

# **The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry Study Guide**

**The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry by Rachel Joyce**

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## Plot Summary

“The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry” begins on the day Harold Fry receives a letter from a former colleague, Queenie Hennessy. Queenie is dying of cancer and wanted to say good-bye to Harold. They were not very close when they knew each other, but each had done a kindness that affected the other in an important way. They hadn't seen each other for many years but each remembered the other as being a kind person, worthy of being called “friend.”

Harold is married to Maureen and has only recently retired from the brewery. They have lived their lives mainly in isolation without making any real friends. They never attended the brewery's annual Christmas party and never spent time with other couples. They don't know their neighbors with the exception of a widower named Rex, and they kept him at arm's length. Then Harold receives the letter from Queenie, who is at a hospice in Berwick-upon-Tweed. The letter dredges up memories from years earlier and Harold wants to say something profound to let her know she was important to him. He can't find the words and eventually pens a brief note, then heads off to mail the letter. He quickly passes the first postal box and then passes more options to mail the letter.

He stops at a garage for a snack and the young clerk shows him how to microwave a burger. He tells her briefly about Queenie and the girl talks about her aunt who had cancer. The girl then talks about her faith that her aunt would recover. Harold finds himself thinking about this girl's faith and realizing he has nothing similar in his life. He telephones the hospice where Queenie is living out her final days with a message. He says that he's setting out now to walk to the hospice and that Queenie should hang on until he arrives. He then begins to walk, wearing only the clothes he has on and using the limited items he has in his pocket.

Harold telephones Maureen and she doesn't understand his mission or his reasoning. She initially lies to Rex, saying that Harold is laid up with a twisted ankle. When she admits the truth to him, Rex becomes a friend and confidante, helping Maureen cope with the situation.

As Harold walks, he and Maureen have time to think about their lives and how they came to their current place. Their son David died 20 years earlier. David was an incredibly intelligent young man but could never find his way. He fell into a pit of alcohol and drug use, and then committed suicide. Harold blames himself, thinking that his own childhood left him ill-equipped to be a good father. Maureen blames Harold as well, thinking that he was basically an absent father who had nothing to do with David. Harold's father was an alcoholic and both believe that the genetics of alcoholism played a role in David's death.

As Harold walks, he goes through a range of emotions. He talks to people and learns from their stories. He deals with a large group who join him on his walk and derail him from his original purpose. He struggles with the pain of his mother leaving and his father



becoming demented to the point that he didn't recognize Harold. He learns to accept all these things, and to accept David's death.

Maureen also has time to realize that she has blamed Harold for things that weren't his fault. She looks through pictures and sees that Harold is in many photos with David, indicating they spent more time together than Maureen remembered. She begins to open her heart again with the idea that she will change her life with Harold, when he returns to their home.

When Harold reaches Queenie, he's shocked to find that she is near death. Maureen joins him and they are together when they learn that Queenie has died peacefully. When they go to pay their last respects, Maureen and Harold face the loss together, a stark contrast to their attitudes when David died. They then spend time together and begin sharing memories as they prepare to take the next step into a new level of acceptance and happiness.



# Chapters 1-3

## Summary

In Chapter 1, *Harold and the Letter*, Harold Fry is seated at the breakfast table when the post arrives. His wife, Maureen, is a small woman with silver hair. She announces that he has a letter. It's in a pink envelope and was postmarked in Berwick-upon-Tweed. He doesn't know anyone in Berwick and confirms that it's addressed to him at the correct address, 13 Fossebridge Road, Kingsbridge, South Hams. When he opens the envelope, he discovers the letter is from St. Bernadine's Hospice. Queenie Hennessy, a woman Harold worked with years earlier, writes that she has cancer and is writing to say goodbye. Harold asks Maureen if she remembers Queenie but Maureen says she doesn't know why she should, then returns to her cleaning.

Harold gets some paper and prepares to write a reply to Queenie's letter. He has never been able to express his emotions and he struggles. He finally winds up with two sentences, saying thank you for the letter and that he's sorry, referring to the fact that she has cancer and is near death. He offers to let Maureen sign but she refuses. Harold leaves the house and Maureen asks if he'll be gone long. He says he's just going to mail the letter.

Harold heads to the mailbox, hurrying to get past his neighbor, Rex. Rex is a widower and likes to talk, so Harold makes a quick excuse to continue his trip. He reaches the mailbox quickly and decides to continue his walk to the next one. He thinks about the letter and knows that it's inadequate. He imagines returning home where Maureen will call David and nothing will change except that Queenie will die. He continues to walk and realizes that he's started something, though he can't put a name to it. He decides to go to the main post office so the letter will arrive more quickly.

Harold thinks about Queenie and the fact that she had remembered him "after all these years." Harold sees a woman and little boy eating ice cream. He knows he must have done the same thing with David but can't specifically remember. He knows that it's Maureen who talks to David now, sharing their news, and that she was the one who always signed Harold's name in the cards and letters to David.

In Chapter 2, *Harold and the Garage Girl and a Question of Faith*, Harold stops at a petrol station where the clerk is a young girl. She helps Harold microwave a burger and asks if he is also paying for fuel. He says that he's walking and explains about Queenie and her cancer. The girl says that he has to have a positive attitude. She says that her aunt had cancer and goes on to say that medicine isn't nearly as important as faith. She says a person can do anything if they have faith. Harold asks if the girl's aunt recovered and the girl says that the faith gave her aunt hope "when everything else had gone." Their conversation is interrupted by a man who is impatiently waiting to pay for fuel. Harold leaves money on the counter for his food and continues his walk.



He's soon leaving Kingsbridge and pledges to stop at the next available mailbox. When he finds it, he has an empty feeling. He doesn't feel that mailing the letter is enough. He thinks of all the times he missed out on life, including invitations for a beer and neighbors who had moved without Harold ever speaking to them again. He discovers he doesn't have his cell phone. He goes to a phone booth and finds the number for St. Bernadine's Hospice. He tells the woman who answers that he had a message for Queenie Hennessy. He urges Queenie to hang on and pledges to walk all the way to Berwick-upon-Tweed. He hangs up, writes a postscript on the letter urging Queenie to live until his arrival, and drops it in the mailbox.

In Chapter 3, Maureen and the Telephone Call, Maureen is at home and is frankly relieved that Harold has gone out for awhile. Since his retirement 6 months earlier, he's always at home. Rex calls, saying he didn't see Harold return from his walk and was concerned. Maureen lies, saying Harold is already at home. Then Harold calls and tells Maureen that he's going to walk to Berwick-upon-Tweed to save Queenie. Maureen is rude, saying she doesn't expect him to make it far. She's angry that he's already decided to do this. Their call is cut off and Maureen thinks back to a long-buried memory.

## Analysis

There is an important piece of information about Harold's character in the opening paragraph. He's seated at the breakfast table and it's noted that he is "freshly shaved, in a clean shirt and tie." He can smell "clean washing and grass cuttings." Harold and Maureen are living very proper lives with nothing out of place. Harold cuts the grass regularly and Maureen cleans everything in the house, all the time. Harold is wearing a shirt and tie though he has no plans to go anywhere or do anything special. This is the life they have come to expect and they don't really know how to live differently at this point. The characters will grow and change over the course of the book.

During this first chapter, Maureen goes into David's room, which is an important setting in the book. She cleans the room, closes the curtains each night, and keeps it ready for David's return. This room symbolizes Maureen's hope that David will return and her lack of acceptance that he's truly gone for good.

There is foreshadowing during Maureen's first visit to David's room in Chapter 1. The foreshadowing is subtle but the reader will likely realize that there's something significant associated with David and this room. The details are not revealed until much later in the book. Another case of foreshadowing is seen at the end of Chapter 3. Maureen has a memory and it's obviously related to Queenie. It's not until much later that the reader learns that Maureen does remember Queenie and that Queenie visited Harold with the intention of saying goodbye, but that Maureen never told Harold about that visit.

During the early moments of his walk, Harold thinks about his relationship with Maureen and with David. He acknowledges that he can't remember a single time he had ice



cream with David, though he imagines that he must have done it at some point. He acknowledges that Maureen is the one who signed “Dad” on cards and letters to David. It was also Maureen who found a nursing home for Harold’s father when his health deteriorated to that point. Harold realizes that, for all important matters, Maureen “was, in effect, Harold.” That makes him wonder who he is. This is the first time that it becomes apparent that Harold is actually seeking something, though he can’t yet identify his quest or what he hopes to accomplish.

There is a very misleading sentence near the end of Chapter 1. Harold says that it’s Maureen who talks to David, giving him the latest news about Harold and Maureen. This seems to indicate that David is alive and that Maureen actually talks to him, but the reader will learn near the end of the book that this is not true. The author uses this misdirection several times so that the revelation of David’s death is a true twist in the story.

The story is set in Britain and there are words and phrases specific to that language. These are seen throughout the book and are an important part of the language of the story and keep the reader focused on the overall setting. For example, in Chapter 2, Harold stops at a “petrol” station. Later, the word “bloody” is used like a curse word.

The girl at the garage is never named but she is important because her words give Harold the motivation to begin his walk. Harold notes that she “seems to be standing in a pool of light” as she talks about faith. Later, the girl tells Maureen that she misled Harold. In fact, the girl’s aunt died despite the girl’s talk of the power of faith.

Rex becomes an important person in Maureen’s life but at this point in the book he is just a man who happens to live next door. Maureen keeps Rex pushed away just like she keeps everyone else at a distance. This is why she lies to him when he calls to ask if Harold is alright. Maureen believes she doesn’t want or need any friends, which is a vital part of her character. She learns differently after Harold has been gone awhile, which is an important stage of growth of her character.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe what you know about the lives of Harold and Maureen at this point.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Harold set out to walk all the way to Berwick-upon-Tweed?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why do you think Maureen lies to Rex when he is concerned about Harold? What does this say about Maureen?



## Vocabulary

brisk, ordinary, unruly, fumbled, abundance, precarious, jocular, intimation, lolled, obliged, estuary, presaged, ominous





# Chapters 4 and 5

## Summary

In Chapter 4, Harold and the Hotel Guests, Harold walks several miles the first day and spends the night in a motel. He thinks back to his childhood. His mother never wanted to be a mother. His father was a normal man before the war but changed after. He learned that he was better off when he kept a low profile. He didn't make friends at school but he also didn't make enemies.

During the first day of his walk, he meets a man who congratulates Harold on his journey and announces it to everyone in the bar. Harold calls Maureen and is disappointed that she doesn't share their enthusiasm. He knows he doesn't have a plan. He also knows that he'll never start the walk again if he goes home to prepare or if he even evaluates the distance on a map.

The next morning, Harold has breakfast in the hotel restaurant. The waitress and two women are interested in his story, and soon everyone in the dining room is listening. One woman calls his walk a "pilgrimage." Harold is self-conscious about the attention. He finishes as much of his breakfast as he can, which isn't much, then returns to his room where he tries to erase his presence by making the bed. He then prepares to leave. At the door, several people are waiting to see him off. They make it clear they believe he can make the journey. He suspects some of them might be laughing as or after he leaves, but it doesn't matter.

In Chapter 5, Harold and the Barman and the Woman with Food, Harold resumes his walk. He's convinced that "nothing" can get in the way of success, and he's clearly referring to Maureen and the demands she makes on him. He attains a rhythm. He's walking slowly but steadily, and he accepts this pace. He has driven this road before, including several times with Queenie, but doesn't remember the scenery. Now he appreciates the landscape.

Harold stops at a pub and the publican, or landlord, asks if Harold has been there before. Harold briefly explains his trip and mentions that he knew Queenie from the brewery. The publican remembers Harold's boss, Napier, as a cruel man. The publican says he remembers a young woman who would have done anything for him, but he went his own way and left her behind. He only realized his mistake when the young woman married someone else. The man says everyone has a past and wishes Harold luck. Harold lets himself think back to Queenie.

As he walks, Harold remembers events from his life. He, Maureen, and David were at Bantham when David swam out too far and got caught in a current. Maureen was yelling at David to come back but he didn't. Harold went to the edge of the water and stopped to untie his shoes. A lifeguard ran into the water, swam out to David, and returned with the little boy in his arms. Maureen never said anything to him but Harold



berated himself for stopping to untie his shoes while his only son was in danger of drowning. Harold admits that he'd stopped to deal with his shoes because he was afraid he couldn't save David.

Harold suddenly realizes he needs a drink of water so badly that he's in trouble. He stops at a house and has water but doesn't want to intrude further. The woman convinces him to have a seat with her and he does. He dozes and wakes to find she has provide bread, butter, and sliced apples. They talk while they eat and the woman says that walking should be easy but could be very difficult. They talk about similar things, and she says children is one of those. Harold can feel an "absence of young life" in the home. He remembers David's birth and his fears, a stark contrast to Maureen's instinctive mothering. He rushes to leave before the woman can see that he's crying.

Harold thinks back to David. When David had finally and completely rejected his parents, Harold and Maureen stopped talking. When Harold came down with a cold, Maureen moved to the guest room and she never moved back. By now, he's tired from walking but feels "intensely alive" and realizes that he's already begun to change.

Harold remembers learning that Queenie was going to be working at the brewery. Women only served in positions such as secretaries. He mentioned it at a family dinner. David was derisive, making it clear he thought Napier was a brutal man. Harold had heard rumors but tried not to think about them. The meal ended with David deriding Harold's traditional views and then leaving the table. Maureen said that David was "clever," hinting that he should be excused for his behavior and that she and Harold would never really understand him. Harold continues his walk and wonders if Maureen will tell David about it. He hopes she does.

## Analysis

In the hotel dining room, Harold talks to the waitress and the other diners. Several people become involved in his conversation. It's very difficult for Harold because he has always tried to be unobtrusive, a habit he grew into from a child as the safest course of action. Now, he's the center of attention and he doesn't feel very comfortable. His character will grow into a new role as he learns to talk to others and to give information about himself. But for now, he's struggling. This is very apparent when he says that Queenie "did something for me and now she's dying." He says he wants her to live and that's why he's walking. He immediately feels that he's exposed a deep part of himself and compares it to feeling nude.

When Harold resumes his walking in Chapter 5, he becomes convinced that "nothing could get in the way or ask him to mow the lawn." This is obviously a reference to Maureen who has come to represent everything that Harold wants from life but can't have. She focuses on cleaning and making their lives presentable to the point that she doesn't care about anything other than that the house and lawn are immaculate. This reference seems to feel a little disloyal to Harold but he's beginning to face the realities of his life, which is an important aspect of his coming acceptance of himself.



There's another piece of foreshadowing in Chapter 5. Harold is thinking about Queenie after his conversation with the publican. He remembers that she carried a notebook with her when they were traveling so she could accurately tally the miles they drove. He says she wasn't the kind of person to tell a lie. He then mentions his guilt over an unintentional lie. This is a reference to the fact that Harold did something to Napier and that Queenie took the blame to save Harold from Napier's wrath.

The walk becomes a symbol of Harold's life. He remembers his childhood and the reader begins to learn things about Harold that has molded him into the adult he became. His mother thought his father was a good man before the war but not so good after, which indicates that Harold's father probably suffered from depression or PTSD, though it was simply ignored in that time. His father was brutal about minor things, such as Harold making noise while he chewed. Harold's childhood was not a happy one though he'll later remember pieces of happiness that occurred in rare instances.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the story the publican tells about his past? What does he mean when he says everyone has a past?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some of the things the reader knows about David at this point? Why do you think the author keeps it secret that David died many years ago?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Harold think about as he walks and what are some of the things the reader is learning about Harold's character?

## Vocabulary

appalled, expectantly, cynical, spindles, exhilarating, copse, simplicity, angular, intrude, transient, rasping



## Chapters 6-8

### Summary

In Chapter 6, *Maureen and the Lie*, Maureen is feeling humiliated because Harold abandoned her to go on this walk. She doesn't know if he'll return once he reaches Berwick. She thinks about Harold's mother who abandoned Harold and wonders if Harold is now doing the same. She admits that she had sometimes been ready to give up on her marriage but remains because of David. She has to take out the trash, a task that's usually Harold's job. Rex asks why Maureen is taking out the trash, knowing it's usually Harold's job. Maureen makes up a story, saying Harold twisted his ankle and needs to rest it. She hears the phone and rushes inside, but the caller hangs up before she can answer. She doesn't sleep well, thinking about Harold walking to Queenie's bedside, and she's hurt by the knowledge.

In Chapter 7, *Harold and the Hiking Man and the Woman Who Loved Jane Austen*, Harold remembers the men making fun of Queenie when she began work at the brewery. The memory makes him impatient to get back on the road. He reads Queenie's letter again and something seems off, but he can't decide what. He thinks more about her early days at the brewery. She was efficient and brought a new level of order to the financial department. One day, Harold found her in the stationary closet. She was crying and said she really needed the job, but couldn't stand the opposition and was going to quit. Harold told her he'd also struggled when he started and promised it would get better. She pulled herself together and they parted, and she thanked him. She remained at the brewery for some time after their talk but never sought him out and almost seemed to avoid him.

Harold continues to walk and begins to have trouble with one of his legs. As he walks, he remembers many scenes from his past. In one, David is beginning school and says he doesn't want to. He isn't crying, but is certain that he doesn't want to go. Harold wishes now that he had hugged David and offered up some words of wisdom, but he'd simply left for work. He wishes he didn't have to remember.

He arrives at Buckfast Abbey and remembers that he'd brought Maureen here years earlier as a surprise trip. David refused to get out of the car and Maureen decided to remain in the car with David. They left without getting out of the car at all. Harold eats and sends postcards. He tells Queenie that he's on his way and tells Maureen that he's reached Buckfast Abbey. He tells the girl in the garage "thank you."

Harold encounters a husband and wife who begin talking about hiking shoes. The husband and wife wind up in an argument about where to hike. Harold wishes the man would say something nice to his wife. Harold leaves and realizes that he misses Maureen horribly. He remembers the first time he saw her. They were at a dance and she was wearing a red dress. He remembers being afraid to hold David as an infant and that Maureen understood then, but she later berated him, saying Harold "never touched"



David during his childhood. Harold wonders how she could have understood so fully at one time and then not understood at all.

Harold calls Maureen and she says that he's spending a lot of money. He says they hadn't made any plans for his retirement savings and that he thought he'd use some of that. She's obviously upset with him. He asks if it's okay with Maureen that he's walking. She says she apparently doesn't have a choice and hangs up. Harold knows they don't communicate well. He also remembers some points of his relationship with his mother, Joan, and that he could never keep up with her.

In Chapter 8, Harold and the Silver-Haired Gentleman, Harold writes more postcards. He asks the girl in the garage if she prays, saying he'd tried it once but "I was too late." Harold remembers their summer vacations at a camp at Eastbourne where David once won a prize for dancing, though he was "jiggering so fast" that it was embarrassing to watch. He also remembers that David had an intelligence that amazed them. David asked for things, such as a book to learn German. Harold and Maureen bought him whatever he requested. David often confronted Harold openly, making it clear that he knew things Harold didn't.

Harold arrives at Exeter and loses time wandering around the city. Harold stops at a crowded diner. A man joins him and they strike up a conversation. Harold reveals his walk and the man says he comes to the city to spend time with a young man. He tells Harold the young man needs shoes but he is torn whether he should buy them. He can afford to buy them but doesn't want to hurt the young man's feelings. Harold says he should buy the shoes. Harold leaves the conversation thinking about the fact that other people are going on with their normal lives while Harold walks. He comes to accept that he is walking to atone for his past and as a mean of learning to accept others.

## Analysis

There was an interesting comment by Maureen in Chapter 6. Maureen says she was sometimes ready to give up on her marriage but remained because of David. David has been dead for more than 20 years but Maureen has remained through those years. It seems likely that Maureen has remained because she has a level of love for Harold, perhaps more so because they had a child together. It may also be that she no longer had the desire to have any life of her own after David's death.

Harold keeps thinking that there's something a little wrong with Queenie's letter but he can't figure out what. It takes some time for him to realize that someone else has typed it for her and that her signature is just a scrawl, quite different from the careful penmanship she'd exhibited during her work years.

Harold's memories reveal important information about Queenie's character. She's proper and doesn't let anyone see that she's hurt by the rude comments the men make. It's only by chance that Harold finds her crying in the stationary closet. He doesn't want to be there and doesn't really know what to do, but he tries to make her feel better. This



is difficult for Harold because he doesn't express himself well, but he does try. It seems likely that the concern of this one person makes Queenie resolve to keep working at the brewery. This is an important moment for her and it drives a great deal of the rest of the story. If Harold hadn't done this kindness for Queenie, she wouldn't have felt the need to return the favor years later.

There's no doubt that the walking is difficult for Harold. He is working hard on this walk and it's physically taking a toll already, though it will be much more difficult by the time he's finished. He thinks a lot as he's walking, noticing the scenery around him for the first time even though he's driven these roads in the past. He also thinks about the people and events of his past. It's as if he "wasn't so much walking to Queenie as away from himself." This is an important look at Harold's character and his attempt to come to terms with his life. He regrets many things and will have to learn to accept his past in order to find a place of peace. This acceptance is one of the book's main themes.

David is confrontational with Harold and it seems that he may have been this way with everyone. Harold talks about the things David wanted as he learned about new subjects, and that Harold and Maureen bought him whatever he asked for. There's no doubt that David is intelligent but he's also a bit of a brat about it. He asks Harold questions about things that Harold won't know, apparently just to make it clear that he knows things Harold doesn't. He is trying to make Harold feel less intelligent, and it works. This is an important part of David's character and is probably part of the reason he failed so completely when it came to real life.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some of the things Harold thinks about as he's walking? Why are these thoughts important?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the conversation Harold has with the "silver-haired gentleman." What does this conversation make Harold realize?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe what you know about the relationship between Harold and David at this point.

## Vocabulary

lurked, appalling, rubbish, inertia, reacquainting, unsavory, unprecedented, unfathomable



# Chapters 9-12

## Summary

In Chapter 9, Maureen and David, Maureen is furious. She is angry that Harold is spending so much money and that he has left her. She is so humiliated that she doesn't think she can tell anyone, even David. One day, Harold calls and says he thinks he's doing this walk partly for David. That makes Maureen angry and she hangs up, though she instantly regrets that rash action. Maureen also has a disturbing dream during this time.

Maureen talks to David who says she knows what's wrong with Harold and what she has to do about it. He also says that Queenie Hennessy "was a good woman." Maureen says David never met Queenie and he agrees, but says that Maureen and Queenie met when Queenie came to their house with an "urgent message" for Harold. That makes Maureen decide she'll go to the doctor's office the following day.

In Chapter 10, Harold and the Sign, Harold remembers more details about his mother, including the day she left him. He'd begged to go with her but she refused. He sees community gardens and thinks about Maureen gardening at their house in the early years of their marriage. He meets more people, including a social worker who asks if he really believes Queenie is waiting. Harold says he does.

Harold continues to walk and to think. He remembers getting the news that David had been admitted to Cambridge. Harold didn't know what to say and made a comment that it was "good," ending with "golly." David scoffs at his father's comment.

The pain in Harold's leg continues to hurt more and he worries he won't make it. He pleads for a sign from Queenie, whether she's depending on him. There's rain and then the weather abruptly changes so that Harold is inspired. He feels again that he can make it if he keeps "looking at things that are bigger than himself."

In Chapter 11, Maureen and the Intern, Maureen goes to the doctor's office only to discover that there's a new computer system for checking in. She's upset by the change. She then learns that the doctor isn't available and that she'll have to see an intern. When she finally gets to see the young intern, she tries to tell him about Harold. She wants him to understand without her having to tell him all the details. She finally says that she believes Harold might have Alzheimer's. The intern suggests she should get the police involved but Maureen suddenly begins to defend Harold and realizes she doesn't want to be the one to end Harold's walk. She leaves the office with a prescription for sleeping pills for herself.

In Chapter 12, Harold and the Cycling Mothers, Harold remembers being teamed up with Queenie. Mr. Napier, Harold's boss at the brewery, decided that Queenie should travel to the various pubs to check their records. Queenie didn't know how to drive. Mr.





Napier decided Harold, a senior representative of the company and one of the few married reps, was the person to take that duty. He instructed Harold to watch out for Queenie. Harold was worried but had no choice. Queenie was very proper in her actions and appearance, but she quickly told Harold that she should have thanked him for his kindness the day she was crying. He found the first trip was actually quiet pleasant. He returned home that night with a more optimistic outlook. Maureen's only comment to him that night was that she hoped he didn't snore.

Harold calls Maureen on his 12th day of walking. He thinks she sounds kinder but figures he's imagining that. Then Maureen says she has to go because she's very busy. She says she's hardly noticed he's gone. Harold doesn't want to hang up then but feels it's the only thing to do.

Harold wakes the following day with severe pain in his leg and he hates that he's so frail. He thinks more about the past. When David was 18, he often went out at night without telling Maureen or Harold where he was going. Neither talked about the fact that he was roaming the streets at night or that they were worried about him. Later, Maureen had claimed that the tragedy was Harold's fault and he never forgot those words. They became silent with each other because there was really nothing else to say.

There is a group of young mothers on a bicycle trip and Harold notices that the loudest of them has cuts on her wrists from an obvious suicide attempt. As he walks, he wonders what made her do it and wishes he could have said something to make her never try it again. He tries to repress other memories but can't. He remembers a day 20 years earlier when he'd opened a wooden door and found horror on the other side. He pushes himself faster, trying to stop the memory. His leg has been bothering him and now he collapses. He realizes someone is pulling at him.

## Analysis

Maureen dreams that she is at a dinner table and her liver is in her lap. She is horrified but knows she can't scream. She tries to find a way to get her liver back inside her body, but can't figure out how to do so without creating a scene. This is an important look at Maureen, her character, and her own struggles. The dream is symbolic of her effort to keep her life in control when she wants to stand up and scream out her pain. She has never created a public scene and it's important to her that she not do so now. It's part of her character's growth that she'll later be able to handle some public situations without coming apart.

In Chapter 9, Maureen has a conversation with David. It's important to note that none of David's comments are in quotations. The reason is not revealed until much later when the reader learns that David is actually dead and Maureen is only pretending to talk with him. She uses David's memory to confirm her own ideas and decisions. In this case, Maureen imagines David saying that she already knows what's wrong with Harold. Harold's father had dementia, probably exacerbated by his alcoholism, and Maureen fears that Harold is following that same path.





There's another important aspect of Maureen's conversation with David. She says David never met Queenie but he says that Maureen did. Queenie had apparently arrived at their house one day with a message for Harold that she said was very urgent. It's later apparent that Queenie had come to say good-bye as she left town after being fired from the brewery, but Harold always believed she'd left without saying anything. It's evident that Maureen hid Queenie's visit from Harold and never told him about it, probably because of a combination of jealousy and hurt because the event happened not long after David's suicide.

While Maureen is in the doctor's office, she talks to the young intern doctor about Harold. She doesn't want to explain about Harold and his walk but she does tell him the basics. It's during this conversation that Maureen suddenly finds herself defending Harold and seeing things from his perspective. She has to voice the conversation to the doctor before she is willing to really consider it. This is an important look at the changes experienced by Maureen's character over the course of the book.

There's another case of foreshadowing of a sort in Chapter 12. Harold remembers a day "just before Queenie's disappearance." Queenie disappeared because she took the blame for Harold's action. After David committed suicide, Harold broke some items in Mr. Napier's office and Queenie took the blame for that. She was fired and left town. That's the disappearance mentioned in this passage but the reader doesn't learn any of that until much later in the book. It's obviously meant to continue building the mystery of what actually happened. Another important aspect of this passage is that Harold remembers opening a wooden door one day and finding something inside. The writer says only that there was an unnatural silence and makes it clear that memory still disturbs Harold. This is referring to the day Harold found David's body after David committed suicide.

The fact that David committed suicide makes the scene between Harold and the mother on the bicycle more important than it seems. The young woman has slashes on her wrists, indicating that she had tried to commit suicide. Harold doesn't say anything to her but later wishes he'd had something wise to say. This is evidence of an important aspect of Harold's character. He knows that he wasn't able to save David but wants to do something for this young woman.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author leads the reader to believe Maureen and David have a real conversation? What are the clues that the conversation isn't real? What would you think of this conversation if you didn't know that David was dead?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe Maureen's visit at the doctor's office. What's the result of that visit? How is Maureen changing?



## Discussion Question 3

What is the dream Maureen has? What do you see as the significance of this dream?

## Vocabulary

loitered, galvanizing, squandered, distract, entrails, mince, allotment, daft, consoled, taut, appeased, slog, insidious, cowered, lurid, congealed, disconcerting



# Chapters 13-15

## Summary

In Chapter 13, Harold and the Doctor, the woman who helps Harold inside is named Martina and she has a strong Eastern European accent. She's a doctor from Slovakia and she lets him stay with her for a couple of days while he recovers. She is unable to practice medicine in the United States but is capable of taking care of him, and she's kind. She reveals that she had a boyfriend who has left her. She seems to wish that he'd return but doesn't really believe it. They talk a great deal, about David and Queenie, and Harold thinks more about his past. He was different from his father. He held a job and financially supported his family. He wasn't able to fully participate in their lives and feels he watched "from the sidelines," but he was at least present.

In Chapter 14, Maureen and Rex, Maureen doesn't do some of the housework she would normally do because Harold isn't there to see her slamming things around as she works. Outside, Rex again asks how Harold is doing. Maureen has come to realize that she has to tell him the truth and she does. He says he knew something was going on and he offers to make her a cup of tea. She joins him and is surprised to find that his house is neat because Rex lives alone since the death of his wife. Maureen is weepy but Rex says he's certain Harold will return, which lightens Maureen's spirits.

The conversation turns to Queenie. Rex asks if Maureen liked Queenie and then asks why Queenie left. Maureen says it was "a difficult time," indicating that it was soon after David's death, and that she hadn't asked Harold about Queenie because she just didn't want to know. Maureen remembers Queenie arriving at their doorstep with a bouquet, and the memory upsets her.

Rex drives Maureen to the Start Bay Inn at Slapton Sands. They walk together and talk more. Rex talks about his wife, Elizabeth. Maureen remembers the night she met Harold and wonders "what happened" to change them so much.

In Chapter, 15, Harold and the New Beginning, Harold has a new focus on walking and feels that he's back on track. He buys a few gifts for Queenie and for Maureen and continues to send postcards. At a cathedral, he waits until no one is looking, then gets on his knees and prays for all those he's met and for the will to keep walking. He then "apologizes for not believing."

During one of his phone calls to Maureen, she announces that she's moved back into the main bedroom. Harold doesn't ask what that means but expects that she has moved him into the spare room. Their conversation turns to the night they met and she says Harold said something funny but she can't remember what it was. As Harold resumes his walk, he thinks about the day he told Maureen that her mother had died, just two months after her father's death. They had believed they would take care of each other and that would be enough. Harold looks back and believes that fatherhood had "been



the real test and his undoing.” He continues to stay in “modest” inns and finds that the nights are the most difficult part of the journey.

He remembers more about his time with Queenie, She'd laughed when she discovered he likes sweets and often brought candy on their trips. They talked about her father and she loved to hear about David, who was enrolled at Cambridge by then. Harold never told her that David had drank a lot during his holiday at home or his fears for his son.

Harold remembers David's impressions of Napier as an intolerant bully. He remembers the day Queenie said “something” serious had happened at the brewery and that Queenie knew Harold was responsible. He never knew why she took the blame in his place. Mr. Napier had yelled at Queenie but everyone knew he would have beaten her if she'd been a man. Harold now knows that he was a coward then and hopes that this walk will make up for at least some of the past.

## Analysis

Harold deeply regrets that he didn't keep in touch with Queenie. He came to feel that he could say anything at all to her and that she would not judge him for it. She also wouldn't tell anyone else anything that he shared. This made for a good basis for a deeper friendship but Harold didn't take advantage of it. And when Queenie left, he never tried to find her to keep up the connection they shared. He now looks at all those years as lost because he didn't have the friendship she would have provided. This is an important part of this character's emerging awareness of himself and his own needs.

Maureen comes to admit some things about herself, which is an important look at her character's growth. She starts to change the sheets on the bed but changes her mind because there's “no one to witness her slamming down the wash basket or complaining that she could manage perfectly well without help.” This is an indication of how Maureen has acted for a long time and that she is aware that she's acted that way. She also admits that it's a way to keep from talking to Harold. She is dealing with the pain in the only way she seems to know how.

There are some other looks at the relationship between Harold and Queenie, and it's evident that they were friends in a true sense of the word. They shared a sense of humor and understood each other, probably more than Harold and Maureen. There was nothing inappropriate about their friendship but it was important to them both. Harold remembers Queenie telling a joke her father loved. Harold and Queenie laughed so hard at the joke that Harold had to pull off the road. He later tried to share that moment of laughter with Maureen and David but they didn't appreciate the humor. This is yet another example of the relationship between Harold and Queenie, which is one of the book's themes.

The author gives more clues about the reason Queenie left town. Harold did something at the brewery that outraged Mr. Napier and Queenie took the blame. It's only much later that the reader learns the details of this event. Mr. Napier had a collection of glass



clowns that he prized. David had been openly hostile about Mr. Napier, saying he was a bad person. Harold refused to really admit that David was right. After David's death, Harold went into Mr. Napier's office and broke the glass clowns. Queenie knew that Harold did it but she took the blame as a way of repaying Harold for his kindness. Queenie claimed that she accidentally broken them while cleaning. The author's presentation of the facts in stages builds mystery, which is one of the literary devices seen in the book.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe the relationship between Queenie and Harold with details you know up to this point. Why do you believe they were close?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How is Harold's absence affecting Maureen?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does meeting people affect Harold?

## **Vocabulary**

metaphorical, apathy, keenly, pylons, cathedral, exiled, sentient, visceral, superfluous



# Chapters 16 and 17

## Summary

In Chapter 16, Harold and the Physician and the Very Famous Actor, Harold's shoes are very worn when he reaches Bath. He plans to stay in the city only a short time but knows he needs to resole his blue yacht shoes, which he's worn for the entire journey. He goes to the cobbler's but finds the store is closed. Harold finds himself in a small crowd and the reaction of someone makes him realize that he must stink. He rushes to a nearby bathhouse and washes himself and his clothes.

Back outside, Harold finds a group of people are waiting for the chance to meet a famous actor who has written a book. Harold actually encounters the man in a restroom. The actor makes it clear that he isn't flattered by the attention. He asks if Harold is in Bath to buy the book and Harold briefly tells the man about Queenie. The actor says he will lend Harold his personal car so that Harold can get to Queenie in a matter of hours instead of weeks. Harold says he has to walk but can feel a new level of uncertainty.

Harold stops at a busy tea house and is seated at a table with a man who turns out to be a doctor specializing in oncology. Harold doesn't really want to talk but finds himself drawn into a conversation with the man. Harold reveals his walk and the doctor asks about Queenie. He reads Queenie's letter and tells Harold that it's not likely that Queenie will survive. He says any reputable doctor wouldn't have told her there was no hope if that wasn't true. He points out that someone else must have written the letter for her and that's the first time that Harold realizes Queenie would have been too ill to write the letter. The man asks if it's really necessary for Harold to walk and Harold can only nod.

Harold desperately wants to find someone who will encourage him. He calls Maureen and she's kind but doesn't buoy him up to his purpose. He sees a man he believes to be David but then realizes it isn't. He realizes that he's spending a lot of money and that he isn't even to the halfway point.

In Chapter 17, Maureen and the Garden, Maureen finds that she's uncomfortable talking to David. She'd imagined they would be closer with Harold out of the house but finds that isn't the case. She has had a change in attitude and continues to change. She goes into the house without taking off her shoes. She acknowledges a sense of relief she didn't expect that she's changing. She becomes determined to try something new everyday that Harold is gone.

One day, Rex arrives with a gift. It's a large map so that Maureen can map Harold's progress. He hangs it on the wall and provides push pins so she can note the places Harold has been. Maureen and Rex go on another outing together and Maureen becomes tearful. She realizes that she'd always blamed Harold for the day David had almost drowned. She admits to Rex that she's often rude to Harold without ever giving



him a real chance. Rex says he'd often been mad at his wife for leaving the lid off the toothpaste. Now that his wife has died, he doesn't use the lid at all. Maureen says she never expected her life to be such an “appalling mess” at her age.

Maureen later remembers other things. She remembers that they missed David's graduation ceremony because they were waiting for David at the wrong place. He'd returned home but hadn't found a job. He often asked Maureen for money. She felt guilty each time she doubted David so turned her anger on Harold instead. She pretended she didn't notice when money went missing from her purse.

One day, Rex creates a small garden space for Maureen. She wears one of Harold's old shirts while she plants. She finds the joy she'd felt years earlier from working in the soil and enjoys the nurturing aspect of the work.

## Analysis

The actor is just one more of many people Harold meets along his way. The man is jaded and scornful of the attention people pay him. Someone outside tells Harold that they named their dog for the actor and this must be a common occurrence because the actor mentions that to Harold. Many of the people Harold meet are hopeful, helpful, and optimistic, and the actor represents the exact opposite of that.

The interaction between Harold and the actor is brief but there's an important piece of information. The actor asks how Harold knows Queenie is even waiting for his arrival and Harold says that he just knows it. The actor then says that Harold's arrival is all that matters and that it doesn't make any difference if he walks or if he arrives in a car, then offers to lend him a car. Harold refuses, saying that he has to finish the walk, but he feels a level of uncertainty that wasn't there before. This indicates that Harold is easily swayed by the words and opinions of others, but is ultimately determined.

Harold looks carefully at the letter again after the oncologist suggests that someone else must have done the actual writing for Queenie. There's a scrawl at the bottom of the letter, clearly meant to be Queenie's signature. Queenie had always been a very neat person with neat penmanship. When Harold realizes this is what she's become, he's hurt almost as much as when he first learned she was ill.

There's a brief passage with Harold seeing a young man he initially believes to be David. He imagines that it really is and that they are going to pass close enough to speak. When they meet, it obviously isn't David. It's not clear what Harold was really thinking at this point. He may have been just wishing that David hadn't really committed suicide after all, or it may have been a momentary effect of his tired attitude at that moment. It's left to the reader to interpret.

The changes Maureen experiences is an important part of her character. She begins to feel that David isn't listening when she talks to him. She stops spending so much time cleaning his room. She stops worrying so much about cleaning the house, as well. She gives up the strict organization of the closet and pairs up her outfits with Harold's outfits,



then leaves them that way. One day, she realizes that “it was over.” She can't really define “it” except to say that it's a level of pain. It seems likely that Maureen has come to a new level in the grieving process and that she's finally able to accept David's death and her own need to have a life without her son.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do you think the actor offered to let Harold take his car to meet Queenie and why did Harold refuse?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why do you think Harold imagined the man he saw might be David?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What are some of the things Maureen begins to admit about herself and her relationships with Harold and David?

## **Vocabulary**

diluted, cobbler, interjections, splendid, barbarity, inflicted, distraction





# Chapters 18-21

## Summary

In Chapter 18, Harold and the Decision, Harold resumes walking on his 26th day. He forces himself to walk but is losing faith in his ability to finish the walk. He thinks that he should have gotten in a car and rushed to Queenie's side. He checks his bank account and is horrified that he's spent so much money. Harold stops to call Queenie. A staff member says that Queenie has no friends or family, and that she's very ill. The woman then says that Queenie showed a marked improvement when they told her about Harold's initial phone call. She says Queenie has sat up a few times and that she shows everyone Harold's postcards. The woman says it's apparent that Queenie is waiting for Harold's arrival. The woman says she initially feared that Harold just didn't understand the gravity of Queenie's situation, but she now says that perhaps the world needs more faith. Harold is so happy that he cries and assures the woman that he'll reach Queenie in about 3 weeks, or a little less.

The phone call erases Harold's doubt and he becomes determined not to give up again. He finds an old sleeping bag and the owners say he's welcome to it. He spends that night outside and continues walking, now determined that he'll walk in the way that he believes it should be done. He thinks about the people who have kindly given him help along the way and decides it's important to accept help just as it's important to give help. He gives away the items he's carrying and mails his debit card, watch and wallet home to Maureen.

In Chapter 19, Harold and the Walk, Harold begins telling people about Queenie and the girl at the garage as he asks for help. Some people offer him food or bandages for the blisters on his feet. He never takes more than he needs at the moment and he listens to all their stories. Harold meets a man named Mick who asks questions about Harold's walk. Mick takes a photo, saying he wants to remember Harold. Mick says Harold's walk is a modern-day pilgrimage. He says people want to hear about stories like Harold's. In the coming days, Harold finds people sometimes stare openly at him. A little girl gives him a juice box and hugs him. Some other people cheer as he walks by. When Harold calls Maureen, she reveals that the story of Harold's walk has become news.

In Chapter 20, Maureen and the Publicist, Mick was right when he said people wanted to hear about Harold's story. The article carries the title, "The unlikely pilgrimage of Harold Fry" and includes details such as the fact that Harold is wearing the blue yachting shoes. Many people are now buying that kind of shoe. Harold has been gone six weeks. Maureen carefully studies the photo of Harold, which shows a man wearing a waterproof jacket and tie – the same ones he'd been wearing when he left home. His hair is shaggy and he seems "at ease with himself." Reporters begin spending time at Maureen's house. A publicist offers to help Maureen get "her side of the story" out but Maureen says she doesn't have a story. Anyone could follow Harold's journey on Twitter.



Maureen stays busy but finds she's very lonely for Harold. She confides to Rex that she worries that Harold might not love her anymore. Rex says his only regret about losing his wife to a brain tumor is that he didn't fight.

Maureen looks at photos and comes to understand that Harold had been more present than she'd ever given him credit for. She also remembers more about the day David almost drowned. She'd always been angry at Harold for not rushing to David's rescue, but she now admits that she had run along the shore but was too afraid to try to save David herself. With this, she has to admit that she's as much at fault as Harold. As the days pass, Maureen finds herself spending a lot of time remembering the past.

One day, Harold calls and says that people really aren't scary once he takes time to listen to them. She thinks about things she has learned, including that she's wronged Harold and that she wants to have a life with him, but she doesn't say any of these things.

In Chapter 21, Harold and the Follower, a young man named Wilf joins Harold. He says he wants to help save Queenie. He has a sleeping bag and carries a sports bag. Harold immediately sees that Wilf's hands are shaking and is reminded of David. By this time, a dog has begun following Harold as well. Harold tries to shoo the dog away, knowing he can't feed the animal or take care of it along the busy roads, but the dog continues to follow. They meet a kind lady who invites them for a meal. Harold showers and discovers the woman has invited others to join them. Wilf says people have asked if he's Harold's son. Harold says Wilf is too young for that.

As they walk, Wilf tells Harold about his life and claims to have faith in God. He is soon limping and Harold stops earlier than he would have if he'd been walking alone. Wilf doesn't understand when Harold continues to explain that he's walking with only what he absolutely needs, and that it doesn't include forks or petrol for starting a fire. That night, Wilf prays and Harold hopes that there is a God and that He is listening. Wilf has a nightmare and Harold comforts him. Harold is concerned about Wilf as they continue to walk.

## Analysis

There is a point early in Chapter 18 when Harold seems to be near the quitting point. He is walking in blue yachting shoes and they are in very poor condition. He is tired and knows that he's spending far too much money. It's in this state of mind that he looks back on the time he's spent walking as wasted time. He doesn't yet realize how much he's changing and how much Maureen is changing because of his walk. That understanding will come much later as an example of what Harold learns during his walk. This doubt is an important part of the growth of Harold as a character.

Maureen talks to Rex about her fear that Harold might not love her any longer. There are two important pieces of information in this scene. The first is that Maureen is talking to Rex about this. Before Harold left, she only talked to David and she would never have



shared something so personal with anyone else, let alone a man. Rex's response is the other important piece of information. He says that he reacted badly when he learned that his wife, Elizabeth, had a brain tumor. He says he "held her hand and gave up." He knows that she would have died regardless of Rex's reaction, but he wishes he had let her see him fighting against losing her. His advice is clear. Rex doesn't really think that Harold is going to leave Maureen but he believes Maureen should fight against losing Harold anyway.

When Maureen is looking through the photos, she comes to realize that most of them are pictures of Maureen and David, but that there are more of Harold and David than she'd believed. These pictures are proof that Harold had sought to be close to David more often than Maureen remembers, and that David had occasionally wanted to be close to Harold. These pictures are a symbol of the relationship that existed between Harold and David, even though Maureen hadn't credited Harold with ever trying to be close to David.

In some ways, Harold's relationship with Wilf is something of a parallel to Harold's relationship with David. When Wilf wakes from a nightmare, Harold remembers how Maureen comforted David, and this time Harold takes the initiative and comforts Wilf. The dog like to go fetch rocks and Wilf says he'd like to throw a rock at a goose they see along the road. Harold pretends he didn't hear and tries to change Wilf's focus, suggesting he should throw the rock for the dog instead. It's obvious Wilf has a drinking problem, just as David had. Wilf begins fingering a trinket Harold bought for Queenie and this seems to be just like David when David was stealing money from Maureen. All these comparisons make it obvious that Harold is probably going to be faced with some crisis with Wilf, just as he was with David.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Maureen forced to accept that her memories of Harold's relationship with David was incorrect? Do you think she might ever have come to this conclusion if Harold hadn't gone for his walk?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Rex say he should have done when he learned his wife was dying of a tumor? Why does he believe he should have had that reaction?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe Wilf. Predict what will happen between Wilf and Harold.



## Vocabulary

vigilant, limpid, substantial, incredulity, estranged, proffering, convivial, quintessential, festering, gamboling, coaxed



# Chapters 22-24

## Summary

In Chapter 22, Harold and the Pilgrims, Harold has been walking for 47 days. A group of people join him. A man named Richard seems overly assertive. He says that Harold's story "filled him with hope." There is also a young woman named Kate who seems to be more sincere than Rich. Another man joins, wearing a gorilla suit because he believes that will garner more support for Queenie. They soon argue over the route.

For a few days, the members of the group work together but their progress is slow and they soon begin to form factions that don't get along with each other. They get bogged down in problems. Some fall sick from their diet. Rich comes up with t-shirts for the "real pilgrims" so they can be distinguished from their "followers." Rich pushes Harold to pose for a photo, holding a fruit drink so the label faces the camera. One night, Harold is tempted to slip away from the group to continue on his own, but Kate calls out to him and he returns. Rich gives Harold a huge hug and someone snaps a photo. The picture appears in the newspaper and it seems that Harold is collapsing and that Rich is catching him.

In Chapter 23, Maureen and Harold, Maureen tells Rex that she's going to find Harold. Rex goes along, saying he'll help her navigate. Maureen easily finds Harold because of the huge crowd now traveling with him. They are uneasy at first but a man ranting about shopping makes them share a smile. Maureen suggests they share a cup of tea. She notices that his eyes seem more vibrant than she's seen them in years. The girl behind the counter recognizes Harold and asks him to sign her arm. She places their order on a tray and adds a scone as a gift. Harold takes a seat by the window so he can keep an eye on the dog.

As they talk, Maureen feels that she doesn't fully understand Harold's way of thinking and that she is like "someone left behind." Maureen says she isn't as selfless as Harold. Harold says that he has learned that it's necessary to let go of things that seem necessary, such as money and phones. As they are about to part, Harold asks if Maureen wants to join him. She says she has Rex with her and the garden to tend, and that she hasn't brought any of her "things." Harold says she won't need them but Maureen says she does. Maureen says she was selfish to think that Harold should stop his walk but Harold says he's the one who needs forgiveness.

On the way home, Maureen cries a little and Rex is understanding. When she arrives at home, Maureen takes down the living room curtains and donates them to the charity shop.

In Chapter 24, Harold and Rich, Harold often borrows phones to call Maureen because he wants to hear her voice and to know what's going on with her. Harold is soon dealing with arguments within the group of walkers. Rich begins hunting small game and Harold



is always upset to see the animals skewered and cooking over a campfire. Wilf is never willing to get up on time which makes them have a late start. Harold believes Wilf is drinking but makes excuses for him to the others. Then Wilf disappears, taking a trinket Harold had purchased for Queenie. Kate confides in Harold that her wedding ring has gone missing and she suspects Wilf. Harold feels he's losing control of the situation. He and Kate begin to get better acquainted and Harold feels a kinship to Kate.

Rich calls a meeting and says that Harold has lost focus. He believes they can travel faster without Harold and a group agrees to go ahead. Kate says her ex-husband has called her and she leaves to return home.

Maureen and Rex watch the news coverage as the main group of pilgrims arrive at the hospice. There's only a brief mention of Harold. Maureen is furious and says none of those people even knew Queenie.

## Analysis

During the trip to meet Harold, Maureen drives and Rex is the passenger. Maureen notices that Rex is upset and she asks why. He points out that she's passed several trucks "in single lane traffic." He says he believes it'll be alright if he just sits still and looks out the window. This is obviously out of character for Maureen. She would be a cautious driver by her very nature. The fact that she isn't being careful and hasn't even noticed, is an indication that she is distracted. This is another part of her character's changes as she comes to terms with her life.

When Maureen takes down the net curtains, she immediately notices that the sun is shining through in an unexpected way. This is symbolic of life from Maureen's perspective. She's spent years keeping even the basic aspects of life out of her personal space so that she doesn't really experience anything anymore. She has also kept people out and now has no friends in the declining years of her life. The fact that she's now allowing the sun to shine into her home is symbolic of her willingness to allow herself to experience other aspects of life as well, including her love for Harold and her friendship for Rex.

There's a look at the importance of perspective in this chapter. Maureen and Rex are watching news coverage when Rich and the others arrive at the hospice where Queenie is staying. The pilgrims who reach the hospice are the focus of the story but there's a mention of Harold. The news footage shows Harold, who looks "like a shadow: dirty, haggard, afraid." The obvious intention is to make the people watching the coverage feel that Harold is not doing well while the main band of pilgrims made it to the hospice relatively quickly.

The group grew into a mass of people without Harold planning to let that happen. None of them knew Queenie or felt any friendship for her, but they had all taken on the idea that they were somehow involved in saving her. Maureen realizes that they've changed the basis of Harold's walk and it makes her angry. They see news coverage when Rich



and his group arrives at the nursing home, and Maureen is upset that people think this group did something worthwhile. It's Rex who points out the story of Rich who has reunited with his estranged children because of the coverage about his participation in the walk. Rex says that is not Harold's journey, but that it's a different kind of journey and that Rich accomplished something for himself. The limited perspective means the reader doesn't know anything about the motivations of Rich and his group, and it's left to the reader to decide if they were selfish or were motivated by a true desire to help.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe the meeting between Harold and Maureen. What does each feel?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the significance of Maureen's decision to take down the curtains?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Harold come to be walking alone again? How do you think he feels about this development?

## **Vocabulary**

assertive, obliged, petty, condescending, parochial, benign, empathy, infuriating, yelp, brusque, stalwart



# Chapters 25-28

## Summary

In Chapter 25, *Harold and the Dog*, Harold and the dog are walking without anyone else now. The dog looks hungry. Harold feels lonely, seeing how the world continues to go on, with or without him. He thinks a lot about how unimportant he is and believes that he hasn't made any impression on any of the people he's met. As he's walking, he suddenly realizes that dog is missing. He walks back a long way, looking for the dog, and finds it getting on a bus with a little girl. Harold accepts that the dog has made a decision to go with the girl.

Harold struggles through the coming days. One day, he calls Maureen and says he can't possibly finish. He says he wants to come home but can't even figure out exactly where he is. Maureen tells Harold to call her back in a half hour. Maureen and Rex figure out that Harold must be in a town called Wooler. She tells him she's booked him a room at the Black Swan, a nearby hotel, and that he's only 16 miles from Queenie. She urges him not to give up. He struggles through the remaining miles and sends Maureen many postcards. He misses her so badly he can't stand it but Maureen and Rex have agreed that Harold will never forgive himself if he gives up when he's so near.

In Chapter 26, *Harold and the Cafe*, Harold manages to walk through the final stretch, though he is so broken that he often can't even think. He does remember the day he tore down the garden shed. He was drunk that day. His hands were ripped at the end of his rampage and he prayed but the words had no meaning at all. He remembers times when Maureen turned away from him.

He reaches St. Bernadine's Hospice 87 days after leaving home. He'd walked 627 miles. He suddenly doesn't know what he should do and he leaves without going inside. He stops at a cafe and asks for water. The manager is not happy at Harold's disheveled appearance. Harold mentions his son and a man, recognizing Harold from the news accounts, offers to help find Harold's son. Harold suddenly realizes he can't remember David's name and he's horrified. All he wants at that moment is to have his son back.

In Chapter 27, *Harold and Another Letter*, Harold had written a letter to the girl at the garage. He talks about finding David's body in the garden shed. He says he prayed, promising to do anything if God would let David live. He got David's body from where it was hanging, but he was dead. He says Maureen took it badly and that Queenie was kind. Harold broke into the brewery and "did something terrible" but Queenie took the blame and was fired. Harold says he didn't try to stop Queenie from leaving and he let her take the blame, but he did give up drinking after that. He says everyone thinks there was something romantic between Harold and Queenie, but that isn't the case. He says that Queenie saved him. He ends the letter by thanking the girl for telling him about her faith.





In Chapter 28, Maureen and the Visitor, the girl from the garage arrives at Maureen's house. She shows Maureen Harold's letter, then confesses that she misled Harold, because her aunt died. Maureen is upset, saying she thought faith saved the girl's aunt. The girl says there's no saving someone with cancer. She says she now feels like a fraud. Maureen tells the girl about talking to David, not as if he was a ghost, but as if he was actually there and listening. She also reveals that Queenie had come to their house before she left town and that she left a message for Harold. The message was that Harold had been kind to her and that she was repaying his kindness, but Maureen never gave Harold the message. She says she didn't want Harold to have comfort when Maureen couldn't find any comfort after David's suicide.

Maureen confides that she doesn't know if Harold is even going to come home. The girl says Maureen should go to Harold.

## Analysis

Harold's final leg of the journey is very difficult for him. He is older and the walking has taken a toll on him physically but his emotional state is even more of a trial. He has trouble focusing on anything and is finally coming to terms with his grief over David's death. When he arrives at St. Bernadine's Hospice, he can't imagine what he's supposed to do next. He began the walk for Queenie and if that had still been his only focus, he would have gone directly in to see her. However, by this point, Harold has come to learn a lot about himself, his life, and his relationships with others. What he expected from the walk and what he's gotten are two entirely different things, and he is now at a loss of how to act. He does go inside in the next section of the book but it seems that he simply can't bring himself to go directly in upon his arrival.

The letter Harold wrote to the girl at the garage is the first time the reader gets the details of David's suicide. Up to now, it seems that David is just absent from Harold's life. The author deliberately leaves the reader with that impression prior to now. In that letter, Harold says that he prayed that David would be alive but that David was dead despite Harold's prayers. Faith is one of the book's themes and it becomes clear that Harold wishes he could believe in God but doesn't.

Maureen reveals to the girl from the garage that she didn't tell Harold about Queenie's visit after David's death. The exact details of the situation are not yet revealed but the important information at this point is that Maureen's pain prompted her to keep Queenie's visit secret. Maureen felt that Queenie's message and her visit might bring Harold a little bit of comfort and she didn't want him to have that because she couldn't find any comfort for herself. This shows that their relationship was already in trouble at this point. They couldn't share their grief over David's death because they were already estranged. This is one of many examples of their failure to communicate, which drives a great deal of the story.

At several points in the story, Harold thinks about David's fall into alcoholism. He sometimes helped David to his room and cleaned up the vomit. He found empty liquor



bottles in the garden shed after one of David's visits. Maureen also noticed that David was in trouble. He often asked for money or just took it from her purse, but she pretended not to notice. If they had been talking to each other and acting as a unit, they might have taken proactive action against David's descent and might have even been able to prevent his suicide. The relationships of Harold and Maureen with their son is one of the book's themes.

The girl from the garage tells Maureen that she feels like a fraud because she told Harold about having faith. It seems likely that she was just trying to help Harold during their brief meeting. She couldn't have known that it would become so important to Harold or that he would place so much stock in her words. She is young and it seems like an incredible kindness that she took time to talk to Harold at all. It's a statement of the depth of her character that she has worried about Harold and is concerned that she set the walk in motion.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe Harold's state of mind during the final days of his journey. Why do you believe this part of the walk becomes so difficult for him?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Maureen refuse to tell Harold about Queenie's visit right after David's suicide? What does this say about Maureen's relationship with Harold at that point?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is Harold's reaction when he arrives at St. Bernadine's Hospice?

## **Vocabulary**

momentum, anarchic, cavernous, arduous, avail, vigil, sallow, fidgety, lacerating, incomprehensible



# Chapters 29-32

## Summary

In Chapter 29, Harold and Queenie, Harold finishes writing the letter to the girl at the garage, describing David's suicide. He finds a razor on the sink in a restroom and shaves off most of his beard. He then goes back to St. Bernadine's Hospice and announces his presence. A nun welcomes him inside and takes him to Queenie's room. The nun says none of the others who arrived claiming to be part of Harold's group was allowed in to see Queenie. Harold is shocked to find that Queenie is frail with a huge tumor deforming the side of her face. The nun says Queenie is in pain and is confused. Harold wants to leave but finds the courage to say hello to her. She doesn't speak and he chatters, saying that she looks "really well." He gets a piece of quartz he'd bought for her and pretends to look for a place to hang it.

As he tries to decide what to do, he remembers the day he and Maureen went to see David one final time in the coffin. Maureen had taken a red rose, a teddy bear, and a pillow, then insisted that she have time alone with David. Harold waited outside for his turn but then Maureen, crying, came out and went directly to the car. Harold followed Maureen rather than going inside to see David.

Harold had hoped to say good-bye to Queenie and to thank her for her kindness to him, but he now realizes that Queenie is already gone. He thinks more about his past, including his mother's departure. The nun returns with tea but Harold excuses himself and leaves.

In Chapter 30, Maureen and Harold, Maureen finds Harold seated on a bench. She asks about Queenie but Harold's replies are stilted. Maureen begins to worry. Then Harold says he should have just sent Queenie a letter. Harold reveals the depth of Queenie's illness, including that her tongue has been removed.

Harold begins to cry and admits that he's terrified of the possibility that he'll have dementia and lose all his memories for good. He tells her about forgetting David's name and Maureen assures him that he's just overly tired. She silently thinks that it is a possibility and of all the things that would entail. But she tells Harold that she loves him and that's the important thing that's come out of this walk.

In Chapter 31, Queenie and the Present, Queenie knows that someone has been to visit her, but it takes time for her to remember that it was Harold. She thinks about her father and then takes her last breath.

In Chapter 32, Harold and Maureen and Queenie, Maureen has booked a room near the sea. She talks to Harold about all her regrets. They get the call that Queenie has died and return to the hospice. Harold and Maureen go to see her one last time



together. Maureen assures Harold that he did all he could. Maureen waits with Harold as he looks at Queenie, and she leaves when he's ready to go.

They take a walk along the sea. Each realizes they can't change the past but that their future will be different. Harold doesn't know what will happen next, but he accepts that uncertainty.

As they walk, Harold suddenly laughs so loudly that he snorts. He laughs a lot and is finally able to tell Maureen that he remembers what was so funny during their first meeting. He says it wasn't Harold who said something funny, but it was Maureen instead. He had greeted her and she made a comment back. Maureen suddenly remembers as well. Both try to get the words out but they are laughing so hard they can't say it. When they get over their laughter, Maureen says that it wasn't even that funny and Harold says that they thought it was funny because they were happy.

## Analysis

Harold is appalled by Queenie's appearance. He thinks it looks as if she has two heads though one of them is the tumor that's taking her life. He is then uncomfortable in her presence and wishes he could just leave, but he stays for a little while. He realizes that she's already gone. Queenie dies shortly after Harold's arrival which indicates that she had somehow understood that he was coming and that she should wait for his final visit.

Maureen tells Harold that he did all he could for Queenie, but she's also talking about David. This is an important look at her character's growth. She has come to accept that David made his own choices and that Harold couldn't have done anything to change that. It's tempting to say that David's suicide was the main reason Harold and Maureen were unhappy but it's obvious that their unhappiness began many years before that. They failed to communicate and were not happy as a couple long before David's death but Maureen's words make it clear that she's forgiven Harold for everything she saw as a shortcoming over the years. They have both begun to see things more clearly and are beginning to forgive themselves for what they see as their own failures.

The details of that first conversation between Harold and Maureen are not revealed to the reader. When Harold and Maureen remember what happened, they both laugh outrageously. After they regain control so that they can talk again, they both admit that it wasn't really that funny after all. Harold says they laughed all those years earlier because they were happy. There's a parallel between that laughter and the laughter they share on the beach when they remember that conversation. They have spent many unhappy years together and are now laughing again at a conversation that they agree wasn't that funny. This indicates that they have again found a level of happiness that they'd lost.



## Discussion Question 1

What changes have taken place in Maureen's life since the beginning of Harold's walk? What caused these changes?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do Harold and Maureen laugh about their shared memory of their first conversation? What does that say about the new status of their relationship?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you predict for Harold and Maureen in the future? Why?

## Vocabulary

ventured, groped, inhuman, gargantuan, prostrate, oblige, absolve, spume, reverberate



# Characters

## Harold Fry

Harold Fry is recently retired and finds that he has little to occupy himself. He lives alone with his wife, Maureen, and the memory of their dead son, David. Harold spends a great deal of time focused on the regrets of his life and has basically forgotten how to live for today. His memories and regrets come to a head when he receives the letter from Queenie Hennessy. She was a colleague who had been very kind to Harold years earlier, especially at a very low point in Harold's life. He remembers that kindness and the letter makes him want to do something kind for Queenie. He writes a letter in reply but feels that it's simply insignificant for what he wants to say, and that prompts his decision to walk all the way to Berwick-upon-Tweed where Queenie is living out the remainder of her days in a hospice.

Harold's mother left him when he was very young and his father was an alcoholic abuser who kicked Harold out on his 16th birthday. Harold feels that his parents gave him a poor start in life and left him ill-equipped to be a good father and husband. He loved David and loves Maureen but he finds himself unable to convey that love in a way that either of them understand. He believes he is at least partly to blame for David's suicide.

Harold discovers that he is happy while he's alone on the road. He enjoys listening to the stories other people tell him and he "carries" their stories like parts of his own life. He hates it when he becomes the center of attention. He hopes that his sacrifice will make Queenie recover but accepts her death. Along the way, he also comes to accept himself for the man he is and learns that there's more to life than living in the past. He is tired at the end of his walking journey but is newly equipped to begin a new phase of life with Maureen.

## Maureen Fry

Maureen Fry is Harold's wife and David's mother. She is a stay-at-home wife and mother though she has an education and took a secretarial course. While David was young, she was excited to be a wife and homemaker. She sewed and cooked for her family, making their house a home and communicating with each of them in a way that held their family together. That changed over the course of time and by the time David was a teenager, Maureen found herself forced to take sides because David was constantly arguing with Harold. She generally took David's side.

When David died, a part of Maureen died as well. She insisted that she spend time alone with David at the funeral home and refused to share her grief with Harold. She blamed Harold for David's death, citing dozens of events over the years. Chief among those was a day when David almost drowned. It's not until Harold leaves home that



Maureen figures out she is putting a spin on many of those memories, including that day at the beach. She knows that she was just as responsible for David as Harold, and recognizes that she didn't rush into the water to try to save their son any more than Harold did. She also comes to realize that Harold was more present in David's life than she had credited. She finds lots of photos with the two together, prompting memories Maureen had pushed away.

Maureen learns that she has to accept the path her life has taken in order to find any enjoyment in what's left of her life. She knows that she and Harold are reaching an age where they'll face health issues and that eventually one of them will die, leaving the other alone. With this acceptance, Maureen also realizes that she deeply loves Harold and wants to regain their former loving relationship.

## Rex

Rex is the widower who lives next door to Harold and Maureen. He has lived there only a short time and has been widowed about 6 months. Rex seems to be a bit of a busybody and worries about everything. When he thinks Harold hurt his ankle on a loose paving stone, Rex says Maureen should complain to the city. He turns out to be a really good friend, helping Maureen cope after Harold begins his pilgrimage.

## Queenie

Queenie was a financial officer for the brewery where Harold worked. She seemed like a nice young woman but was actually quite fierce when she audited bars at the behest of her employer. She became acquainted with Harold and apparently valued their friendship much more than Harold did at the time. It's Queenie's letter, alerting him to the fact that she has cancer and is near death, that prompts Harold to being his pilgrimage.

## The Girl at the Garage

This is a clerk who talks to Harold on the first day of Harold's walk. She tells him about faith and her aunt's cancer, ending the conversation by giving the impression that her faith saved her aunt. Her aunt actually died and the girl feels bad that she misled Harold. She is the reason he began the walk and she is the one who tells Maureen that she should go to Harold rather than waiting for Harold to return home.

## David

David is the son of Harold and Maureen. He was an incredibly intelligent child who learned about everything he could. He graduated Cambridge and could have become a successful adult in almost any field. However, he succumbs to alcohol and drugs, and he commits suicide in the garden shed.



## Joan

Joan was Harold's mother. She left Harold when he was very young and he never got over it. She may have been manic-depressive. She was sometimes very happy and laughed at Harold's jokes and was sometimes so withdrawn that she paid no attention to him at all. She wrote him a note after she left, saying she wasn't cut out to be a mother.

## Richard

Known as Rich, he is a man who joins Harold's ground of pilgrims on the pretext of making up for personal aspects of his own life. His wife left him with their children and Rich initially seems like the kind of person Harold would listen to, keeping Rich's story as part of his life from that moment. But Rich is actually self-serving and manipulative. Rich eventually convinces the group to leave Harold behind and continue the walk to Berwick-upon-Tweed where Queenie is. He does lead that walk and news coverage shows him reunited with his children after his arrival.

## Wilf

Wilf is the first of the pilgrims who joins Harold on his walk. He reminds Harold of David. He often steals things and is completely selfish and unreliable. He steals and drinks, but Harold finds himself standing up for Wilf because of the similarity to David. Wilf simply disappears one day and Harold never sees him again.

## Kate

Kate is a young woman who is recently divorced when she joins Harold on his walk. She is sincere and seems to believe in Harold even when other walkers are self-serving and manipulative. Kate remains with Harold when everyone else leaves him but she then announces that she's going to rejoin her husband. Harold knows she has to go back to her own life but he feels a connection with Kate that he doesn't feel with anyone else.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## Dog

The dog never has a name other than “dog.” He arrives at Harold's side one day and just continues to follow him for miles and weeks of walking. One day, Harold realizes that the dog is no longer with him and he retraces his steps in search of the dog. The dog is at a bus stop with a little girl and they get on the bus together. Harold misses the dog but accepts that it's the dog's choice, and the dog's right to make that choice.

## The Net Curtains

Maureen hangs the Net Curtains on the front window of their home after David's death in an effort to keep the neighbors from seeing anything inside their home. The Net Curtains hang in Harold and Maureen's house until one day when Maureen notices that it's a perfect day for washing. She takes down the curtains and immediately notices that the sunlight shines through the windows in ways she hadn't remembered. She doesn't put the curtains back up.

## Napier's Clowns

Napier was Harold's boss at the brewery and he had a collection of glass clowns on display in his office. The clowns belonged to Napier's mother and he was very protective of them. David felt that Napier was a thug and Harold remembered that after David's death, Harold broke into Napier's office and broke the clowns. However, Queenie knew that Harold acted out of his grief over David's suicide and she took the blame for the clowns. Napier would likely have beat Harold over the clowns but he merely fired Queenie.

## The Blue Yacht Shoes

These are the shoes Harold is wearing when he begins his walk. Along the way, people advise him to buy hiking shoes that will hold up better, but he decides that he should finish in the yacht shoes. They hold together until near the end of his walk, though they are resoled and worn. Harold eventually has to wind duct tape around them to finish his journey.

## Suicide

Suicide is an important motif because of David's death. David chose to die but was very high and drunk at the time. Harold is forced to face David's death as he comes to accept his own actions and reactions to situations over the years. Suicide comes up again



when Harold meets a young woman with scars on her wrists, indicating that she had attempted suicide. This young woman is loud and seems overly self-confident, which points to manic-depression.

## **The Brewery**

The brewery is where Harold and Queenie worked when they met. The company was run by a cruel, selfish man with a harsh reputation. Harold and Queenie began a friendship there that was casual to the outside observer but that affected them both in a powerful way.

## **Rex's House**

Rex's house is next door to Harold and Maureen's house. His wife died, leaving Rex alone in the house. Maureen hasn't been in the house since Rex's wife's death and she expects to find that it's messy and unkempt. She's surprised. The house represents Maureen's expectations and the fact that those expectations are sometimes unfounded.

## **The Pictures**

Maureen has lots of photos in albums at her house. Most of them are pictures of David and Maureen but Maureen looks through them and comes to realize that there are more than she'd thought of David and Harold. These pictures prompt Maureen to further examine her life and her memories, and she comes to terms with the fact that she hadn't been fair to Harold.

## **Cancer**

Queenie is dying of a cancerous tumor. The girl at the garage says he aunt had cancer as well. Harold believes he can save Queenie by walking to her but the girl at the garage says cancer is a killer that can't be stopped.

## **Alzheimer's**

Harold's father had Alzheimer's Disease and Maureen fears that Harold may be having an Alzheimer's issue when he sets out on his walk. She later believes that isn't the case but both Harold and Maureen know that it's possible for Harold to have the disease.



# Settings

## The Garden Shed

This was a small shed Maureen used as a potting shed and that Harold used for storing his outdoor tools. This was where David committed suicide, hanging himself from a hook used for tools. Harold was the one who discovered David's body. He destroyed the shed later as a means of trying to cope with David's death, but nothing can erase the memory of that scene.

## Berwick-upon-Tweed

Berwick is the town where Queenie is staying in the hospice facility. It's near the sea and is not a large city. Maureen joins Harold there and this is where they find themselves rekindling their lost love. They walk on the beach and remember their first conversation, laughing long and loud at that memory. The town represents the end of Harold's walking journey, or pilgrimage, and the beginning of this new life shared by Harold and Maureen.

## St. Bernadine's Hospice

This is the nursing facility where Queenie is staying when she contacts Harold with news that she's near death. Harold arrives to find that it's a "modern and unassuming" building with an old-time street lamp outside. On his first glimpse of the building, he also sees people seated outside, and compares that to "clothes set out to dry." The place is run by nuns and there's a chapel. There's a small window in Queenie's room where Harold places one of the gifts. There are religious overtones throughout the building with nuns present as caregivers. Queenie's room is sparse with a bed, cross, and chair as the main things Harold notices.

## 13 Fossebridge Road

This is the address of the house shared by Harold and Maureen Fry. The address is significant in that it's where they have lived for years though they never really had a life together. The house seems ordinary with a formal dining room that they used often when David was young but seldom now that he's dead. There are three bedrooms. One is the main bedroom where Harold is sleeping and one is David's bedroom, which Maureen keeps just as it was when he died. The third is a guest room that has never been used for anything but is where Maureen sleeps for years after David's death. The fact that they don't share a room is symbolic of their lack of connection as husband and wife. That fracture occurs after David's suicide.



## David's Room

David's room is one of the bedrooms in the Fry house. Maureen keeps it immaculate and regularly checks to be sure there isn't any dust anywhere in the room. Maureen closes the curtains each night and opens them each morning. She is waiting for David to return. She feels closest to him when she's in his room and she goes there often prior to Harold's walk. After a while, Maureen stops spending so much time in there and actually avoids cleaning the room.



# Themes and Motifs

## David

David is the son of Harold and Maureen Fry, but his life and death are a major theme in the story. David does not appear in the story except in the memories of Harold and Maureen. Their memories are skewed with the passage of time but it's obvious that David was a difficult child from an early age. He was often condescending to the adults in his life, especially to Harold. He made it a point to say things that Harold wouldn't understand, just to prove that he was smarter than his father. His presence and his relationship with Harold put a wedge between Maureen and Harold, straining their relationship.

David's selfish attitude is seen in Harold's memory of a trip he'd planned as a surprise for Maureen. The three of them arrived at Buckfast Abbey but David refused to get out of the car. Harold apparently felt that Maureen would enjoy touring the Abbey but David's action forced Maureen to choose a side. She chose to remain in the car with David and the family returned home without even getting out of the car. It seems that David could have endured time at the Abbey for his mother's sake if he hadn't been so selfish. This selfish attitude exists in other situations throughout David's life.

David is also outspoken when it comes to his thoughts and opinions. He says that Harold's boss is a violent bully. Harold would naturally be uncomfortable talking about his boss in this manner but David doesn't care about his father's feelings. He openly scoffs at his father's reaction when David is accepted into Cambridge.

Another example of David as a theme is seen in his life as a young college graduate. He returns home, ostensibly for a short time until he can find a job, but probably isn't really even trying to begin his life as an adult. He drinks a lot and often returns home drunk. Harold helps David to his room and cleans up vomit from David's drunken binges. David asks his mother for money or sometimes just takes money from her purse. By now, Maureen and Harold's marriage is in trouble and they are no longer communicating about anything of importance.

Finally, David's suicide drives yet another wedge between Harold and Maureen. In their grief, they are unable to turn back to each other and each of them has to deal with David's death on their own. Harold remembers being driven to tear down the garden shed and to breaking all the glass clowns in Mr. Napier's office. He also prayed that David wouldn't really be dead and when that prayer wasn't answered, he had no more faith in anything. Maureen could find no comfort for herself and resented the idea that Harold might find comfort. That attitude drove them even farther apart. It's not until Harold goes on the walk that each of them evaluates their memories and actions, coming to the point that they can forgive each other and themselves.



## Harold's Relationships

Harold's relationships with David, Maureen, Queenie, and others are important to the story and drive a great deal of the storyline. Most notable among these is his relationship with David and Maureen because he sees these as failures on his part. Harold's childhood probably had a great deal to do with how he acts as an adult. His mother left when Harold was very young and his father was abusive. Harold grew up without a role model to teach him how to interact in a loving way. He carried that into adulthood and found he was unable to really reach out to David and Maureen. He loved his wife and son dearly but was never capable of demonstrating that love as he wanted. He looks back on his role as husband and father, thinking that he was at least there but was always on the sidelines. He doesn't see his presence as much of a success.

Harold's friendship with Queenie begins accidentally when he hears her crying. He doesn't really want to get involved but he finds he is unable to just walk away from her without offering some comfort and advice. Their friendship would likely have ended there except that Harold was assigned the task of driving Queenie to various bars around the area where she would inspect the books. That forced time together put them in a position to learn more about each other and resulted in a mutual respect and understanding. The friendship meant a lot to Queenie as evidenced by her decision to accept the blame for the broken clowns in order to protect Harold. The friendship also meant a lot to him as evidenced by his need to do something more than write a letter when he learned she was dying.

Harold never really developed any other friends during his life. He apparently never paid much attention to this deficit in his life until he had time to think during his walk. He then looked back on the times he'd been invited to spend time with various people over the years. He'd always declined and had therefore denied himself the possibility of developing other friendships.

As Harold walks, he becomes intent on accepting the brief friendships offered by the people he meets. He makes a point of listening to their stories and accepts them without judging. He learned that from Queenie and saw it again in some others, including Martina. He remembers that he'd always known Queenie would listen to anything he wanted to say and that he never had to worry that she would tell others about their conversations. With that as his model, Harold listens to the people he meets and keeps their stories as a part of him. These brief encounters are not the same as friendships but they fill that void that has always existed in Harold's life.

## Faith

There are religious undertones throughout the story as Harold struggles to figure out what he believes and to reconcile that with his past. His main source of that struggle is David's death. Harold found David's body in the tool shed. Harold told the girl at the garage that he'd prayed once, but that it was already too late. Harold prayed that David wouldn't be dead. That prayer wasn't answered. Now that Harold has something else



that he wants to pray for – Queenie's recovery – he finds that he can't really have any faith in anything other than himself. Since he can't find the faith that there is a God who is listening and powerful enough to save Queenie, Harold sets out on the pilgrimage, believing that he can do something that will save Queenie.

Harold's brief encounter with the girl at the garage sets the stage for Harold's walk. The girl talks about her aunt who had cancer. The girl tells Harold that he should have faith that Queenie will get better. When Harold questions her further, the girl says that her aunt claimed faith was all that kept her going after her cancer diagnosis. Harold gets the impression that this faith saved the girl's aunt. Harold's lack of faith means that he can't understand that faith would provide a level of comfort that wasn't otherwise available at all.

The girl at the garage visits with Maureen and talks about her feelings. She had talked to Harold in an effort to make him feel better but she then feels like a fraud because she misled Harold. She says her aunt actually died and that she doesn't believe anything will save someone who has cancer. Her message to Harold was that her aunt's faith sustained her as she was dying but Harold believed her aunt's faith saved her. The fact is that a person who has the kind of faith this girl describes would be comforted even in facing death. Harold isn't religious and doesn't have that kind of faith. He also can't understand it.

To a lesser degree, this theme is seen when Harold visits religious sites along his route. He says that people buy things at these places because they don't know what else to do once they arrive. This is another example of Harold's lack of religious faith.

Another example of this theme is seen when Wilf joins Harold. Wilf is obviously a disturbed young man who is struggling with his life. He says that he saw the story about Harold and that he asked for a sign that he should join Harold's pilgrimage. He says God sent a dove – or a pigeon – and that Wilf took that as a sign that he should join Harold. Wilf also prays and this is another case of Harold's own faith being tested. Harold finds himself hoping that there is a God and that He is listening to Wilf's prayers.

## The Quest

Harold's walk becomes a quest with several goals, though Harold never verbalizes most of those goals and never really realizes what those are even after he accomplishes them. The first and most important, is Harold's desire to reach Queenie. Harold comes to believe that he might be able to save Queenie if he takes some step of his own, such as walking all the way to her bedside. He makes this the main purpose of his walk and gains a lot of attention for it. This aspect of his quest is the only goal on Harold's mind when he begins the walk and the others really happen as a byproduct of this goal.

He comes up with the idea to walk all the way to Queenie because of the girl in the garage who mentions faith. The girl says that faith was the only thing that kept her aunt's spirits up during a battle with cancer, but the girl didn't mean to imply that it saved



her aunt's life. Harold took it that way and felt that exhibiting faith would mean Queenie would live.

Coming to terms with his past is another of Harold's goals, though he doesn't really think of it in those words. Harold has a lot of time to think while he's walking. He thinks about his childhood, his relationships with his mother and his father, his career, and his life as husband and father. He doesn't really intend to think about these things but it seems that he has ignored his need to find peace with each aspect of his life until he has nothing to do but walk and think. As he walks, he remembers the abuse at the hands of his father and that his mother abandoned him. Harold understands that both these things changed how he was as an adult. He didn't become abusive but he was never really able to express his love and affection for others, even though he deeply loved his wife and son. Harold also has to come to terms with his relationship with David and what he sees as his failure as a father. He was never able to really communicate with David and watched helplessly as David spiraled out of control and eventually committed suicide.

Another important part of Harold's quest is meeting people along the way. Harold meets dozens of people and gets to know small details about their lives. His knowledge of each of these people is limited to a specific point in time and he sometimes knows only the information they offer. That's the case with the woman bicycling with the group of mothers. She has scars on her wrists that tell Harold she tried to commit suicide but he doesn't know any other details. He wishes he had something wise to tell her so that she would never try again, but he leaves without saying anything to her about it at all. Harold feels a kinship with some of the people, including Martina, and he says that it's difficult to leave each of these people while carrying just a small part of their lives.

## Love and Marriage

Harold and Maureen love each other but have fallen into the trap of not communicating their true feelings. They each remember the night they met and that they were immediately drawn to each other. They struggle to recall something that made them laugh and when they remember it, Harold says it was funny then because they were so happy. This happiness is obviously an indication of their attraction and the love that began that night. After they had been married for awhile, Maureen's parents died. Their deaths occurred just a few months apart and Maureen was heartbroken, but she turned to Harold. They pledged that they were together and that their family would be enough to sustain them through anything they faced in the future.

Both Harold and Maureen love David, but they show it in different ways. Harold has never had a positive role model so he doesn't know how to show his love for David. He describes being afraid to hold David when he was an infant and that Maureen understood then, but she was later angry at him when he wasn't demonstrative with David. Harold is amazed that Maureen seems to instinctively know how to take care of David, down to knowing when he needs new clothes. Maureen believes that Harold had never tried to be close to David but then realizes that her memory is wrong. She finds





photos that show David and Harold were sometimes together, and that sometimes both of them sought to demonstrate their love.

Maureen realizes after Harold has gone on his walk that she's forgotten how to be nice to him. She admits that she instantly says that she doesn't want to do things with him, without even giving his proposals any consideration. She cleans just so that she can slam things around and then refuse his offer to help. She tells Rex when she comes to these conclusions, saying that the words "I think not" come out of her mouth too often. She eventually realizes that she has, however, stayed with Harold because she cares for him. She says that her world with Harold has become dull and lonely, but that she can't imagine how awful life without him would be. As Maureen comes to accept these things about herself, she becomes determined to try to save her marriage and to find some happiness with Harold.

Rex is another example of this theme. It's obvious that he loved his wife dearly and that he misses her since her death. He says that he held her hand and remained by her side during her illness, but that he looks back on it and wishes he'd had a different reaction. He says he should have raged against the diagnosis and refused to simply accept that she was going to die. He calls that his biggest regret and uses it as he advises Maureen to go meet Harold and tell him how she feels.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is written in third person from limited perspectives. The majority of the story switches between Maureen's point of view and Harold's. This is necessary because the story is about the changes that take place in both of them. There is at least one brief scene in which the perspective switches to a less limited one. Rich talks to the group about the possibility of splitting up into two groups. He has this conversation while Harold is away and Kate argues with him over it. This seems to be necessary because it indicates that there are some people who have a different take on the situation than Harold, and that conversation can only reasonably take place outside Harold's hearing. This seems to be appropriate to the story, though the switching between the perspectives of Maureen and Harold make up the vast majority of the book.

Harold and Maureen seem to be honest as they relate their thoughts and experiences. Maureen admits that she has habitually cut off Harold's conversations and has been mean to him without knowing why. Harold recounts his own failings, such as the day he fumbled around on the beach when David almost drowned. They also are honest as they come to terms with their faulty memories. Maureen believes that Harold never touched David and that he was basically an absent father. When she looks through photo albums, she realizes that isn't true and she admits that she's been mistaken. All these mean the reader can trust what Maureen and Harold say and remember.

Harold realizes that his perspective is different from the perspective of others, and he understands this means that other people aren't able to fully understand his life. For example, he is talking to Kate one evening and she seems genuinely interested in his past. Harold knows that if he were to describe his house, she would envision something different. That is true of something as general as his house, meaning he doesn't have any hope of making her understand the really important aspects of his past. This affects how he talks about himself and the things that are truly important to him.

## Language and Meaning

The story is set in Britain and some of the language reflects the setting. There are words that would be commonplace for the people of this time and place but that the American reader may not understand. For example, in Chapter 5, Harold is walking during the early part of his journey and notes that there's a "copse" of trees that have been windblown into a "quiff." The word copse is not often used in American language because it's dated. The word quiff is specific to Britain and refers to the way a man's hair can be brushed up and back from the forehead. Later, Harold meets a "publican." This is a British term for the owner of a pub, or bar. These English references are used fairly regularly throughout the book but many of them will be familiar to the American reader.



There are several curse words seen in the book but they happen seldom and most readers won't be upset by these occasional references. They seem to be made in an effort to make the dialogue seem more realistic. The book is divided into dialogue and narrative, though there is more narrative than dialogue. The thoughts of Harold and Maureen are presented as narrative. Some sentences that could have been presented as dialogue are presented as narrative instead. For example, when a character says something, those words are sometimes presented as a paraphrased narrative rather than a direct quote in quotation marks. This seems acceptable, especially considering the casual tone of the book.

The story is one of hope though Maureen and Harold deal with tremendous demons and fears throughout the story. Harold's thoughts turn particularly dark as he nears the end of his journey, with Harold thinking about his parents and about David's suicide. Even with this, there is an undercurrent of hope that makes the reader expect that Harold will emerge to a better place in his life. That hope turns out to be true.

## Structure

The story is divided into 32 chapters of varying lengths. The chapters focus on events, meaning some of them are much longer than others. Each chapter has a title and that title gives the reader an idea of the focus of that particular chapter. The book also includes several special sections. Most notably is a map at the beginning of the book that outlines Harold's journey. The map includes specific places of interest along Harold's route and gives the reader an idea of how Harold traveled.

The book opens with a quote from "The Pilgrim's Progress" by John Bunyan that basically defines a pilgrim. The book closes with a dedication page and acknowledgments along with a section "About the Author." The final section of the book is a reader's guide that includes a question-and-answer session with the author along with 13 questions readers can consider about the book.

Chapter titles are: Harold and the Letter; Harold and the Garage Girl and a Question of Faith; Maureen and the Telephone Call; Harold and the Hotel Guests; Harold and the Barman and the Woman with Food; Maureen and the Lie; Harold and the Hiking Man and the Woman who loved Jane Austen; Harold and the Silver-Haired Gentleman; Maureen and David; Harold and the Sign; Maureen and the Intern; Harold and the Cycling Mothers; Harold and the Doctor; Maureen and Rex; Harold and the New Beginning; Harold and the Physician and the Very Famous Actor; Maureen and the Garden; Harold and the Decision; Harold and the Walk; Maureen and the Publicist; Harold and the Follower; Harold and the Pilgrims; Maureen and Harold; Harold and Rich; Harold and the Dog; Harold and the Cafe; Harold and Another Letter; Maureen and the Visitor; Harold and Queenie; Maureen and Harold; Queenie and the Present; Harold and Maureen and Queenie.



## Quotes

"I'm only going to the end of the road."

-- Harold (Chapter 1, Harold and the Letter paragraph 31)

**Importance:** These are the last words Harold says to Maureen as he heads out to mail the letter to Queenie. The significance lies in the fact that he'll call Maureen later with the news that he's walking to see Queenie and that he doesn't return for months.

"So when Harold said he was walking to Berwick, did he mean that once he got there, he was staying?"

-- Maureen (Chapter 6, Maureen and the Lie paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Maureen has never been alone and she is actually afraid now that Harold has gone on this walk. This is very early in the walk and is a stark example of the fact that they aren't communicating well.

"He hunched his shoulders and drove his feet harder, as if he wasn't so much walking to Queenie as away from himself."

-- Narrator (Chapter 7, Harold and the Hiking Man and the Woman Who Loved Jane Austen paragraph 48)

**Importance:** It's early in Harold's walk and he is struggling with memories because he has so much time on his hands. He doesn't yet realize that self-discovery will be an important part of his walk.

"People were buying milk, or filling their cars with petrol, or even posting letters. And what no one else knew was the appalling weight of the thing they were carrying inside."

-- Narrator (Chapter 8, Harold and the Silver-Haired Gentleman paragraph 48)

**Importance:** Harold has just talked to the silver-haired gentleman and learned that the man is having an affair with a young man. As Harold listens to the man, he comes to realize that other people are going about their lives as usual without any concern to the fact that Harold is on this walk.

"Harold had wanted to take him in his arms and hold on tight. He wanted to say, You beautiful boy of mine; how do you get to be so clever when I am not?"

-- Narrator (Chapter 10, Harold and the Sign paragraph 54)

**Importance:** This is from Harold's memory of the day he learned David was accepted into Cambridge. This is an example of the relationship Harold wants to have with David as opposed to the relationship he actually has. He wants to be closer to David but has never known how to communicate.

"She had stayed because, however lonely she was with Harold, the world without him would be even more desolate."



-- Narrator (Chapter 11, Maureen and the Intern paragraph 49)

**Importance:** Maureen has just been to talk to the doctor, expecting him to help her stop Harold's walk. However, when she was explaining the situation, she suddenly realized the need to defend Harold's decision. This is the first step Maureen takes toward understanding herself and Harold.

She would decide to strip the beds only to realize there was no point, since there was no one to witness her slamming down the wash basket, or complaining that she could manage perfectly well without help, thank you."

-- Narrator (Chapter 14, Maureen and Rex paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Maureen is beginning to acknowledge that she has done a lot of things just to make it clear to Harold that she's suffering. This is an important step in the growth of her character.

David had been right about Napier. It was Queenie who had shown the courage."

-- Narrator (Chapter 15, Harold and the New Beginning paragraph 46)

**Importance:** This is one of many hints about the events at the brewery that led to Queenie leaving town. In his grief over David's death, Harold broke some items belonging to Mr. Napier and Queenie took the blame to save Harold from Napier's wrath.

Why had he wasted so much time, looking at the sky and the hills, and talking to people, and thinking about life, and remembering, when all along he could have been in a car?"

-- Narrator (Chapter 18, Harold and the Decision paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Harold worries that he can't make the entire walk and that he can't arrive before Queenie dies. He doesn't yet realize that the walk is more than a journey to reach Queenie's bedside and that he's on an important path of self-discovery that will ultimately make him a better man.

He heard himself praying, eyes screwed up, hands clenched, and the words meaning nothing."

-- Narrator (Chapter 26, Harold and the Cafe paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Harold is remembering the day he tore down the garden shed after David's suicide. His unanswered prayer that David would live became a problem for him and he now says he has no faith because of that.

Once she had been a woman called Queenie Hennessy."

-- Narrator (Chapter 31, Queenie and the Present paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This is near the end of Queenie's life when she is facing a certain death. By this time, she has a huge tumor on the side of her face and is no longer able to speak or concentrate on anything. She briefly remembers Harold, his visit, and their



friendship, but knows that her life has changed dramatically and she dies a few moments later.

There was nothing more you could have done,' she said. And she was thinking now not only of Queenie, but of David too."

-- Maureen/Narrator (Chapter 32, Harold and Maureen and Queenie paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Maureen and Harold have been to say their good-byes to Queenie and Maureen is reassuring Harold that he did all he could for both Queenie and for David. It's an important step for Maureen because it shows the forgiveness she's come to have for Harold and for herself.