop tells her she must be the smartest girl in her class. She tells him they should go to the memorial together.

Analysis

From the beginning of Chapter 25: Pop, Deja sees a difference in her father. First of all, he is standing close to Dora. He never stands close to anyone other than Ma. He also calls out to thank her as she and Ben . His hug and smile that he gives Deja also shows her a changed Pop. She also notes that he is there without Ma; he handles this on his own without disrupting her work day. Deja is happy to see this because she knows she is in trouble for skipping school. Her guilt would have been compounded if Ma had to miss work to deal with the situation she caused.

As part of the story's denouement, or resolution, Pop sits down with Deja and explains everything he saves in his suitcase in Chapter 26: The Talk. She was correct in assuming the men in the photograph with Pop were his work family. As far as anyone can tell from Pop's story, he is the only one to make it out of them to leave the Towers alive on 9/11. He has carried this guilt with him ever since. In Chapter 23: Our Stop, Deja remarks that the policeman reminds her of Pop (197). Her hunch was not too far off. Pop was a security employee at the North Tower. He worked to protect and serve, just like the policeman does at the memorial. Deja uses a simile to compare his former workplace to a home.

The ingredients of the suitcase offer various forms of symbolism. The walkie-talkies connect him with the voices of his friends. The last time he heard them talk was on this



walkie-talkie. He still hears voices of that horrible day in terms of nightmares about people screaming for help.

The flashlight is his reminder of the stairwell he tried to get his friends to take instead of the elevator. The flashlight did little to help him maneuver through the heavy ash that was falling in the stairwell.

The bag of gray ash and concrete dust serves as a reminder, Pop says, of the stuff that is in his lungs. The symbolism goes deeper than that. The people from his old job were very much a part of his life. Their ashes are in his lungs now, meaning they are still physically very much a part of his life. That job was a big part of his life, a happy part of it. Ironically, it is keeping him from living a good life now.

Deja's hunches that drew her to consider the interior at the time of the attack are also confirmed by Pop. He was there when it happened. He personifies the building when he describes it as shrieking. He also confirms what Deja learned in science. Even though the building was built to be sturdy, the heat from the airplane wreck and fuel was so great that the steel bones of the building began to melt.

Pop is humble. He does not see himself as a hero for saving Mrs. Able. Instead, he sees himself as a failure for not saving more people, and for not finding his friends. In a way, he feels guilty for surviving. Deja's words to him can help that aspect heal. Now that she knows the truth about what happened to Pop. She can give him the respect he needs in order to feel like a winner again.

Deja has something to be proud of now. In the midst of her family's impoverished situation, she can at least see her dad as a hero. He is in the situation he is in now because he was a hero. He had a good job, good relationships, and was a contributing member of society. The 9/11 terror attacks robbed him of all that.

Knowing the truth about her dad lets Deja be herself again and to gain more self-confidence. His "loser" attitude has rubbed off on her in the past. The Brooklyn Collective Elementary School challenges her to do better. Now that she is proud of Pop, she can be proud of herself for being his offspring, one of the Barnes that were looked down upon in her old neighborhood.

Through their discussion, Pop has built a new, improved relationship with Deja. Her actions pushed him to be brave and to discuss what happened to him on 9/11. Even though he saved a life at the World Trade Center on 9/11, it is Deja who is the hero of this story. Through education, she changed her family's situation. She can now explain to Ray and Leda how their father got sick when saving someone's life. They will be proud of him instead of afraid. This will also help Pop heal as broken bonds with his children grow stronger.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the changes Deja sees in her father in Chapter 25: Pop.



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the importance of each bagged item in Pop's suitcase. What is the symbolism associated with each?

Discussion Question 3

The reader learns how the 9/11 Tower attacks affected Pop physically. How does it affect him mentally and emotionally?

Vocabulary

shadowy, shuffle, unmade, palms, memorial, ordinary, protective, imagining, accounting



Chapter 28: The End

Summary

Chapter 28: The End is an essay written by Deja. It is titled "What Doesn't Ever Change." She starts by writing about all the different ways her family has changed. Pop has changed since a new doctor started giving him the right medicine. At night, he and Deja walk to the river and talk. Leda has stopped using her pacifier and pull-ups. Ray has started school. Ma is happier, and the family is moving to an apartment that will be better than Avalon.

Deja also writes that relationships and connections with family, friends, and other groups are important. She says she is glad to know about 9/11 because it helps show her that America's values never change, even though sometimes other things in America (like the Manhattan skyline) do change. The American values that helped people survived 9/11 are part of her future, she writes. She concludes by writing that on the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11, Americans still believe in freedom, something that has not changed in 240 years as a nation.

Analysis

Chapter 28: The End features Deja's essay about how history is alive, relevant, and personal. It is shown in what is supposed to be her own handwriting. It looks like a copy of the essay was made and printed into the book.

Deja writes in sentence fragments in her essay, but they are effective as they place emphasis on certain words or phrases to which she wants to call attention. The essay shows a lot of personal growth for Deja. First of all, she proudly signs her full name to it. Secondly, she makes a number of connections between the past and her future. The author uses Deja's essay to wrap up loose ends that were not completed in the story. Pop is going to heal now that he has better medicine. The relationship between Pop and Deja is also healing. They spend time talking to each other, developing a strong father-daughter bond. Ben's dad shows some healing when he visits New York to accompany his son on a field trip. The Barnes family has even had dinner at the Demir house. Deja's life is improving, and it all started with her education.

Discussion Question 1

What message is Deja trying to convey when she includes in her essay that she will some day visit Arizona with Ben and that her family had dinner at Sabeen's house?



Discussion Question 2

How have American values affected Deja's past? How do they affect her future?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Miss Garcia's 9/11 experience. How did it affect the way she taught Deja's class about 9/11?

Vocabulary

wounds, focused, present, anniversary



Characters

Deja

Deja is a 10-year-old girl who lives in the Avalon Family Shelter with her parents and two siblings. She is the oldest of the children and has to take care of her brother and sister often because her father is not able to do so. Her mother works to earn money for the family. This puts Deja in a very mature role for her age. She is in charge when Ma is at work. Pop is not able to help with any chores, so she and Ma do it all.

Deja hates poverty and the life she shares with her family. Initially, she blames it all on Pop, who cannot hold down a job and who is anti-social and lies in bed with headaches often. By the end of the story, however, Deja learns her father is a hero. She gains new respect for him.

Deja tries to be tough, especially when she is frustrated. This causes some trouble at school. Deja's friends know this trait about her, though, and they are always quick to help her calm down and re-focus.

She is a very insightful girl who wants more for herself and her family than the poverty in which they live. She believes she can change it through education. By the end of the book, her family situation has already improved because of Deja's desire for education.

Pop

Pop has debilitating headaches and coughs that keep him from being able to hold down a job. He is often so depressed that he does not get out of bed, so he never helps with family chores. Deja blames Pop for their poverty, and she thinks he is just lazy. She thinks that her parents never tell her the truth.

Pop is a 9/11 survivor who worked in the North Tower as a security guard. He helped get an elderly woman out of the tower and to an ambulance just as the tower crumbled behind them. The trauma scars him mentally and emotionally and leaves him with a respiratory illness from all the ash and concrete dust he inhaled that day. Deja's push to know more about Pop's experience is helping Pop and the whole family to heal.

Ma

Ma is a Jamaican immigrant who came to America seeking a better job. She looks very tired all the time because she works so hard to make money for the family since Pop cannot work. Ma gave up some of her personal, sentimental items from her hope chest to get money for the family, too. Ma spends the time when she is not working babying Pop. She rubs his head, makes the children play outside so as not to disturb him, and relies on Deja to care for the children when she is at work. Ma tries to hide how worried



and tired she is because she believes that complaining is useless since it changes nothing.

Raymond (Ray)

Ray is Deja's little brother. In the shelter, he sleeps on the floor. Deja frequently tells Ma and Pop that he is ready to start school. At the end of the story, we learn that he has been enrolled in school. He is around kindergarten age. He helps Deja with her home project by cutting out paper dolls. Miss Garcia says that the paper dolls are the best example of a home because home is not just some building.

Leda

Leda is Deja's baby sister. She is 2 to 3 years old. She shares a bed with Deja in the shelter. Leda is a typical little girl. She likes cookies, hugs, and attention.

Miss Garcia

Miss Garcia is a young teacher at Brooklyn Collective Elementary. She is Deja's homeroom teacher. Miss Garcia is very encouraging and helpful to the students. Deja likes her better than the teachers she had at her old school.

Miss Garcia seems nervous when she introduces the Twin Towers as the first lesson's theme. By the end of the story, the reader knows that Miss Garcia is nervous because she witnessed firsthand the towers falling as she looked out her fifth grade classroom window. She was so shocked by the attacks that she had nightmares for a long time. Knowing that people were helping each other at that difficult time gave her faith in humanity again.

Ben

Ben moves to New York from Arizona. He wears cowboy boots. Deja thinks that the boots do not fit in with New York. Ben wears them anyway.

Ben has natural talent as a sketch artist. He likes to draw people he sees. and he spends time on their subway trip drawing what he sees. A man at the tower memorial sees him making a sketch and asks if he can have it. Ben obliges because he is a nice boy.

Ben lives with his mother now in New York. His dad still lives in Arizona. They are getting a divorce. There was a time in the story when Ben seldom heard from his dad. In the end, however, the issues seems to have been resolved, or at least improved.



Ben skips school to go with Deja to the memorial. He packs a backpack with supplies, brings cash for lunch and the subway, and even brings a pair of gloves for Deja. He is one of Deja's best friends.

Sabeen

Sabeen works hard in school, maintains focus, and does not lie or cheat. She is Deja's other best friend. Deja and Sabeen have a number of things in common despite the wealth difference between their families. Both girls know the pain of discrimination. Sabeen trusts Deja and Ben with a story about how a store clerk tells her often that she should go back to Saudi Arabia. Ironically, Sabeen is American and Turkish, not Saudi Arabian.

Sabeen's religion is very important to her, and she shares her fears of intolerance with Deja and Ben. The friends are very supportive of Sabeen, and they say she is the nicest person they know. They know that all Muslims are not terrorists.

Dora

Dora is Ben's mother. She is happy to be visited by a full house of kids when Deja and Sabeen show up on Saturday to work on a group project. Dora is divorcing Ben's dad and moving to New York to pursue an undisclosed dream.

Mr. and Mrs. Demir

Mr. and Mrs. Demir are Sabeen's parents. They are very nice and family-oriented. They welcomed Deja into their home and invited her whole family over for dinner. Mr. Demir is a dentist, and Mrs. Demir wears traditional Muslim attire for modesty. Until the day Deja went to visit, she thought Sabeen's mom could not teach English. She can actually speak English, Turkish, and Arabic.



Symbols and Symbolism

Twin Towers

The World Trade Center's Twin Towers represented the American dream and democracy through their association with capitalism. Seeing how they were constructed in the documentary in Deja's science class showed the students just how strong and reinforced those towers were when they came under attack.

The Twin Towers also symbolize the ability to stand strong. Deja stands stronger after her trip to the tower location because she feels the impact of what her father experienced on 9/11. Her father stands taller when he finally comes to grips with the fact that he must tell his daughter the truth about his 9/11 experience so he can begin healing emotionally and mentally. The fact that a memorial was built after the towers collapsed is also a symbol of determination in the place where the tall towers once stood.

Oak trees

The oak trees planted at the 9/11 memorial symbolize American growth and prosperity. New oak trees will sprout up over the years just from the small acorn that happens to fall and get embedded.

The trees also symbolize strength and adaptability. There is a saying: "From the tiniest acorn grows the mightiest oak." Oaks are known for their ability to grow without much fuss, right from where an acorn falls. The symbolism implies that the towers fell right there and in their place grows something just as mighty and strong, the memorial to honor the victims. It also symbolizes that the two falling towers made America stronger by planting the seeds that began the nation's war on terror.

Mourning Dove

Deja recalls that Ma has told her that mourning doves are not really sad. She also recalls that Ma said the doves fly straight and strong. When she considers giving up her hope of learning more about 9/11, hearing the mourning dove reminds her of that conversation with Ma. She realizes she is not really sad, either. Her situation is better than it has been in a while. She finds comfort in that. When she sees the dove fly away, she decides to symbolically do the same, to pursue the knowledge she needs to make a change in her life. She realizes if she does not fly strong and straight like the mourning dove, her life will never change.



School

While many elementary students will say that school is a challenge, Deja's school symbolizes a very personal challenge for her and her family. The school wants to teach students about 9/11, but Pop does not think Deja is old enough to learn about it. In this case, the school challenges his authority. He tries to pull the "As long as you live under my roof" example, but Deja shoots it down quickly, challenging his reasoning. They do not live under his roof. They live in a shelter.

In addition to challenging Pop's beliefs and Deja's, the school also challenges Deja to do better. They encourage her to think critically and to learn from new experiences. This challenges Pop because he wants to protect Deja from the past and anything associated with it in her future.

Water

Water in the 30-foot waterfall at Freedom Towers, the 9/11 memorial, symbolizes many things. Its reflective qualities make it a symbolic remembrance of the people injured or killed at the twin towers on 9/11. It is a never-ending waterfall, symbolizing tears shed for those people injured or lost in the attack. Water also represents purity and cleanliness. In that way, the water represents a pure healing process.

White roses

The white roses placed by the inscribed names on the victims' birth dates symbolize purity and innocence.

Bag of ash and concrete dust

The bag of gray ash and concrete dust from Pop's suitcase symbolizes the guilt he still carries with him, literally and figuratively. Pop feels guilty that he could not save his loved ones that day. He carries their ashes and the buildings' remains with him in the bag, in his heart, and since he inhaled so much debris -- in his lungs. Those people are still symbolically a big part of his life.

Miss Garcia

Miss Garcia, unlike any teacher Deja has previously known, symbolizes that Deja's first year at Brooklyn Collective Elementary will likewise be unlike any she has ever known. Miss Garcia works with students so they will understand the material. Deja's previous teachers were not so helpful. Miss Garcia is young and vibrant, symbolizing a youthful, vibrant school year for Deja and her classmates.

Sharing food

When Ben and Sabeen share their food with Deja, they are symbolically offering her life and sustenance. Deja is not one who usually accepts a handout. Thus, her acceptance of their food symbolically represents her acceptance of Ben and Sabeen as friends.

Map

The map display in the hallway at Deja's new school symbolizes diversity and reinforces the school's name -- Brooklyn Collective Elementary. The map symbolizes the collection of cultures represented at the school. The students accept and welcome diversity, as symbolized by Sabeen's reaction to Deja's connection to Jamaica. It was exciting to her, the only long-time Brooklyn Collective Elementary student in the group of friends, to find someone with a new international connection to add.



Settings

Avalon

Avalon is a family shelter. Deja, her brother and sister, and parents live in one room at Avalon. The walls are crumbling, and the space is crowded. They only have two beds in their room, no other furniture. They must use public restrooms and have meals in the cafeteria. They cannot cook in their room. The best thing about Avalon is that it is located in a nice, diverse neighborhood.

Brooklyn Collective Elementary

Brooklyn Collective Elementary is the new school Deja attends. The teachers there are very progressive and work together to coordinate lessons for the students. A map in the hallway shows just how diverse the student population is as students mark their heritage by adding pins and string to the map to form connections.

Ben's House

Ben's house has carpet, something that Ray and Leda cannot get enough of when Deja takes them to Ben's when they have to work on a group project. Ben's room has a computer and a nice view of trees. Deja is most struck by the fact that Ben has a fluffy bed all to himself.

Sabeen's House

Sabeen's house is big. In addition to her parents and a brother, Sabeen's grandmother and uncle also live there. The grandmother lives on the basement level, and her uncle lives in the attic. Sabeen's immediate family has the two stories in between. Deja goes to Sabeen's house when their school is out for a teacher in-service day.

Subway

The subway is crowded, but everyone is nice when Ben and Deja ride the subway to and from the tower memorial site. They take note of all the interesting people (Ben even sketches them) and the interesting fliers posted in the cars. While riding the subway to the tower memorial, Deja spots a homeless man. As they leave at their stop, Deja hands him a container full of baklava. She looks back to see him sharing with everyone else on the subway car.

Tower Memorial

The tower memorial is an awe-inspiring sight to see. They first notice hundred of oak trees that bring life to the space. Deja is drawn to the 30-foot waterfall. It is endless, like tears shed by all those who lost loved ones in the attack on the Twin Towers. The water also provides life for the trees and symbolizes a purifying, cleansing, and calming.



Themes and Motifs

History is relevant, personal, and alive.

The entire book is based on the main theme that history is relevant, personal, and alive. From the first day of class, Deja's teachers work together to teach them about the terror attacks on 9/11. The teachers try to relate the events so students will see that history is relevant, personal, and alive. Deja struggles with this concept. She has a hard time understanding how 9/11, which caused so many deaths, can still be alive. Ultimately, Deja sees that history is relevant, personal, and alive, not just for her but for her friends Ben and Sabeen, too.

History is relevant for Deja because her Pop was there. It is personal because it affected his mental, emotional, and physical health which, in turn, affects her life. It is alive now that Pop has told her his story and continues to talk about the experience with her. His honesty about 9/11 has also opened the doors of communication, building a strong, lively relationship for them.

For Ben, history is relevant because it is what encouraged his dad to join the Marines. It is personal for him, because his dad fought in the war on terror. It remains alive when his father comes to New York to go on the field trip with Ben and his class.

For Sabeen, history is relevant because it changes her family's views about their safety. It is very personal when the store clerk tells her to go back to Saudi Arabia. History is alive for Sabeen in her family relationships and in her mother's encouragement for her to be bilingual and her father's encouragement to learn about other cultures.

Relationships

Relationships are a motif in *Towers Falling*. In the beginning of the story, Deja wonders if she will make friends at her new school, but she guards herself against friendships after her last best friend disappointed her. Deja is happier when she develops friendships with Sabeen and Ben. The graphic organizers they make in school demonstrate that all the students are part of something bigger. They have relationships with people they do not really know simply because they share similar values as Americans.

With her friends in place, school life becomes better than home life for Deja. Eventually, though, she bonds with her father over his 9/11 experience and positive changes begin to happen in her whole family.

Deja's relationship with her father is essential to the story. When the book begins, their relationship is rocky. Deja views her father as a lazy man who shirks the responsibility of his family. Deja is not even sure that she can trust her father being ill. However, once Deja hears her father's experience on 9/11, their relationship changes for the better. She understands that his lung condition is the result of his heroic behavior when the attacks



occurred. She gains a new respect for her father. Respect is a key ingredient to restoring their relationship.

Secrets

Secrets are a motif in *Towers Falling*. Deja realizes everyone has secrets. Sabeen is not always happy. Ben's parents are divorcing, and his dad has little contact with him. Deja's secret is that she tries to act tough when she is mad or frustrated. Eventually, the friends all gain understanding of these traits in each other, and they are a supportive group.

Pop's secret (and Ma's too, since she has not divulged the information previously) is that he is a 9/11 survivor. He saved a woman's life and his own just before the North Tower collapsed. He has felt guilty for 15 years for surviving, for not saving more people, and for not finding his friends. He keeps his secret from Deja for a long time. Then, he decides to share his story with her. Sharing the secret opens the door for a close relationship between Pop and Deja.

Miss Garcia's secret is that she saw the Twin Towers fall when she was Deja's age. She watched the destruction from her school room window when she was in the fifth grade.

Education is the road to a better life.

The underlying theme of this book is that education is the road to a better life. Even as a child, Deja's educational experience at Brooklyn Collective Elementary is enough to spur her family into action. Her search for knowledge about 9/11 leads to a better relationship between a father and daughter. Deja's search would have never directed her to start at the Twin Towers. Her school experience directly sparked her desire to learn more.

By learning more about 9/11, Deja unintentionally sets events in motion that will positively affect her and her family. After Pop tells Deja about his role when the towers fell, she understands why he is not working and why he coughs all the time. This is an important moment for Deja because she gains a new respect for her father. In turn, her father starts to recover. No longer burdened with keeping his secret from Deja, his health begins to improve.

There is renewed hope for Deja's entire family as they are moving out of the family shelter. The entire chain of positive events was set in motion by Deja's desire to become educated on 9/11. Deja's desire led to the facts of the attack. Moreover, her desire led to a step in Deja's maturation and the family's hope to overcome poverty.



Writing is a way to learn about yourself.

Deja is surprised several times by the words she writes in classroom essays. When she re-reads them, she realizes she did not know she felt that way. Putting thoughts onto paper is especially important for Deja, who internalizes so many emotions. She has learned through her Ma and their family situation to hide her emotions. Writing allows her to look at her emotions and analyze them.

We are part of something bigger.

We are part of something bigger. The graphic organizers that the students draw prove it. They have families, friendships, the school, the city, the state, and the nation with which they all identify. Graphs on Pages 66 and 72 show examples of how the students identify on a larger scale.

In this story, Deja is part of something bigger. She is not just homeless Deja. In discovering her bigger picture, Deja is surprised to learn that her Pop is a hero and survivor of 9/11. Through her father's heroic acts, her family is forever connected to a myriad of people who were at the Twin Towers when they fell.

Pop, as Deja refers to her father, has been part of something bigger in life, too. He acted as a hero on 9/11. He was more than just one person that day. He was a rescuer, a hero in a group of countless strangers at the Twin Towers.

Deja's friendships also make her part of something bigger than herself. She has influence on her friends. Likewise, her friends influence her. Her friends help her realize that no one has a perfect life. That is a big discovery for Deja because she harbors anger toward her dad for the family's homeless situation until she learns the truth.



Styles

Point of View

The story is told in present tense from the first person point of view of Deja Barnes. Deja is a 10 year old girl who lives in a homeless shelter with her family. Since the book is written for the middle school audience, the author's choices of tense and point of view are appropriate because Deja's personal narration shares her immediate mindset and emotions. Thus, Deja becomes more authentic because she is narrating some of the same feelings and thoughts that are similar to those of the intended readers.

Language and Meaning

The language reflects that of a 10 year old girl, and it slightly follows stream of conscious writing. Deja's thoughts are revealed as she has them, which is sometimes in fragments of short phrases or a simple word. The language is straight-forward and easily understood.

Sometimes, Deja narrates using spelling that is consistent with the way she speaks. For example, on Page 45, paragraph three, she says, "'Sides, it's not just about home, its about the missing towers.'" The "'sides" is short for besides, demonstrating the abbreviated way children speak sometimes.

In some cases, the narrator relates terms she is learning in school to her thoughts. For example, when Ben and Deja are at the tower memorial, she tells him that the water is a metaphor and explains that it is cleansing.

Structure

The structure of this book is simple and straight-forward. It moves from Deja's first day of school in fifth grade to her unraveling of Pop's secret. The narration is in chronological order. It does not use literary devices such as flash back to fill in the back story. The book is divided into 28 short, titled chapters. The title of each chapter connects to a current event that is either occurring or about to occur in Deja's daily life.



Quotes

This is stupid. Sappy like syrup.
-- Deja (Chapter 4: Lunch paragraph 9)

Importance: Initially, Deja rejects the idea of the cultural map in the school hallway. She says it is sappy. Sabeen quips, "Better than sour." Periodically, the friends make reference to this conversation throughout the story. It was a defining moment in their early friendship.

A good woman has a clean house. Everything should be in its proper place.
-- Ma's ma (Chapter 7: Ruined Weekend paragraph 2)

Importance: This value drives Deja's mom, but it is difficult to live up to since the family of five is living out of boxes in a single room. Deja takes care of the younger kids while Ma works. Ma and Deja are too tired to do much more than what is necessary.

Sides, its not just about home, it's about the missing towers.
-- Deja (Chapter 7: Ruined Weekend paragraph 3)

Importance: This is the first time Deja informs her parents that her class is discussing the Twin Towers.. She has no idea how Pop will react, but she feels very guilty for ruining their nice family moment when Pop overreacts at the mere mention of the Towers. This serves as an inciting force that kicks off the whole story.

Home is divine. Blessed by Allah.
-- Sabeen (Chapter 8: Small Groups paragraph 2)

Importance: While presenting the drawing she made of her house to Ben and Deja, her small group, Sabeen offers her first comment about her religion in this quote. Despite her hijab being a visual clue to her religion, she very seldom discusses it, indicating her fear of being discriminated against or harmed for her religious choice.

Another missed homework and I'll have to meet with your parents.
-- Miss Garcia (Chapter 9: Principal's Office paragraph 8)

Importance: This comment makes Deja want to do better for several reasons. First of all, she does not like disappointing Miss Garcia. Secondly, she knows if the school calls her parents, her mother will have to miss work to visit the school, which will take money away from the family. She knows her Pop will not go to the appointment because he cannot function in social settings.

Everyone's part of something larger.
-- Deja (Chapter 10: Homeroom paragraph 7)

Importance: Deja reads the dictionary definition of a social unit, but she employs critical



thinking skills for the first time to explain its meaning. She is catching on quickly and excelling in school.

He's always ruining my life!

-- Deja (Chapter 11: Recent Past, Far Past paragraph 3)

Importance: Deja is frustrated that she has the unexpected responsibility of child care on what was supposed to be her day off. She is not goofing around; she has plans to work on a homework project with Ben and Sabeen. She is frustrated that, because Ma has to accompany Pop on the subway for his visit to the clinic, she must babysit Ray and Leda. This is important because it shows the magnitude of her frustration with Pop's illness or laziness. At this point, Deja is not sure whether her father is sick or lazy.

History is alive. Especially if there's video.

-- Deja (Chapter 12: Stuck Inside My Head paragraph 1)

Importance: Deja makes her first connection that history is alive. With video, she can see it happening right before her very eyes; it puts her there in first person, even though it is on a computer screen.

I feel like I've past the biggest test. Just by being me.

-- Deja (Chapter 14: Sabeen paragraph 1)

Importance: Sabeen's grandmother liked Deja upon their first meeting. All of Sabeen's family were watching grandmother to see her reaction to Deja. When the woman welcomed her and touched her cheek, Deja felt like she had made a major accomplishment and was surprised she could do such a thing just by being herself. Her self-esteem begins to increase.

Pop survived 9/11.

-- Deja (Chapter 17: Secrets paragraph 4)

Importance: At this moment, Deja realizes her father survived 9/11. He worked in the tower at the time. Deja finding his name tag that identifies him as an employee is the story's climax.

Ben, I've got to go see it. I've got to walk across the bridge.

-- Deja (Chapter 20: Pact paragraph 9)

Importance: Deja is so frustrated about not being able to find out details about her father's role in the trade center tower during the 9/11 attack that she believes she must go to it in order to find information she needs for closure. Ironically, she does need to go to get that information. It was this trek across the city that inspired Pop to tell her the truth about his illness and how he was affected by 9/11.

You're my brave Pop.

-- Deja (Chapter 26: The Talk paragraph 3)

Importance: Deja encourages her father by reminding him that he saved a life and had an impact on many lives by doing it. She calls him brave. She is very proud of Pop.