

# Eleanor and Park



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAINBOW ROWELL

A writer from Nebraska who got her start in the 1990s as a newspaper columnist at the *Omaha World-Herald*, Rainbow Rowell is the author of several popular books for young people and adults alike. Her breakthrough novels, *Eleanor and Park* and *Fangirl*, were both published in 2013, catapulting Rowell to fame within the YA community. Rowell is active in the online writing community, and regularly participates in both fanfiction communities and NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month). Her most recent projects include writing for the Marvel superhero comic book series *Runaways* and a “spinoff” series inspired by the *Simon Snow* novels, the books-within-a-book originated in her novel *Fangirl*. Her novels for adults include *Attachments* (2011) and *Landline* (2014).

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Eleanor and Park* is set in 1986, and is peppered with ample references to major historical and cultural events of the time. Eleanor and Park bond over their shared love of bands like Joy Division and The Smiths, as well as comics like [Watchmen](#), which was first published that year. Rowell also references popular television shows and movies (*Happy Days*, *Star Wars*, *Back to the Future*, *Short Circuit*) in order to ground Eleanor and Park in the 80s. Racial tensions at Eleanor and Park’s Omaha high school are rife, as the ethnic makeup of the school is altered by busing—the practice of transporting students to schools in other school districts in order to reduce racial segregation in schools. Park’s parents Jamie and Mindy (or Min-dae) met in 1970, when his father was stationed in Seoul, and Park also struggles with his classmates’ casual racism when discussing his heritage.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Eleanor and Park* could be conceived of as a very loose contemporary take on Shakespeare’s [Romeo and Juliet](#)—a play Eleanor and Park study in their English class. Just like [Romeo and Juliet](#), Rowell’s novel is a searing look at the total intensity of first love and the power of familial, societal, and economic barriers to stand between a pair of young lovers’ chance at happiness. Similarly to [Romeo and Juliet](#), Eleanor and Park are separated at the end of the novel, though in a divergence from the play there is the chance that they might reunite in the future. Eleanor, an avid reader, finds comfort in novels like *The World According to Garp*, [Watership Down](#), and *Catcher in the Rye*; books, like music, are a way for Eleanor to escape the poverty

and abuse which have come to define her home life.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Eleanor and Park*
- **When Written:** Early 2010s
- **Where Written:** Omaha, Nebraska
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young adult fiction; coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** Omaha, Nebraska
- **Climax:** Eleanor realizes that her cruel and predatory stepfather Richie has been the one writing lewd messages on her textbook covers, and enlists Park’s help in escaping Nebraska to go live with relatives in Minnesota.
- **Antagonist:** Richie Trout
- **Point of View:** Third person limited, alternating between Eleanor and Park’s perspectives

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Resemblances.** Rainbow Rowell, herself a red-haired music lover from Omaha, bears many resemblances to one of the book’s two protagonists, Eleanor. Rowell has said in interviews that she, like Eleanor, retreated into music, comics, and books in high school, and even shared some of Eleanor’s favorite reads (*The World According to Garp*, [Watership Down](#).) The difference between her and Eleanor, Rowell says, is that while she felt like an outsider in high school, when she looks back on her teen years, her “memories are full of friends.”



## PLOT SUMMARY

In August of 1986, it is the start of Park Sheridan’s sophomore year of high school. Park takes the bus to school each morning, navigating its fragile social territory by listening to **music** to drown out the noise of the dumb, popular kids at the back like Steve and Tina—kids who mostly like Park but still make racist jokes in his direction. Park, who is half Korean, has gone through high school so far hoping to remain mostly invisible. When a new girl boards the bus—a heavy-set redhead with wild curls and a bizarre taste in **clothing**—no one lets her sit down but Park, who saves her at the last minute from the popular kids’ taunts. Eleanor herself is nervous about the start of sophomore year. She has recently returned to Omaha to rejoin her mother, Sabrina, and her four siblings in her stepfather Richie’s house, a year after having been kicked out during a cataclysmic fight with the drunken, abusive Richie. Eleanor’s

home life is impoverished and depressing—Park’s is solidly middle-class and relatively happy, but his embarrassment over his immigrant mother, Mindy, and his clashes with his strict, hypermasculine father, Jamie, leave him feeling out of place and alone. As Eleanor and Park ride the bus to and from school together every day, Park notices Eleanor reading his comic books over his shoulder—and soon begins bringing some along for her to read, as well. When Park forgets to bring comic books one day, he pulls out his Walkman and lets Eleanor listen to some of his New Wave tapes instead—the two of them soon begin talking and discussing the music they both love.

One night, Park brings a comic over to Eleanor’s house for her to read only to realize, when Richie opens the door, that things in Eleanor’s home life are strange and difficult. The next morning on the bus, Park reaches for Eleanor’s hand and holds it, and both of them feel emotions and desires they’ve never felt before. Over the next several weeks, as Eleanor and Park’s friendship turns to romance, Eleanor tries to ignore bullying from Tina and the other girls which comes in the form of menstrual pads stuck on her locker and disgusting, sexually explicit notes written on her textbook covers. Park, meanwhile, argues nonstop with his father over driving lessons, and incurs Jamie’s verbal and even physical wrath as he struggles to learn to drive a stick-shift (manual) car.

When Eleanor is offered a babysitting job at her real father’s house one Friday night, she tells Park that she wants to have a phone date with him. On the phone, both Eleanor and Park are anxious and nervous—but nevertheless find themselves admitting that they don’t just like one another, they “need” and “live for” one another. At the end of the phone call, Park tells Eleanor he loves her—but the stunned Eleanor is unable to say the words back.

On Monday, in spite of Eleanor’s hiccup on the phone, Eleanor and Park are delighted to see one another. Eleanor tells Park that she’s lied to her mother about spending the afternoon at a girlfriend’s house—which means she can go over to Park’s all afternoon. Park is excited, but part of him is anxious about what his family will think of the eccentric Eleanor. That afternoon, when Park tells Eleanor to smile when she meets his parents, she becomes convinced that Park doesn’t truly like her for who she is. Things are awkward on the bus the following morning, and Eleanor tells Park she’s concerned that he’s embarrassed by her. When the bus pulls up to school and Steve begins taunting Eleanor, however, Park defends Eleanor—his “girlfriend,” he tells Steve—by using taekwondo moves to knock Steve to the ground. After the fight, Park is grounded and forbidden from having friends over—but just before Christmas break, his punishment is lifted. Park is excited by the prospect of seeing Eleanor more over the winter break, but it soon becomes clear to him that things at her home are not good. Eleanor is contending with Richie’s increasing instability—and the realization that her mother and her siblings, even in the

face of violence and danger, are never going to take her side against him. Just before the break, Park invites Eleanor over again. He insists that he is not embarrassed of Eleanor and loves her for who she is. Eleanor comes over every day that week, and one night, she and Park share their first electric kiss. Eleanor reaches new levels of happiness, even as the cruel messages on her textbooks continue appearing with startling frequency. Eleanor believes Tina is the one leaving the notes, but when she tells Park about her suspicions, he insists Tina wouldn’t do something like that—and explains that he dated her in junior high. Eleanor becomes irate and more convinced than ever that Park will never understand her. As Christmas break arrives, Eleanor and Park are on the outs, and a three-week separation looms.

Things at Eleanor’s house are tenuous as Christmas arrives. Richie is on edge, and though he gives Eleanor a 50-dollar bill as her present, Eleanor is forced to spend it helping her mother buy groceries for Christmas dinner—a dinner Richie ruins when he becomes violent after discovering there’s no pumpkin pie. Late on Christmas night, Eleanor is surprised when Park taps at her bedroom window—she motions for him to head to the elementary school across the street, and quickly hurries and dresses to meet him there. As soon as Eleanor and Park see one another, they embrace and kiss passionately. Eleanor spends most of the rest of Christmas break at Park’s house, enjoying time with his family. As school starts back up, Eleanor struggles to balance her lies at home with her time at Park’s—and endures constant bullying from Tina and her crew each day at gym class.

One evening, Park’s mother Mindy—a beautician—gives the reluctant Eleanor a makeover. Eleanor endures the beauty treatment to be polite, but secretly worries that both Mindy and Park think she’d be more beautiful as someone else. When Mindy uses Park as a model to show Eleanor some eyeliner, Eleanor compliments Park on his punk look, and Park even feels confident about his altered appearance. The next day, Park puts on eyeliner as he’s getting ready for school—his father berates him for his effeminate new look, but Park, feeling like a rock star or a punk, heads out the door to school as he is. Kids at school actually compliment Park’s look—and Eleanor goes crazy for it. As Park continues to wear the makeup to school throughout the week, his already-tense relationship with his father sours even further.

One afternoon, Eleanor’s siblings Ben and Maisie confront her about having a boyfriend, claiming to have heard the truth about Eleanor and Park from Park’s younger brother, Josh. Eleanor’s siblings beg her to bring them along to Park’s house in the afternoons, but even seeing how desperate they are to escape the house, Eleanor knows she can’t bring them with her. Instead, Eleanor tells Ben and Maisie that they can play with her box of secret stuff, which includes comics, makeup, perfume, and other things she’s gotten from Park’s house.

Eleanor worries that she is running out of time with Park. One Friday afternoon, when Tina and her crew dump Eleanor's clothes in the toilet during gym class, Eleanor is forced to walk through the halls in her gym suit—Park catches sight of her in the skin-tight garment, and is unable to think about anything else for hours. The next day, Park's whole family goes out for the day, but Park stays home and invites Eleanor over. The two of them spend the day kissing, touching, and exploring one another's bodies, alone in the house for the first time ever.

The following week, Park's mother takes him to get his driver's license—in spite of his father's protestations that he isn't ready for the responsibility. Soon after, Mindy suggests Park take Eleanor out on their first real date. Eleanor and Park head downtown, exhilarated by the freedom of being allowed out on their own. When Park drives Eleanor home at the end of the night, they are both on cloud nine. Eleanor arrives home, though, her mother and Richie are fighting loudly in their bedroom, and when she arrives in her own room she finds that her box of special things has been desecrated—and Richie has left a note threatening to put Eleanor through a world of pain for her betrayals. Eleanor recognizes Richie's handwriting as the same handwriting that has been appearing on her textbook covers, and flees the house without thinking twice. As Eleanor runs through the street towards Park's house, Tina—who is hanging out in Park's next-door-neighbor Steve's garage—flags Eleanor down and tells her that Richie has been out looking for her all night. Tina, who, it turns out, also has an abusive stepdad, invites Eleanor in for a drink, but Eleanor insists on getting to Park. Steve goes over to Park's house, knocks at his bedroom window, and wakes him up—Park hurries over to the garage, where Eleanor sobs into his chest and tells him she has to “leave.” Park brings Eleanor over to hide in an RV parked between his parents' and grandparents' yards, and promises that after his parents are asleep, he'll drive her wherever she needs to go. Eleanor, who has been invited to Minnesota for the summer to spend some time with an aunt and uncle, asks Park to take her there. Even though he knows that this means he and Eleanor will be separated, Park agrees.

Later, as Park attempts to sneak out, his father catches him. After Park explains what's going on, Jamie tells Park to take the truck, be safe, and check in at rest stops whenever he can. Park thanks his father for his blessing, retrieves Eleanor from the RV, and together they hit the road. The drive to Minnesota is difficult—Eleanor and Park both know they'll soon be separated, and are miserable at the prospect of living without one another. Even so, Eleanor knows that she can't remain in Omaha—she fears being rejected by her aunt and uncle, but Park insists that if they won't take her in, he and his family will. Eleanor tells Park that after he drops her off at her uncle's, he should leave right away, without looking back. Park tells Eleanor how difficult doing so will be for him, but nonetheless promises he will. After a quick kiss goodbye, Park leaves her. In

the days and weeks that follow, Park writes Eleanor letters every day—letters she never reads or even returns. Eleanor knows that it would be too painful for Park to slowly stop loving her because of time or distance, and has decided to cut off the pain before it can even start. Back in Omaha, Park learns that Eleanor's mother and all of her siblings have moved out of Richie's house. He goes over one afternoon to confront Richie, but when he finds the man stumbling around drunk, leaves without hurting him.

A year later, Park still pines for Eleanor, but has stopped sending her letters. One day, a postcard arrives for him—it is from Eleanor, and it is “just three words long.”



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Eleanor Douglas** – Eleanor is one of the novel's two narrators and protagonists, along with Park. She is fiery, impatient and closed-off because she has been deeply traumatized by years of poverty, abuse, and neglect at the hands of her stepfather, Richie (and to some degree, her mother, Sabrina). Eleanor has a tough exterior which shields a deeply sensitive inner life. Eleanor finds herself isolated and bullied at her new school in Omaha, Nebraska—her unruly red hair and odd wardrobe (which includes men's clothing, loud scarves, and beaded necklaces and bracelets stacked along her neck and wrists) make her the target of her peer's taunts—but Eleanor's inability to fit in at school is the least of her problems. Her impoverished and dangerous home life is a constant source of vulnerability and embarrassment, and Eleanor lives in fear of her peers, teachers, or counselors finding out just how bad things are. When Eleanor meets Park on the school bus, she's cold towards him and privately refers to him in her head as a “stupid Asian kid.” As they slowly warm to one another and find that they share interests in music and literature, however, they embark on a romantic relationship. Eleanor, in spite of all the walls she's built up to keep people out, finds herself letting Park into her world. She feels Park is her safe haven and begins spending most of her afternoons at his house with him and his family. She lies to her own family about hanging out with her “friend” Tina, knowing she'd never be allowed to have a boyfriend under Richie's roof. Eleanor is reluctant to admit her love for Park in plain terms but tells him that she “live[s] for” him—and the statement is surprisingly true. Park is the one good thing in Eleanor's life—and though she's devastated when she has to leave Omaha and seek refuge from Richie in Minnesota, she learned by watching her mother turn into a shell of her former self that she must always put herself first.

**Park Sheridan** – Park is one of the novel's two narrators and protagonists, along with Eleanor. He is a starry-eyed, sensitive romantic whose quiet demeanor hides a passionate, restless

soul. Park is half-Korean and struggles daily with racism from his peers, criticism from his strict father, and the nagging sense that he is out-of-place in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. Park uses comic books and music as a way of retreating from the world and from his peers—he enjoys a residual bit of popularity because he dated the popular Tina in junior high, but is constantly afraid to rock the boat and get bullied. When Park first meets Eleanor by chance on the school bus, he is desperate to avoid the uncool new girl—but as the two of them slowly (and almost wordlessly) begin bonding during their bus rides to and from school each day, he develops feelings for her that explode into a full-on romantic obsession. Park—not unlike Romeo from [Romeo and Juliet](#)—is intense, soulful, and amorous, and his relationship with Eleanor allows him to explore that part of himself without shame for the first time. Constantly dogged throughout his adolescence by feelings of being not masculine enough—feminized by his peers and indeed by society due to his Asian heritage—Park slowly begins to explore new ideas of what it means to be a man with Eleanor, feeling supported and inspired for the first time in his life. Park knows that Eleanor’s home life is difficult, but has trouble getting through to her—it isn’t until the novel’s climax that he understands just how much stands between them. Park helps Eleanor escape her dangerous home situation to stay with relatives in Minnesota, and writes her letters almost every day, hoping to sustain their intense love. Though the novel seems to suggest that Park’s letters will go unreturned, in its very final lines, Park smiles as he receives a postcard from Eleanor bearing “just three words.”

**Sabrina Douglas** – Eleanor’s mother. A beautiful and kind woman whose abusive relationship with her second husband Richie completely dominates her life. Sabrina organizes her days around staying out of Richie’s way and trying to keep him off the war path—nevertheless, she still winds up suffering verbal, physical, and sexual abuse at his hands at least weekly. Sabrina is portrayed as someone who used to be strong but who has been worn down over the course of years of abuse—she frequently chooses keeping Richie happy over her own children’s well-being, and Eleanor, the only one of her siblings who has ever truly stood up to Richie, is often the victim of Sabrina’s indifference or betrayal. When the novel begins, Eleanor has just returned home after a year of living with Sabrina’s friends after Richie kicked her out, and there is an uneasiness between Eleanor and Sabrina as Eleanor begins to realize that her mother will never choose her over Richie again. Sabrina seems to want to turn things around and provide for her children—but Richie’s strict control over her behavior, her finances, and indeed her body prohibit her from breaking free.

**Richie Trout** – Eleanor’s stepfather Richie is the villain of the story. Cruel, abusive, lecherous, and vindictive, Richie seeks to physically and psychologically control Sabrina and all of her

children. Eleanor hates Richie with every fiber of her being, and rarely makes conversation or even eye contact with him. Because of this, Richie is something of a shadowy, nebulous presence throughout the first portion of the novel—but as the story unfolds, Richie’s irredeemably cruel nature and predatory actions increase in frequency and intensity. Eventually, it is revealed that Richie has been the one leaving increasingly lewd messages scrawled on Eleanor’s textbook covers—she’d assumed one of her school bullies had been responsible for the brief, explicit missives. Once Eleanor realizes that Richie has been the one leaving the notes, she allows herself to finally see just how predatory Richie has been towards her all along—and understands that she is in danger of being physically or sexually assaulted by him very soon. Richie is completely one-dimensional in his cruelty, and the roots of his behavior are never explained. He seems to only crave the total annihilation of Sabrina’s agency and individuality—and Eleanor and her siblings’ as well.

**Jamie Sheridan** – Park’s father Jamie, a military man, is a mess of contradictions. Straight-laced and strict, Jamie expects a lot of his sons—but seems to genuinely want to help them become good people and succeed. Jamie is deeply in love with his wife Mindy, and Park and Josh are regularly grossed out by their parents’ over-the-top displays of affection. Park and Jamie often clash over Park’s desire to get his driver’s license—a milestone Jamie is determined to keep him from reaching until he learns to drive a manual transmission. Park believes his father is trying to hold him back, unable to see the ways in which Jamie is trying to better prepare him for the world. Jamie is not a perfect parent—he’s sometimes verbally and even physically abusive—but in the end, he proves himself to be on Park’s team when he supports his son in driving Eleanor out of the state and away from the home of her abusive stepfather, Richie, whom Jamie has known since his own youth.

**Mindy Sheridan** – Park’s mother. A Korean woman whose given name is Min-Dae, Mindy is a loving and doting mother who runs a hair salon out of her home. Park is often embarrassed of Mindy because of her thick accent and overly-warm demeanor, but as the novel progresses, he begins to have more empathy for her. He knows she works hard to ingratiate herself into a racist, hostile pocket of rural America, and when he sees how kind and welcoming she is towards Eleanor, he is even more grateful for his mother’s kindness and patience.

**Tina** – A popular, mean girl at school. Tina makes it her personal mission throughout the school year to berate and humiliate Eleanor at every turn, sticking menstrual pads to her locker and dumping her clothes in the locker room toilets. Park’s mother, Mindy, cuts Tina’s hair regularly. It’s suggested that Tina—who dated Park briefly in junior high—still harbors feelings for Park and lashes out at Eleanor out of jealousy and resentment. Tina is redeemed at the end of the novel, however, when she offers the frightened Eleanor a safe haven from Richie’s wrath.

**DeNice** – A black girl in Eleanor’s gym class, DeNice is wise in spite of her very youthful appearance and kind to Eleanor when no one else is, helping her clean up her locker in the wake of Tina’s crew’s pranks. DeNice is funny and practical, and helps Eleanor learn to take social strife, gossip, and drama with a grain of salt. DeNice and her friend Beebi soon become Eleanor’s closest friends in school.

**Eleanor’s father** – Eleanor’s father is never named in the novel—he is not a significant presence in her life, though he also lives in Omaha. Eleanor sees her father as a selfish man with a gambling problem who has never put her or her siblings first. He has even moved on to a new fiancée—and has a new child, Matt, with her—which makes Eleanor feel even more rejected. He does invite Eleanor to come babysit one evening, but isn’t able to pay what he promised her at the end of the night, and doesn’t seem to view her as much more than a helping hand.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Josh Sheridan** – Park’s younger brother. Park is intensely jealous of Josh, who is tall for his age—taller, even, than Park himself—and who passes for white, while Park does not. Josh is funny and rambunctious, but Park sees Josh as more of a pain than an ally.

**Steve** – A popular boy at school. Steve, who dates Tina, is huge and monstrously tall. Steve is a bully, and makes fun of less popular kids to cement his own popularity. Park gets into a fight with Steve when Steve mercilessly teases Eleanor—and wins.

**Ben Douglas** – Eleanor’s 11-year-old younger brother. Ben is solemn and serious, and Eleanor worries that he is lost, confused, and joyless for a boy his age.

**Maisie Douglas** – Eleanor’s eight-year-old younger sister who has an occasionally sassy personality.

**Mouse Douglas** – Eleanor’s five-year-old younger brother who reminds Eleanor of “a big, sloppy puppy.” Mouse is traumatized by his mother and stepfather’s abusive relationship and wets the bed almost every night.

**“Little” Richie Trout** – Eleanor’s youngest brother, a two-year-old toddler. The only one of Eleanor’s siblings with whom she does not share a father.

**Matt** – Eleanor’s half-brother; her father and Donna’s son.

**Donna** – Eleanor’s father’s fiancée and Matt’s mother.

**Cal** – One of Park’s friends at school. A slightly sensitive boy more concerned with social climbing and securing a girlfriend than with maintaining the friendships he already has.

**Kim** – A pretty, popular girl at school.

**Beebi** – DeNice’s best friend. A very heavyset black girl who is quiet but kind, with a giggly demeanor in spite of her shyness. Beebi also becomes a close friend of Eleanor’s as the school year unfolds.

**Mr. Stessman** – Eleanor and Park’s English teacher. An eccentric, passionate man who urges his students to work hard and think critically not just about what they’re studying, but about who they want to be in life.

**Mrs. Dunne** – The guidance counselor at Eleanor and Park’s high school. A kind woman who takes her students’ issues very seriously.

**Dani** – A friend Eleanor makes at her new school in Minnesota.

**Cat** – Park’s prom date.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### ADOLESCENCE AND SHAME

Though Eleanor Douglas and Park Sheridan, the two teen protagonists of Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor and Park*, couldn’t seem more different on the outside, they’re connected deeply on the inside—both Eleanor and Park share a profound sense of loneliness and social isolation. As the two misfits navigate their emotionally and socially fraught sophomore year, they find refuge in one another, and are able to mitigate some of the solitude they feel. Ultimately, though, Rowell suggests that while friendship and love may help minimize some of the emotional burdens of loneliness and social isolation, there is no cure-all for the inherent shame that comes along with the process of growing up.

*Eleanor and Park* doesn’t shy away from wrestling with the very real feelings of shame and loneliness that define much of adolescence. Eleanor and Park struggle separately—and together—with their experiences of isolation and self-loathing, and though their time together helps them to understand themselves and one another better, the novel ultimately shows that neither is able to fully escape coming of age unscathed. Eleanor and Park are both loners at the start of the novel. Though Park enjoys some residual popularity due to having dated the popular Tina several years ago in junior high, even his so-called “friends” bully him for his Korean heritage, invoking racial slurs and insensitive caricatures of Asian individuals to get a rise out of him. Park puts up with the abuse, and even believes that his friends are right—he resents that he looks different from the other mostly-white students at his school while his brother Josh is white-passing, and wishes he could bury the parts of himself that are different.

Eleanor, on the other hand, is, as the new girl, “fresh meat” so to

speaking—she is an outsider by virtue of being new to school, and her loud, strange appearance and social awkwardness don't help at all. Eleanor feels insecure about not fitting in at school, but she wears her men's Goodwill **clothes** (the only thing her mother can afford to buy her) like armor, focuses on reading and schoolwork, and even manages to make friends with two girls from her gym class, DeNice and Beebi. Eleanor's shame and self-loathing stem from her inability to shield herself or her siblings—or, for that matter, her mother—from the poverty and abuse they suffer at the hands of Eleanor's stepfather, Richie. Like Park, she feels there is something wrong with the core of who she is—and like Park, she feels helpless to change things.

As Eleanor and Park, forced by chance to sit together on the bus one day, slowly begin to connect over comic books and **music**—and then begin to embark on a romantic relationship—they are shocked by the fact that the other person not only sees them for who they are, but likes them. In being seen and accepted by one another, both Eleanor and Park feel a newfound sense of belonging—they stand up for one another at school, spend time discussing their shared and separate interests alike, and slowly reveal the depths of their private shame to one another. In this way, they help one another feel less lonely, and school and home life become, for a time, easier to navigate as they feel the strength of having a partner at their sides.

As the novel progresses, however, social, familial, societal, and economic pressures continue to press up against Eleanor and Park's respective shame, loneliness, and self-loathing. Eleanor continues to be bullied by girls at school who put her clothes and shoes in the toilet and stick menstrual pads on her locker in gym class, while Park, enamored with punk rock, experiments with wearing eyeliner and makeup to school, a decision that both invigorates him and causes him shame and anxiety. Eleanor and Park are there for one another when their peers—or their parents—make fun of them or demean them, but they slowly begin to realize that they cannot shield one another completely from the ups and downs of the rocky road to adulthood. Things are further complicated when Eleanor's home situation grows more and more dire, and she feels the need to flee her abusive stepfather Richie. Both Eleanor and Park receive a sharp, shocking reality check as they see, once and for all, that shame, pain, and loneliness are part not just of adolescence but of life itself.

Adolescence is full of growing pains—intense emotions, social challenges, and feelings of shame and self-loathing are part of any teenage experience. Through Eleanor and Park, Rowell attempts to show her young readers that their feelings are normal—and, occasionally, will be just as inescapable as they feel. Eleanor and Park are each outsiders and loners in their own way, and wrestle both separately and together with their feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. In the end, however, they're each on their own—though together they've grown

stronger, more capable, and better-prepared for the struggles still to come.



## LOVE AND INTIMACY

*Eleanor and Park*—like **Romeo and Juliet**, the play the novel's titular characters are studying in their sophomore English class—is a story about first love in all its overwhelming, all-consuming glory. As the spiny, self-contained Eleanor Douglas and the starry-eyed Park Sheridan embark on their first real foray into romance, they learn a lot about how to best love and care for one another—and for themselves. Through their journey, Rowell argues that true love can enable people to connect not just with others, but also to reach a greater level of understanding and intimacy of and with themselves.

*Eleanor and Park* is a love story, and like a traditional romance, it centers around the burgeoning connection between its two protagonists. The novel's deeper layers, however, show how Eleanor and Park, through their explorations of love and intimacy, actually learn not just how to care for and bond with another person, but also how to discover and embrace more intimate truths about themselves. Eleanor and Park are thrust together by chance when they are forced, one fateful day, to sit together on the school bus—even though Park worries that sitting with the redheaded, crazily-dressed new girl is social suicide. As the days go by, however, they find pleasure in one another's company, and continue sitting together. They connect at first over comic books, which are Park's obsession, and **music**, which is Eleanor's. As they share their interests, they begin bonding, and their intellectual connection soon leads to an emotional one.

Soon, Eleanor and Park are holding hands surreptitiously, admitting to “missing” one another throughout the school day, and scheduling late-night phone dates. Though Eleanor and Park couldn't be more different—the sharp-tongued, cynical Eleanor stands in direct contrast to the quiet, idealistic Park—they're soon confessing their love for one another. Eleanor is reluctant to use the word “love,” but tells Park that she “think[s] she live[s] for [him.]” Their feelings are intense and overwhelming—and though the cynical Eleanor worries the two of them are a parody of young love just like the titular characters of *Romeo and Juliet*, she can't help her emotions. Neither Eleanor nor Park has been in love before, and as they tumble into emotional, verbal, and physical intimacy with one another, they push back against their shame and insecurities to make room for one another. The connection they share is profound, and yet as they grow closer to one another, they find themselves privately considering how their relationship has allowed them each to understand and accept themselves.

Eleanor, who has always hated her big-boned body, finds herself feeling less ashamed of her curves, and even

experiencing a newfound appreciation for who she is in Park's eyes. "Everywhere [Park] touche[s] her [feels] safe," she thinks to herself one evening after they've parted ways. Park, too, is grateful that Eleanor finds him attractive—it's not that Park has felt ugly so much as he's felt feminized and "othered" by his classmates' flagrant airing of cruel stereotypes about Asian men. Through Eleanor, Park is able to see himself in a new light, and attain a newfound confidence.

The self-love Eleanor and Park find themselves experiencing as they fall more deeply in love with one another isn't just physical, but emotional as well. Eleanor, who has always kept her feelings at arm's length as a kind of defense mechanism—a byproduct of growing up in an abusive household with four younger siblings, a place where there's never been any room for her emotions—begins experiencing life more deeply. She allows herself to surrender to hope and happiness as she spends more time with Park, and indeed allows herself to be loved unconditionally for the first time in her life. Even her own mother sent Eleanor away when she clashed with Richie—but with Park, Eleanor never has to be anyone but herself, and she is allowed to experience the part of herself that feels deeply and fearlessly. Park, too, allows himself to let loose emotionally—he has been shrinking himself in order to fit in with his cruel schoolmates, but with Eleanor by his side, he at last stands up to them (even though it means getting into a fistfight with his popular friend Steve.) Park also develops enough self-confidence to explore a long held-fantasy: wearing eyeliner to school. Even when his father mocks and berates him, Park feels less cowed by the prospect of being both physically and emotionally vulnerable, thanks to the support he feels radiating from Eleanor.

At the start of the novel, Eleanor and Park are loners hungry for acceptance and love. The romance they share validates those feelings of wanting to be seen, understood, and embraced for who they are—but the wild, intense love they feel for one another allows them, in the end, to connect more deeply with who they are inside, and actually begin to embrace themselves. Unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, whose whirlwind romance estranged them from their families, themselves, and eventually one another, Eleanor and Park find that the pure, healthy love they share with each other opens up new insights about who they are, what they want, and what they need.



### POVERTY AND CLASS

Eleanor and Park live in the same Omaha neighborhood, but in terms of socioeconomic class, they are a world apart. Eleanor, her mother, and her siblings live in extreme poverty, made worse by her stepfather Richie's physical, emotional, and financial abuse. Park and his family enjoy a solidly middle-class lifestyle which, when seen through Eleanor's yearning eyes, seems sparkling and luxurious. As Eleanor and Park navigate their burgeoning

romantic relationship, they also each see, for the first time, how the other half lives. Through the two of them, Rowell highlights the inequalities simmering just beneath the surface of suburban life, ultimately suggesting that the insidious, unjust force of extreme poverty has the power to tear lives—and relationships—apart.

Eleanor and Park, like *Romeo and Juliet*, are star-crossed lovers kept from spending as much time as they'd like together by a variety of factors. Aside from Eleanor's controlling, abusive stepfather Richie, one of the major obstacles in Eleanor and Park's relationship is the extreme, abject poverty in which Eleanor and her family live. Ashamed of her home, wary of accepting the kindness and generosity of others, and armed with an arsenal of defense mechanisms, Eleanor nevertheless slowly pushes these things aside so that she can try to be with Park—but Rowell shows how poverty, like abuse, creeps into all facets of life in insidious and destructive ways.

Rowell is unsparing in her descriptions of the poverty in which Eleanor and her family live. The entire family uses one bathroom that doesn't have a door on it, and Eleanor and her four siblings all sleep tangled in a mass on the floor in one bedroom of their shabby house. There is rarely any good food to eat, and most of the family's meals subsist of beans. Eleanor doesn't even have a toothbrush, and though she considers asking her guidance counselor for one, the shame she feels is ultimately too great to reveal the truth about her home life. Though poverty has no doubt been a disruptive force in Eleanor's life for a long while, Eleanor is able to take it all in stride most of the time—but when she meets Park and begins to see how he and his family live, everything changes. The first time Eleanor visits Park's home, she's nervous and uncomfortable—she feels out of place and overwhelmed, and is afraid that Park is embarrassed of her for a whole host of reasons, one of them being how poor she is (and the way her wardrobe reflects her family's lack of means.) After this brief hiccup, Park insists that Eleanor is welcome at his house any time, no matter what—and she begins steadily spending more time there, enjoying the hours she's able to steal away from the nightmare that is her home. She begins staying later and later at the Sheridans', enjoying dinner with them most nights before begrudgingly returning home to her real life.

When the older two of Eleanor's younger siblings, Ben and Maisie, discover the truth of where she's been spending her evenings (at Park's and not, as she's told her family, at her "friend" Tina's), they practically beg Eleanor to take them with her—"It's not fair," Maisie says, "that you get to leave all the time." Eleanor senses how "desperate" her siblings are for an escape, but feels herself "go cold and mean" as she refuses to share her time at Park's with them. Eleanor sees her evenings at the Sheridans' as a refuge—she doesn't want her brother and sister, reminders of her circumstances, to disrupt the small slice of happiness and security she's been able to carve out for

herself. Shortly after Ben and Maisie’s discovery of Eleanor’s relationship with Park and the afternoons she spends at his family’s house, Eleanor worries that she is “running out of time with [Park.]” She has been able to escape the truth of what her life is really like for a while, but the disruptive forces of poverty and class, and the insular, perverted way Richie runs her family’s household, are about to rear up again. Eleanor has tried to make a life for herself that is separate from the circumstances she’s been conscripted to, but she knows, deep down, that she can’t outrun them forever.

It must be said that the poverty Eleanor and her family live in is a facet of Richie’s abuse—by keeping tabs on Sabrina’s money, he is able to keep Eleanor and her siblings in poverty and thus under his control. With no funds or freedom of their own—and with the shame, self-loathing, and instability poverty often creates at work—Richie can keep total control over his family and continue belittling and abusing them. Eleanor’s particular experience of poverty, then, is even more insidious and destructive because of its roots in Richie’s desire to manipulate and degrade his wife and her children. Poverty not only reminds Eleanor that she’s separated from Park and his family by a thin but inflexible socioeconomic barrier; it also reminds her, at every turn, that she is Richie’s captive.

Poverty is the tell-tale heart beating in the background of *Eleanor and Park*—Eleanor is ruled by her family’s lack of funds, and her family’s impoverishment is the impetus behind an overwhelming percentage of the feelings she has and the decisions she makes. In the end, Eleanor cannot deal with the way poverty—and the abuse that is tangled up in it—rules her life any longer, and she makes a radical escape. In *Eleanor and Park*, Rowell casts poverty as the great disruptor—it turns familial relationships into adversarial ones, it engenders shame and self-loathing, and it creates an invisible and impenetrable boundary around those it entraps.



## FAMILY AND ABUSE

The differences between Eleanor and Park’s respective families aren’t just socioeconomic—while Park comes from a stable home, Eleanor’s family life is in shambles, and she, her mother Sabrina, and her siblings are subjected daily to fear, manipulation, and abuse at the hands of her stepfather Richie. As Eleanor and her family descend deeper into a spiral of abuse, she seeks refuge increasingly often at Park’s house, which becomes a safe haven for her—but is often blind to the smaller but still painful abuses Park himself suffers at the hands of his controlling, straight-laced father. Through both Eleanor and Park’s experiences with family life that range from the uncomfortable to the downright dangerous, Rowell suggests that for many individuals—even those who seem safe and privileged—family and some measure of mistreatment often go hand-in-hand.

Rainbow Rowell doesn’t shy away from depicting the more difficult and painful aspects of family life. From Eleanor’s poverty-stricken, fear-ridden home environment to Park’s idyllic but rigid family structure, Rowell shows how conflict and abuse, in varying shades and differing levels of intensity, are often at the core of families of all shapes, sizes, and configurations. Eleanor’s household is a hotbed of poverty, abuse, and misery. Her cruel, drunken, lecherous stepfather Richie hits Eleanor’s mother Sabrina, refuses to put a door on the bathroom so that he can monitor his stepchildren’s activities in there, fires “warning shots” at neighbors when they make too much noise too late, and, it’s eventually revealed, writes lewd, explicit messages on Eleanor’s paper textbook covers. The abuse Eleanor suffers is daily, and it is personal—at the start of the novel, she’s just moved home after having been kicked out of the house for a year for standing up to Richie. Even before her mother married Richie, Eleanor has never known a happy family situation: her father, who is a character in the novel but is never even referred to by a name, is a distant figure who is described as “selfish” despite his charisma. Already remarried with another child, Eleanor’s father doesn’t try to take her under his wing—when she was kicked out of the house, she went to live with family friends, never having received an invitation to come stay with him.

Eleanor’s family life is downright miserable, and occasionally even dangerous. Towards the end of the novel, when Eleanor recognizes Richie’s handwriting and realizes he’s been leaving the crude notes on her textbooks all along, she also has an epiphany in which she at last allows herself to realize all the predatory behavior Richie has been exhibiting toward her: clocking her whereabouts, commenting on her appearance, and indeed keeping a door off of the bathroom. Eleanor fears that if she stays any longer, it’s only a matter of time before Richie assaults her physically—and decides to run away to beg for help from distant relatives rather than risk being further victimized.

The abuse Park suffers is mild compared to the nightmare that is Eleanor’s home life—but the pressure his controlling, militaristic father Jamie exerts on him, especially when Park begins exploring other aspects of his identity and playing with gender roles by wearing makeup to school, nonetheless leave Park feeling vulnerable and insecure. Rowell includes the subplot about Park’s tense relationship with his father to show that even though Eleanor sees the Sheridan home as a safe haven compared to her own house, no family is perfect—and many households, regardless of how they seem on the outside, harbor borderline-abusive situations, even if the abuse is emotional rather than physical, or otherwise invisible.

Park and his father eventually reconcile, even if they don’t see eye-to-eye by the end of the novel. When Park helps Eleanor flee Nebraska to seek refuge with relatives in Minnesota, his father catches him sneaking out of the house. Though Park is afraid of incurring his father’s wrath, which is mostly verbal but

occasionally physical, his father hands him the keys to his truck and allows Park to drive Eleanor to safety, in spite of the fact that the two of them have been arguing about Park's permission (or lack thereof) to drive the entirety of the novel. Park, who was enraged that his father had been so strictly asserting he learn how to drive manual transmission, is pleasantly surprised by his own ability to maneuver the truck from gear to gear and drive Eleanor to safety. For Park and his father, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel—but for Eleanor, there is no chance of improving her abusive home life, and she knows she must escape or drown. Rowell is unafraid to show her young readers that familial conflict and abuse sometimes has no solution—individuals like Park and his father might be able to find forgiveness and common ground, but when there's a monster like Richie in the house, she suggests, to fight to keep "family" together is futile and even dangerous.

Though there's no doubt that Eleanor suffers abuse much more intensely and markedly than Park—and is much more vulnerable to and endangered by those abuses—Rainbow Rowell doesn't shy away from exploring the various forms and shades that familial conflict and abuse can take on. By demonstrating the disparaging words and physical threats that both Eleanor and Park are forced to endure at home, Rowell shows how disruptive, destabilizing, and demeaning familial abuse is in any form—and yet suggests that it is, all too often, a part of family life.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## MUSIC

When Eleanor and Park first start interacting on the bus to school, they bond over comic books as Eleanor reads [Watchmen](#), [Batman](#), and others silently over Park's shoulder when they're forced, by chance, to sit together. Slowly and wordlessly, Park begins allowing Eleanor to read with him, and then brings her comic books of her own to read. When Eleanor expresses frustration with the comics, though, the two begin talking about music—and find that they never run out of feelings to discuss and bond over when it comes to the punk, new-wave, and shoegaze anthems of the mid-80s they so love. Park begins making mix tapes for Eleanor and bringing her batteries so that she won't run out of juice while she listens at home each night to songs he's chosen for her. Eleanor's home life is a mess, and listening to the music Park curates for her is her only chance at escaping her needy siblings, her fawning, battered mother Sabrina, and her cruel stepfather Richie. Through music, she can feel farther from herself—but closer to

Park. For Park, however, music is less an escape and more a way of being even more present in the world and in his own skin. As Park wrestles with his feelings of inadequacy and otherness, music allows him a way to discover his identity by emulating the style of the members of bands like The Smiths and The Cure. Music, then, is a complex and mutable symbol throughout the novel, but ultimately emerges as a symbol of connection—connection between people, but also connection with one's deeper, hidden self.



## ELEANOR'S CLOTHES

Eleanor never looks "nice," thinks her boyfriend Park—she looks like "art." Eleanor, a self-admittedly big-boned teen girl with flaming red curls that she can never seem to tame, dresses in bizarre and ill-fitting clothes, often culled from the men's section of Goodwill. She ties scarves and men's neckties in her hair and on her wrists, and wears brightly-printed Vans sneakers that clash with her outfits' muted tones. Eleanor's clothes are always too big and too baggy—eventually, it becomes clear that Eleanor is trying to hide herself inside them from the prying eyes of her leering stepfather, Richie, and from the girls at school, including Tina and her crew, who mock Eleanor's body. As the novel progresses, her clothes emerge as a symbol of Eleanor's competing desires to both shrink herself and to announce herself as a presence that will not go away no matter how much the world tries to bring her down. Unwanted and mistreated at home and bullied at school, Eleanor is in a constant tug-of-war with herself as to whether she should make herself smaller to avoid scrutiny and negative attention, or puff herself up to declare that she won't be silenced or made to feel invisible. When Eleanor's clothes are stolen by Tina and the other girls and stuffed in a locker-room toilet, Eleanor is humiliated by having to walk through the halls of school in her gym unitard—but pleasantly surprised when she later realizes that Park, who glimpsed her in her gym suit, was excited by the body she's been working so hard to hide in plain sight. Eleanor doesn't change her style to please Park, or anyone else, but slowly begins to feel more at home in her own skin, even in spite of the onslaught of bullying she faces at school and at home. Eleanor's odd, clownish clothes are as much a refuge as they are a prison, a dichotomy that further exemplifies the confusion and insecurity she faces each day even as she staunchly works to remain true to who she is.



## ROMEO AND JULIET

In Mr. Stessman's English class, Eleanor, Park, and their other classmates study [Romeo and Juliet](#)—one of Shakespeare's most famous plays. As Eleanor and Park's obsessive, all-consuming love for one another takes root, their readings of the play come to symbolize their perspectives on love, longing, and faith in their newfound relationship. In class,

the brash and impatient Eleanor is skeptical of the play, and cynically reads it as “Shakespeare making fun of love”—the shy, romantic Park, however, is taken by the drama, and asserts that people always “want to remember what it’s like to be young [...] and in love.” As Eleanor and Park explore the depths of their devotion to one another, Park’s grand declarations of eternal love are often met by Eleanor’s resistance or uncertainty—she even occasionally mocks Park for acting like “Romeo, sweet Romeo.” Eleanor eventually drops many of her defenses, though, and comes to see that Park really does love her and want to be with her—and her snarky comments about the play’s sappy nature stop. As the novel continues to unfold, *Romeo and Juliet* recurs as a symbol of the ultimate love story—one in which the young lovers are kept apart by unfair social circumstances, just like Eleanor and Park often are—and comes to symbolize the fact that though young love is often hasty and ill-fated, its power can endure throughout the years.

like a “weird” “mess” and unafraid of what anyone else thinks of her—Park’s world is turned upside down. This quote introduces one of the major themes of the novel, adolescence and shame, and shows how the book’s two protagonists, Eleanor and Park, attempt to wrangle the shame that is an intrinsic part of their adolescence in very different ways. All Park wants is to blend in—but the eccentric, wild Eleanor seeks to weaponize the ways in which she can’t help but stand out.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ But Park didn’t have any luck—or status—to spare on that dumb redhead. He had just enough to keep himself out of trouble. And he knew it was crappy, but he was kind of grateful that people like that girl existed. Because people like Steve and Mikey and Tina existed, too, and they needed to be fed. If it wasn’t that redhead, it was going to be somebody else. And if it wasn’t somebody else, it was going to be Park.

**Related Characters:** Park Sheridan (speaker), Tina, Steve, Eleanor Douglas

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 14

### Explanation and Analysis

When Park allows Eleanor to sit with him on the school bus, he is worried that he’s committing social suicide—and forfeiting the tiny bit of social “status” he has by rescuing her from bullies like Steve and Tina. Because of the shame he feels about who he is, Park’s top priority in school is to stay hidden, shrinking out of sight just to get through the days. This is decidedly not Eleanor’s tactic; even though Park doesn’t know her very well yet, he can see just from looking at her that she refuses to even try to blend in. Park knows that the things he thinks about privately—how to spend his small reserve of social capital, how to make someone else a target so that he himself is spared—are despicable and cruel, but he’s never felt strong enough to question the status quo. With the arrival of Eleanor, however—and the self-evaluation and self-love she is about to inspire in Park—he finds himself thinking critically about the social systems and personal choices that have only caused his shame to grow and fester throughout his high school career, and how he might take steps to change not just his feelings but his actions.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the St. Martins edition of *Eleanor and Park* published in 2013.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ Not just new—but big and awkward. With crazy hair, bright red on top of curly. And she was dressed like . . . like she *wanted* people to look at her. Or maybe like she didn’t get what a mess she was. She had on a plaid shirt, a man’s shirt, with half a dozen weird necklaces hanging around her neck and scarves wrapped around her wrists. She reminded Park of a scarecrow or one of the trouble dolls his mom kept on her dresser. Like something that wouldn’t survive in the wild.

**Related Characters:** Park Sheridan (speaker), Eleanor Douglas

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 8

### Explanation and Analysis

The first time Park sees Eleanor on the school bus, she fills him with a nervous feeling. Park Sheridan spends his whole life at school trying to remain invisible and avoid the racist taunts of his boorish classmates. He cares deeply what everyone else thinks of him, and carries around a great deal of shame about his Asian heritage and the ways in which his cultural identity makes his classmates see him as effeminate and othered. When Eleanor comes along, though—dressed

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ "What are you supposed to do when it gets too cold to play outside?" [Eleanor] asked Ben. [...]

"Last year," he said, "Dad made us go to bed at seven thirty."

"God. You, too? Why do you guys call him that?" She tried not to sound angry.

Ben shrugged. "I guess because he's married to Mom."

"Yeah, but—" Eleanor ran her hands up and down the swing chains, then smelled them. "—we never used to call him that. Do you feel like he's your dad?"

"I don't know," Ben said flatly. "What's that supposed to feel like?"

**Related Characters:** Ben Douglas, Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Richie Trout, Maisie Douglas

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 35

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Eleanor plays at the park with her younger siblings one chilly fall day, she asks them about what their lives have been like since she hasn't been around. Ben, a boy of 11, tells Eleanor about their family's new routines—and as he does, refers to the odious Richie as "Dad." Eleanor, who has already heard her younger sister Maisie refer to Richie as "Dad," is startled and angered by how her siblings' allegiances have shifted in her absence. When Eleanor asks Ben if he "feel[s]" like Richie is his dad, Ben admits that he doesn't know what it's "supposed to feel like" to have a dad. This heartbreaking quotation shows just how completely a life of poverty, abuse, and neglect has warped Eleanor's siblings—and to some degree, Eleanor herself. Ben and Maisie—and ostensibly the younger kids, though they don't speak critically about their thoughts and feelings throughout the novel—have never known anything but abuse, neglect, and the feeling of being unloved or loved insufficiently. Abandoned by their own father, the two of them don't know what it feels like to have a positive male influence. Since Richie is all they have, they are desperate to allow him to assume the mantle of "Dad," even when he hasn't earned it.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ "So," [Park] said, before he knew what to say next. "You like the Smiths?" He was careful not to blow his morning breath on [Eleanor.]

She looked up, surprised. Maybe confused. He pointed at her book, where she'd written *How Soon Is Now?* in tall green letters.

"I don't know," she said. "I've never heard them."

"So you just want people to *think* you like the Smiths?" He couldn't help but sound disdainful.

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas, Park Sheridan (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 43

**Explanation and Analysis**

At this point in the novel, Eleanor and Park have been sitting together on the bus for several weeks—but they've barely exchanged a word. Their entire friendship has been a silent one in which they read and share comics and music. In this passage, as Park tries to begin a conversation with Eleanor, he stumbles over what to say to her and how to say it. He tries to talk to her about something he thinks they'll have in common—liking the band the Smiths—but doesn't know that at Eleanor's house, where there's no telephone, no batteries, and no money to spare, she doesn't have a way of listening to the kind of music she wants to. Eleanor, however, isn't ashamed to admit that she hasn't actually listened to the Smiths, and will later on even tell Park that she has no recourse for doing so—an admission that will bond them even closer together. For now, Eleanor and Park are shakily trying to navigate their tenuous friendship, dealing with all the potential embarrassment of signaling who they are to one another, of mitigating the vast differences they don't know lie between them, and of revealing themselves slowly to one another as they embark on a journey towards intimacy.

☝ "Romeo and Juliet are just two rich kids who've always gotten every little thing they want. And now, they *think* they want each other."

"They're in love..." Mr. Stessman said, clutching his heart.

"They don't even know each other," she said. [...]"It's Shakespeare making fun of love."

**Related Characters:** Mr. Stessman, Eleanor Douglas (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 44

### Explanation and Analysis

In English class—a class Eleanor and Park share—Mr. Stessman has assigned the classic play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare’s most famous love story. In a classroom discussion of the play, Park—who has begun to develop a keen interest in Eleanor, and even a burgeoning set of feelings for her—is shocked to watch as Eleanor denigrates and dismisses the play as “Shakespeare making fun of love.” This passage contains a lot of information about Eleanor and, by proxy, Park, since the scene is filtered through his narration. As Park watches Eleanor slam “rich kids who’ve always gotten every little thing they want,” he gets even more of a glimpse into her contempt for affluence (a defense mechanism, perhaps, against her own shame over her family’s poverty). He also sees that Eleanor believes people can’t be in love without really knowing each other—a sentiment which meshes with the novel’s overarching theme of love and intimacy. Rowell argues throughout the novel that true love is about the journey not just towards knowing one’s partner, but also towards knowing oneself—here, Eleanor obliquely echoes these feelings, suggesting that the idea of passion without intimacy is ludicrous and laughable.

### Chapter 13 Quotes

☹️ Best of all, she had Park’s songs in her head—and in her chest, somehow. There was something about the music on that tape. It felt different. Like, it set her lungs and her stomach on edge. There was something exciting about it, and something nervous. It made Eleanor feel like everything, like the *world*, wasn’t what she’d thought it was.

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Park Sheridan

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 57-58

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eleanor sets off for the bus with a feeling of lightness about her after a long night of staying awake listening to the mixtapes that Park has made for her. Music is one of the novel’s central symbols—an externalization of the connections people make with one another, and the sense of connection people search for with themselves as well. As Eleanor bonds with Park over their shared love of alternative and New Wave music, she’s also growing closer to herself and learning more about what she likes, feels, and wants. In this passage, a weight lifts off of her, and her body and spirit are filled with hope and happiness for the first time in a long time as Park’s music allows her to connect not just with him, but with who she is inside, too.

### Chapter 14 Quotes

☹️ Until this moment, she’d kept Park in a place in her head that she thought Richie couldn’t get to. Completely separate from this house and everything that happened here. (It was a pretty awesome place. Like the only part of her head fit for praying.) But now Richie was in there, just pissing all over everything. Making everything she felt feel as rank and rotten as him.

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Richie Trout, Park Sheridan

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 67

### Explanation and Analysis

After Park shows up to Eleanor’s house one evening to share a new comic book with her, he quickly realizes that he’s made a mistake when Richie answers the door. Throughout their friendship so far, Eleanor has tried to keep the truth about her impoverished, abusive home life from Park—but now, he has seen a glimpse of what her life is really like, and the compartmentalization she’s been trying so hard to keep up has been shattered. Richie is a noxious, dangerous force in Eleanor’s life—he has corrupted her relationship with her mother, with her siblings, and indeed with herself, as her confidence and sense of safety have been dealt blows by Richie’s abuses. Park was the one thing in Eleanor’s life that Richie didn’t know about and couldn’t control—and now, Eleanor feels that even if she and Park avoid Richie forever, there will be a part of her relationship with Park that cannot escape his “rank and rotten” hold. As the intimacy between Eleanor and Park has deepened,

Eleanor has been filled with joy and hope, but now she is learning that intimacy with another person also means letting them into the shameful, darker parts of one's life.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ "You don't care what anyone thinks about you," [Park] said. "That's crazy," [Eleanor] said. "I care what *everyone* thinks about me."

"I can't tell," he said. "You just seem like yourself, no matter what's happening around you. My grandmother would say you're comfortable in your own skin."

[...]

"I'm *stuck* in my own skin," she said.

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas, Park Sheridan (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

Eleanor is an iconoclast—a social pariah who dresses in strange, flamboyant outfits, who takes up more physical space than her peers, who doesn't even try to fit in or make friends. Her wild clothes symbolize her commitment to preserving the core of who she is even in the face of pressure to cave to the status quo. And though Park was at first off-put by her zany outfits, he finds himself more intrigued and impressed by them as their relationship deepens.

In this quotation, Park admires how carefree and "comfortable" she seems—even as Eleanor refutes the idea that she's safe in her own skin and suggests that the truth of who she is as a person is more often a personal burden she must bear than a flag she chooses to fly proudly. Eleanor and Park have bonded over their shared interests—but now, as their relationship deepens, they are sharing intimacy about the darker parts of themselves and are allowing one another to see the private shames they carry each day. Eleanor doesn't know how to get un-stuck from her miserable home life or her depressing place in the social stratosphere—and she's able to admit in this passage for the first time that her confidence is, more often than not, a put-on designed to deflect how she really feels inside.

☝ "Stop asking that," she said angrily. There was no stopping the tears now. "You always ask that. *Why*. Like there's an answer for everything. Not everybody has your life, you know, or your family. In your life, things happen for reasons. People make sense. But that's *not my life*."

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Park Sheridan

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 108

### Explanation and Analysis

As Eleanor and Park have their first phone "date," their conversation rangers from the superficial—music, comics, and school woes—to the deeply intimate. Eleanor, a prickly and private person, has kept a lot about who she is from Park. Now, though, as he seeks to find out more about who she is and what her home life is like, Eleanor finds herself struggling to get Park to see through the veil of his privileged upbringing.

When Park begins asking questions about Richie and why he treats Eleanor so badly, Eleanor grows frustrated and lashes out. In this passage, she tells Park that there's not always "an answer for everything," and that sometimes "People [don't] make sense." Eleanor knows that Park has never had to deal with a lot of the problems that are just part of the background of her life—and his inability to understand her or her circumstances exacerbates her sense of shame and loneliness. At the same time, in simply venting these frustrations to Park, Eleanor is allowing him to get closer to her and understand more about where she's coming from. The very fact that her life doesn't make sense—and isn't very fair—allows Park to confront his preconceived notions about class, poverty, and abuse, and to see that to fully love Eleanor, he'll have to journey with her into the darker recesses of her heart and her experiences.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ She would never belong in Park's living room. She never felt like she belonged anywhere, except for when she was lying on her bed, pretending to be somewhere else.

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Park Sheridan

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 127

### Explanation and Analysis

After a disastrous evening at Park's house, Eleanor returns home early. She had hoped that Park's house would be a kind of refuge for her, but after her own anxiety about meeting Park's family clashed with his nervousness about introducing her to his parents, it has become clear that both of them still have a lot of work to do in terms of facing their shame, fear, and desire to control one another's feelings and actions alike.

Eleanor feels particularly flattened by the day's strange turn of events—having only recently returned home after having been kicked out of her house for an extended period of time, Eleanor feels like a stranger in her own family. She is searching for a sense of connection and belonging, and not finding it instantly at Park's house has made her feel even more alienated and ostracized than ever before. The very real fear she feels anytime she's around Richie is a problem beyond the scope of what many teenagers have to deal with, and Eleanor worries, as she is forced to return home, that she will never find a way to escape the sense of dread and displacement that currently mark her days.

### Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ "Your mother's sorry. She's sorry that she hurt your feelings, and she wants you to invite your girlfriend over to dinner."

"So that she can make her feel bad and weird?"

"Well, she is kind of weird, isn't she?"

Park didn't have the energy to be angry. He sighed and let his head fall back on the chair.

His dad kept talking. "Isn't that why you like her?"

**Related Characters:** Park Sheridan, Jamie Sheridan (speaker), Eleanor Douglas

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Park's father Jamie tells him that Mindy—who once called Eleanor "weird" as a pejorative and suggested that she didn't want her around the house—is ready to accept Eleanor and invite her back over. Over the course of their conversation, it becomes clear that Park sees being "weird" as a bad thing, much like his mother does.

However, in spite of his straight-laced demeanor and strict parenting style, Jamie sees that Eleanor's weirdness is both what makes her special and what endears her to Park. Part of the novel's investigation of love and intimacy involves knowing and accepting both one's partner's true self, and one's own innermost layers—it tracks, then, that as Park and Eleanor become more physically and emotionally intimate with one another, they must own up to the ways in which the other's strangeness (and their own) is what has drawn them together rather than a force that threatens to tear them apart.

### Chapter 32 Quotes

☝☝ [Mindy's] hand settled softly in her lap.

"In big family," she said, "everything . . . everybody spread so thin. Thin like paper, you know?" She made a tearing gesture. [...] "Nobody gets enough," she said. "Nobody gets what they need. When you always hungry, you get hungry in your head." She tapped her forehead. "You know?"

Park wasn't sure what to say.

"You don't know, she said, shaking her head. "I don't want you to know. . . I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry for how I welcomed your Eleanor."

**Related Characters:** Park Sheridan, Mindy Sheridan (speaker), Eleanor Douglas

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 189

### Explanation and Analysis

When Park and Mindy spot Eleanor, her mother, and her four younger siblings at the grocery store on Christmas Eve, Park begs his mother to ignore them and head in the other direction. Park and Eleanor are on the outs, and the idea of confronting Eleanor—and risking getting her in trouble with her family—brings him fear and shame. When Park and Mindy get home from shopping, however, Mindy wants to talk to Park about what happened at the store—and the intimate moment between them shows Park that his mother, for all her judgement of Eleanor's crazy clothes and harsh demeanor, perhaps understands Eleanor more than she let on. Mindy alludes to her own difficult childhood in Korea, and suggests that she has worked hard to keep Park from knowing how "thin" large, poor families like Eleanor's are spread. Park has had a privileged upbringing full of love

and happiness, one which stands in stark contrast to Eleanor's, and Mindy is beginning to see that perhaps she's even shielded her son too well from understanding the problems of the world.

## Chapter 35 Quotes

☹☹ [Eleanor] pulled away. "Are you kissing me because I look like someone else?"

"You don't look like someone else. Plus, that's crazy."

"Do you like me better like this?" she asked. "Because I'm never going to look like this again."

[...]

"You look like you," [Park] said. "You with the volume turned up."

**Related Characters:** Park Sheridan, Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Mindy Sheridan

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 216

### Explanation and Analysis

After Park's mother, Mindy, a beautician, gives Eleanor a makeover in the home salon she runs out of her family's garage, Eleanor is horrified rather than elated by the way she looks. Covered in makeup, with her hair all blown out, Eleanor feels like a different person—which is the one thing she has been trying to avoid all her life. In spite of the rough hand she's been dealt, Eleanor has never compromised or changed who she is—she has carried the shame of looking different, of not fitting in, and of feeling rejected not just by her peers but by her own family for years, but has rebelled against letting that shame change her or influence the way she acts, dresses, and presents herself to the world. Now, in letting Mindy make her over, Eleanor feels she has compromised who she is—and is worried that Park will like this version of her better than the person she really is on the inside. Park, however, displays his true love for Eleanor by assuring her that she couldn't change who she is if she tried, and he wouldn't want her to—in fact, a version of her "with the volume turned up" is even more appealing to him.

## Chapter 38 Quotes

☹☹ "What do you want me to do?" Eleanor asked. [Ben and Maisie] both stared at her, desperate and almost . . . almost hopeful.

[...]

She was pretty sure she was wired wrong somewhere, that her plugs were switched, because instead of softening toward them—instead of tenderness—she felt herself go cold and mean. "I can't take you with me," she said, "if that's what you're thinking."

[...]

"You don't care about us," Maisie said.

"I do care," Eleanor hissed. "I just can't . . . *help* you." [...] "I can't even help myself."

**Related Characters:** Maisie Douglas, Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Park Sheridan, Ben Douglas

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 227

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eleanor's younger siblings, Ben and Maisie, reveal that they have found out the truth—they know that Eleanor is dating Park Sheridan and spending every day at his house. Eleanor feels trapped, cornered, and exposed, but worse feelings are yet to come. As she realizes that her brother and sister want her to take them with her on her daily outings, Eleanor feels herself "go cold and mean," and she cruelly "hisse[s]" that she can't help her siblings when she can't even begin to help herself. Through this emotionally charged passage, Rowell is engaging several of the novel's major themes. Eleanor feels shame at being caught, shame at her own selfishness, and shame at her inability to help her siblings escape Richie. Rowell is also examining, for one of the first times in the novel, how truly and completely trapped Eleanor's siblings feel. Eleanor is not the only one struggling with extreme poverty and terrible abuse. While she has been finding ways to escape her home life, her siblings have still been suffering under Richie's thumb, and when they discover what Eleanor's been up to they are hurt, angry, and "desperate" for retribution.

## Chapter 48 Quotes

☝☝ "Why is your stepdad looking for you?"

"Because he knows, because I ran away."

"Why?"

"Because he *knows*." Her voice caught. "Because it's him."

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas, Park Sheridan (speaker), Richie Trout

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 287

### Explanation and Analysis

In this brief passage, Eleanor, who has run away from home after realizing that Richie was the one leaving sexually explicit notes on her textbook covers, confides the truth in Park. Park's inability to understand the depths of what's happening harkens back to an earlier conversation Eleanor and Park had in the first stages of their relationship. During their phone date, Park asked Eleanor why she hated Richie so much, and why she felt he hated her. Eleanor lashed out at the privileged Park, explaining that in her life—and underprivileged lives like her family's—there are no easy answers. In this quotation, Park again has trouble understanding the logic behind what Eleanor's doing, or the seriousness of what she's facing should Richie catch her. Eleanor tries to impress upon Park just how endangered she is, even as the barriers of class and experience stand between them. Eleanor and Park are reaching a new level of intimacy here in spite of the darkness of the circumstances they're in, and Rowell is showing how true intimacy and true understanding are not always about romance, love, and happiness—loving someone means journeying with them through the dark valleys of life, as well, and meeting them on their own terms.

## Chapter 49 Quotes

☝☝ *How he looks at me.*

*Like he's biding his time.*

*Not like he wants me. Like he'll get around to me. When there's nothing and no one else left to destroy.*

*How he waits up for me.*

*Keeps track of me.*

*How he's always there. When I'm eating. When I'm reading. When I'm brushing my hair.*

*You don't see.*

*Because I pretend not to.*

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Richie Trout

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 288

### Explanation and Analysis

As Eleanor tells Park about what has happened at her house—that she has realized that Richie has, all along, been the one leaving lewd, sexually explicit notes on her textbook covers—she slips almost involuntarily into this poetic, hypnotic reverie in which she reflects on all the things she has “pretend[ed]” not to notice about the way Richie looks at her. As Eleanor at last allows herself to face the full trauma of what she's been going through during her time living under Richie's roof, she experiences a terrible catharsis. Not only has Eleanor been dealing with poverty, hunger, and having to witness Richie's abuse of her mother—there is a part of her that has been trying to survive under the watchful eye of a sexual predator. As the full weight of what Eleanor has just barely managed to escape dawns on her, this departure from the narrative offers some insight into Eleanor's mind, allowing readers to access the depths of her shame, the intensity of her fear, and the stealthy mechanisms she has developed for coping with Richie's constant abuse in all its forms.

## Chapter 53 Quotes

☝☝ "I just can't believe that life would give us to each other," [Park] said, "and then take it back."

"I can," [Eleanor] said. "Life's a bastard."

He held her tighter, and pushed his face into her neck.

"But it's up to us..." he said softly. "It's up to us not to lose this."

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas, Park Sheridan (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 305

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, as Eleanor and Park prepare to part ways in Minnesota, Rainbow Rowell shows just how differently her two protagonists see the world, love, and one another. Throughout the novel, Rowell has examined how love for and intimacy with another person can actually bring one closer to a sense of love, acceptance, and respect for

oneself. Eleanor and Park have been on twinned but separate journeys as they've fallen deeply in love over the course of a year, and the more they've gotten to know one another, the more they've understood about themselves, as well.

Now, as life is about to "take" them apart from one another, Park reminds Eleanor that it is up to the two of them to preserve what they've found. While Park is undoubtedly talking about the love they've found in one another when he refers to "this," he's also, on some level, talking about the things they have learned about themselves. The cold, closed-off Eleanor still sometimes sees life as a "bastard," a machine that takes and takes. Park, though, is sensitive as ever, and encourages Eleanor to see their separation as an opportunity to reflect on all they've learned from one another, both together and separately.

## Chapter 55 Quotes

●● Park spent most nights lying on his bed because it was the only place she'd never been.

He lay on his bed and never turned on the stereo.

**Related Characters:** Park Sheridan (speaker), Eleanor Douglas

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 314

### Explanation and Analysis

After Eleanor moves to Minnesota—and refuses to answer any of the letters Park sends to her—Park has a hard time adjusting to her absence. Too many things are tainted by her memory—Mindy's Impala, the halls of their shared high school, and even the different rooms of his own house. While they were dating, Eleanor made a point of never sitting on Park's bed because she didn't want his parents to think she was "slutty" for coming into his bedroom. Park's bed, then, is the one place unscathed by his and Eleanor's intimacy, and the one place he feels relatively safe any longer. Even music is ruined for Park—what was once his and Eleanor's shared love and one of the first real things that bonded them to one another has now become almost unbearably painful. This quotation stands in direct contrast to an earlier passage from the book in which a lighthearted Eleanor, at the beginning of her relationship with Park, felt

like she carried in her chest the songs they listened to together on the bus. Park now feels a twisted inversion of this sentiment—his memories of Eleanor and the things they shared weigh on him heavily, and have become too much for him to bear.

●● And they weren't going to break up. Or get bored. Or drift apart. (They weren't going to become another stupid high school romance.) They were just going to stop.

**Related Characters:** Eleanor Douglas (speaker), Park Sheridan

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 318

### Explanation and Analysis

After Eleanor flees to Minnesota to live with her aunt and uncle, she is inundated with letters, postcards, and packages from Park—but she chooses to never write him back. Eleanor clings to her memories of Park, but doesn't allow herself to even open the things he sends her, or talk about him with anyone else. In fact, when one of her friends at her new school asks Eleanor if she's ever had a boyfriend, Eleanor says she hasn't. It's less painful to deny that Park ever came into her life than it is to think of him as having left it.

In this brief quotation, Eleanor gestures towards the reasoning behind her decision to carve Park out of her life—she doesn't want their relationship to be rendered ordinary, small, or "stupid" in hindsight by the possibility of breaking up, falling out of love, or losing interest in one another over time. Eleanor would rather just "stop" things with Park than have them fall apart. Eleanor opened up her life to Park when they began dating, and wrestled constantly throughout their relationship with feelings of vulnerability and shame at the prospect of admitting how much she loved and needed Park. Though they shared a great intimacy, there are certain things Eleanor was never able to express—a part of her was always holding back. Now, Eleanor continues that pattern of self-preservation by cutting things off with Park before things have a chance to sour, or even change.

## Chapter 58 Quotes

●● Eleanor hadn't written him a letter.

It was a postcard. GREETINGS FROM THE LAND OF 10,000 LAKES it said on the front. Park turned it over and recognized her scratchy handwriting. It filled his head with song lyrics.

He sat up. He smiled. Something heavy and winged took off from his chest.

Eleanor hadn't written him a letter, it was a postcard.

Just three words long.

**Related Characters:** Park Sheridan (speaker), Eleanor Douglas

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 324-325

### Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final lines, Park—who has waited over a year for Eleanor to write him a letter—finally receives mail from her. Throughout the novel, the love and intimacy Eleanor and Park have shared has been deep, intense, and nourishing—but the two star-crossed lovers are very different people, and the way they've approached love has

been vastly different, too. Eleanor has always been more reluctant to admit to her feelings or verbalize her emotions, while the romantic Park can barely contain himself and often finds expressions of love and devotion pouring out of him. Eleanor has scorned love stories like *Romeo and Juliet* for being corny or unrealistic, while those very same stories and ideals have sustained Park all his life. Now, as Eleanor sends a three-word long postcard to Park (after months of tearing herself apart up in Minnesota over whether or not she should reach out to him), Rowell suggests that love and intimacy, and expressions thereof, can take many different forms.

From context clues, readers can reasonably assume that the “three words” on the postcard are “I love you”—Eleanor was never able to say the words to Park in person, but now, having been through so much and gotten more in touch with who she is, Eleanor knows herself better, and is at last able to express her feelings for Park. Rowell's thematic argument throughout the novel has been that love and intimacy with another person can actually bring one closer to oneself—and by finally expressing her feelings, Eleanor shows that she has undertaken this journey and emerged on the other side a more whole person who knows and respects herself.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE

Park Sheridan has “stopped trying to bring [Eleanor] back.” She comes to him now only in dreams. Occasionally, while driving to work or out about town, he thinks he sees a flash of her red hair, but Eleanor is never really there. Eleanor’s absence distresses Park—in being gone, she is “ruining everything.”

*This brief prologue shows that Eleanor and Park—the novel’s titular protagonists—will be separated at some point in the future, and that there will be a sense of longing and resentment between them.*



## CHAPTER 1

It is August of 1986—the start of Park Sheridan’s sophomore year of high school. He listens to New Wave **music** on his headphones, trying to drown out “the morons at the back of the bus.” Park can’t wait to get his driver’s license in November so that he can drive to school by himself.

*The introduction to Park shows that he is a loner who feels trapped in his school’s social stratosphere. He wants to stoke his loneliness rather than risk having aversive or awkward social interactions with his peers.*



Park’s neighbor Steve, one of the “morons,” calls out to him. Park hears Steve call his name, but ignores him—Park is always trying to just keep his head down. Park feels a ball of paper hit the back of his head. Steve’s girlfriend, Tina, yells at him for crumpling up her class notes to throw at Park. Park at last relents and pulls his headphones off, then turns around to face Steve, who has “looked like a grown man since the seventh grade.” Steve has a reputation for being hotheaded, and is always looking for a fight.

*Park seems annoyed by his peers rather than frightened of them—he feels he is above their moronic, juvenile behavior, and yet this attitude only brings him more shame and isolation.*



Steve urges Park to tell another guy on the bus, Mikey, about “Drunken Monkey karate.” Park insists he doesn’t know anything about it, but confirms that it exists. Mikey tells Steve that Park doesn’t know anything about kung fu, but Steve retorts that Park must, because his mother is Chinese. Mikey looks at Park “carefully” and says that he always assumed Park was “Mexican.” Steve tells Mikey he’s a racist. Tina, who has been getting haircuts from Park’s mother since grade school, tells the boys that Park’s mom isn’t Chinese, but Korean. Steve retorts that it doesn’t matter “what” Park’s mom is, because “She’s fucking hot.” Park smiles weakly and slumps back into his seat, facing away from the popular kids four rows back.

*This passage, with its intricate depiction of the casual cruelty of Park’s classmates’ racism, makes clearer the reasoning behind Park’s desire to isolate himself from his peers. They see him as different and other because of his race—Park doesn’t even try bothering to fit in when doing so would mean putting up with even more of their racism and idiocy.*



Park spots a new girl (Eleanor) standing at the front of the bus. He watches as she tries to find a seat—and as anyone sitting alone on the bus scooches to the aisle or puts their bag down to prevent her from sitting with them. Park hears Tina laugh—Tina “live[s]” for any kind of gossip or drama. Park can’t help but stare at the new girl, who reminds him of a “train wreck/eclipse situation.” She is “big and awkward” with unruly red curls and she is dressed like a “mess”—she wears men’s **clothing** and has “weird necklaces” and scarves wrapped around her neck and wrists.

As the bus continues moving, the new girl (Eleanor) struggles to find a seat—the bus driver yells at her to sit down. The new girl tries to sit in an empty seat, but Tina yells at her and tells her it already belongs to someone. Park turns up the volume of his **music**, trying to ignore the situation, but when he looks up at the new girl’s face, he sees that she is about to cry. Without thinking, he scoots towards the window and urges her to sit next to him. The new girl sits down, leaving half a foot of space between herself and Park. He is grateful that she doesn’t try to speak to him. Park turns towards the window, waiting for the popular kids to start making fun of him—and for “a world of suck to hit the fan.”

## CHAPTER 2

That day, after school is out, Eleanor considers the options she has for getting home without taking the bus again. Every idea she can think of, though, comes with a problem of its own. She doesn’t know her new address yet, and can’t walk home; she can’t call her mother, Sabrina, for a ride, as her mother has no car or even a phone; the idea of calling her estranged father is laughable. Eleanor sits on the steps of the school building, staring at the bus, knowing she’ll have to take it—if not now, then tomorrow morning. The “devil-kids” on the bus repulse her, but she can’t tell whether “the Asian kid who finally let her sit down” is a part of their group or not.

Eleanor knows that no matter how bad the teasing gets, she can’t complain to her mother—if she does, her mother will make her ride to school with her stepfather, Richie, in the back of his truck. Eleanor is snapped from her thoughts when the Asian boy from earlier that morning bounds down the stairs towards the buses. Eleanor realizes that it must be leaving soon, and reluctantly gathers her things and heads towards it.

*Park’s first sighting of Eleanor fills him with a kind of secondhand shame. Park is just barely getting by in the complicated minefield that is the social landscape of his school—this new outsider, clueless as to how much attention she’s drawing to herself, makes Park cringe.*



*Though it outwardly appears to be a small gesture, Park inviting the new girl to sit with him is actually a huge risk to his limited social capital. He scooches over shamefully, aware of what associating with the weird newcomer might do to his fragile reputation. Park is more ruled by shame than compassion at this point in the novel—a dynamic that will shift as his relationship with Eleanor changes and deepens.*



*Eleanor, too, feels a great deal of shame and anxiety as she navigates the uncharted waters of her new school. The difference between her shame and Park’s is that Eleanor’s discomfort and self-consciousness only comes in the wake of having been taunted—it’s other people’s reactions to her that bring her down, but on her own, she seems to be comfortable in her skin. This passage also contains hints about the poverty, abuse, and neglect that mark Eleanor’s home life.*



*Eleanor clearly has a dread of her stepfather Richie, and as the novel progresses, the patterns of fear, abuse, and revulsion that mark Eleanor’s life will become clearer. Eleanor has to contend with shame and self-loathing not only at school but at home, too.*



## CHAPTER 3

Though Park has spent all day coming up with ways to “get away from the new girl,” he’s been unable to figure out a solution. There’s no way he can switch seats without drawing the attention—perhaps even the wrath—of the more popular kids. Park feels guilty for even worrying about losing his social status over doing something nice for someone else. At the same time, he knows that as long as the popular kids are making fun of the redheaded girl—or someone else like her—Park himself is safe from their taunts.

Park thinks back to that morning’s English class—the redheaded girl was there, and Park learned that her name was Eleanor when their teacher, Mr. Stessman, called on her to read a poem aloud. Eleanor had also been in Park’s history class—but luckily for him, she didn’t try to talk to him in either. Now, as she sits down on the bus beside Park, Park puts his headphones on and prays that she won’t try to talk to him.

*Park knows that the cannibalistic way he looks at surviving the social challenge that school presents is morally wrong—but he’s still too afraid to break from the mold and do the right thing by befriending Eleanor.*



*Even though Park has learned more about Eleanor throughout the day and seen that they have common ground, he still refuses to talk to her. He doesn’t even see that she could be a good new friend for him—he only sees her as a liability.*



## CHAPTER 4

Eleanor gets home from school before the rest of her siblings, and she is relieved to have some alone time with her mother. After having been away from her family for a year, Eleanor was flattened and disappointed by how she was received upon finally coming home—Eleanor felt “like her siblings didn’t recognize her.” Only the five-year-old Mouse showed any excitement about Eleanor’s return—eight-year-old Maisie, the toddler Richie Jr., and the eleven-year-old Ben barely even looked up when she walked into the house.

Upon returning home, Eleanor was shocked to see how “depressing” the new house her family had moved into was—she and her siblings were all packed into one room, and the bathroom, off the kitchen, didn’t even have a door on it—just a flowered curtain between the fridge and the toilet. Now, as Eleanor lets herself into the house after school, she finds the place “even more depressing in daylight.”

Eleanor’s mother, Sabrina, who is preparing soup for dinner, asks her how school was—Eleanor says it was “fine,” even though on the inside, she feels like she’s about to cry. Eleanor admires her mother’s beauty, and wishes she looked more like her. Eleanor feels there is “too much” of her—her mother is slim and delicate, but Eleanor is “built like she [runs] a medieval pub.” The only thing she and her mother have in common is their red hair, but while Eleanor’s is wild and bright, Sabrina’s is tame and auburn.

*As the narrative follows Eleanor home, it becomes clear that her family life is seriously broken. Eleanor feels like a stranger in her own house—she is an outsider not just at school, but at home as well.*



*The emotional atmosphere at Eleanor’s house isn’t the only thing that brings her anxiety and shame—Eleanor’s family lives in abject poverty, and she and her siblings are trapped in a hostile environment day in and day out.*



*Throughout the novel, Sabrina is a complicated figure for Eleanor. Eleanor admires and envies her mother in some ways, but is ultimately disappointed time and time again by the choices her mother has made and the ways in which she has doomed Eleanor and her siblings to a life of poverty and abuse.*



Sabrina conspiratorially tells Eleanor she has something to show her before leading her to the hall closet and pulling out a black trash bag—it is full of all of Eleanor’s old things. Eleanor thanks her mother for saving her things and keeping Richie from throwing them out. Sabrina returns to the kitchen to finish dinner, stating that she wants to have everything ready when Richie gets home, while Eleanor goes into her room and begins looking through the bag. Inside it, she finds some old paper dolls, a few of her favorite books, some old school assignments—and, at the very bottom, a box that makes Eleanor’s heart leap in her chest.

*Though Rowell has not yet divulged what caused the schism that sent Eleanor away from home for a year, when Sabrina presents Eleanor with her meager possessions, readers can sense just how little Eleanor has—not just in terms of material things, but in terms of agency over her own life and circumstances.*



Eleanor’s uncle in Minnesota always used to send her and her siblings a Fruit of the Month Club subscription every year, and the children would fight over who got to keep the boxes. A carefully-saved grapefruit box was always Eleanor’s favorite. Now, she removes the box from the trash bag and checks inside—within it are stationery, pencils, markers, and her treasured Walkman, though its batteries are missing. Eleanor, however, is thrilled just by “the possibility of **music**.”

*Eleanor’s secret stash of special objects is the only thing that makes her feel like there’s some hope for happiness ahead. This passage shows how important music is to Eleanor—and sets it up as a symbol of the ways in which she seeks to both escape her present circumstances and connect more deeply with her inner self.*



## CHAPTER 5

Mr. Stessman, Park’s English teacher, gives the class a new assignment: to memorize a poem. He tells them all that though they’ll probably forget most of what they’re learning in his class, they’ll always remember the poem they choose now. He urges them to pick a poem that will speak to them individually—but will also help them “speak to someone else.” Park plans to take the easy way out of the assignment by picking a simple rhyming poem. He feels “embarrassed” for Mr. Stessman for trying so hard to “work the room.”

*This brief chapter further demonstrates just how hard Park is working to make himself invisible and participate in life as little as possible to avoid being seen as trying too hard.*



## CHAPTER 6

As Eleanor boards the bus after school, the popular Tina pushes past her and calls her a cruel nickname. Tina has already popularized the nicknames “Bozo” and “Bloody Mary” in the gym class she and Eleanor share, and has gotten all the other girls in class to turn against Eleanor. Eleanor hates gym for many reasons—the teasing being one, and the mandatory wearing of gym suits being another. As Eleanor settles into her seat on the bus, she notes her seatmate is not there yet—she dreads the “awkward” interaction of having to stand up to let him get to his window seat when he boards. Though Eleanor never talks to the “stupid Asian kid” or looks at him, she has noticed that he’s always reading comic books. Eleanor thinks that she’ll never be able to read on the bus—she doesn’t want to get caught “with her head down.”

*Even though things at school are hard and miserable for Eleanor, she retains a measure of detachment about all the cruel teasing and bullying she faces each day. Eleanor’s home life has instilled in her the knowledge that she needs to just survive whatever’s in front of her—but never let her guard down.*



The narrative switches to Park's point of view. He is home from school after an awkward bus ride next to Eleanor—it is starting to feel “wrong” to sit next to her every day without exchanging even a simple hello. Park is trying to eat dinner alone in his room, but his little brother, Josh—all dressed and ready for taekwondo—interrupts Park and urges him to put his uniform on. Park angrily pushes Josh out of his room and slams the door. He is insecure about the fact that his younger brother is already taller than him, and has been trying, lately, to pretend more and more often that “he could still kick Josh’s ass.”

Park dons his taekwondo uniform and sneakers and heads to the kitchen. His father, Jamie, “barrel[s]” into the kitchen and scoops Park’s mother, Mindy, into his arms, kissing her deeply. Park is grossed out by his parents’ constant, overzealous displays of affection. Park and Josh head out to the car to wait for their father to finish changing into his own uniform.

The narrative switches to Eleanor’s perspective. She hates the new routines her family has established in her absence—they eat dinner ridiculously early, at 4:30 p.m., so that all of the kids are out of the way by the time Richie gets home. Eleanor doesn’t mind not eating with Richie, since she loathes him, but hates being pent up for hours with her siblings in their bedroom.

After dinner, Eleanor thinks about writing some letters to her friends from her old school, but her younger sister Maisie interrupts her, bringing the scraggly cat into the bedroom. As Eleanor looks at Maisie, she is disturbed by a recollection of seeing Maisie sitting on Richie’s lap a few days ago. A year ago, before Richie kicked Eleanor out, “all the kids were allied against him,” united in hatred of the man who yelled at and beat their mother regularly. Eleanor snaps out of her reverie and asks Maisie if she calls Richie “Dad” now—Maisie replies that Richie is their father now.

## CHAPTER 7

Park and his friend Cal are sitting in the school library, and Cal is scheming about how to ask Kim—a preppy, popular girl—out on a date. Park thinks that the blonde, prim Kim is out of Cal’s league, but Cal will not be talked down—he is determined to get a girlfriend, and wants to “start at the top” and work his way down the social food chain of girls. Cal suggests Park get a girlfriend, too, so that they can go for double dates in Park’s family’s Impala. Park, though, tells Cal not to get his hopes up—Park and his father are fighting about Park’s driver’s license, and Park’s father is insisting Park learn to drive stick before taking the test.

*As readers get a glimpse into Park’s home life, it becomes clear that Park, too, faces insecurity and shame in his own house as well as at school. Even though Park’s struggles with his family are decidedly less intense than Eleanor’s, they share a common ground of feeling out of place and overshadowed in the one place they should feel supported and loved.*



*This introduction to Park’s parents shows that they have an intense and intimate relationship—something that repulses Park and makes him nervous.*



*With each glimpse into Eleanor’s home life, it becomes clearer and clearer that her family’s entire existence is organized around keeping Richie calm and happy.*



*Eleanor clearly loathes Richie—and it’s evident that there’s a part of her that fears him, too. Richie is a sleeping volcano of a man whose tempers and volatile moods threaten everyone—and yet while Eleanor tries to resist caving into a life of subservience to Richie, and tip-toeing around him to keep him happy, her mother and even her siblings seem to believe that the best path forward is the one of least resistance.*



*This passage serves a dual function: it shows how pressing and immersive Park finds the small, quotidian social problems he faces at school, and it also shows that how compared to Eleanor, his actual problems are extremely insignificant.*



Cal points out “a girl who might want a piece of [Park,]” and Park looks over to see Eleanor staring right at him. Park insists that Eleanor isn’t staring at *him*—she’s just staring. Park has noticed that Eleanor rarely makes eye contact or says hello to anyone, and yet seems to dress as if she’s screaming for attention. Park feels he has to constantly “brace [him]self” for the sight of Eleanor.

Eleanor sits in the African American history section of the library, thinking about how “fucked-up” the school’s racial disparities are. Though most of the kids at school are black, most all of the honors students in Eleanor’s advanced classes are white and are bused in from another neighborhood. Eleanor’s honors classes are, she feels, a relief from the “Crazytown” atmosphere of her other, regular classes. She feels determined to do well in her “smart classes” so that she isn’t kicked out of them.

## CHAPTER 8

At first, Park thought he was imagining things, but now he knows without a doubt that each day, on the bus, Eleanor is reading his comics along with him. Park feels he should say something to her to ease the “irrevocably weird” and silent situation between them—after all, they do sit together for an hour each day—but he is too intimidated.

The narrative switches to Eleanor’s point of view—she arrives home from school to find her mother looking tired, like she is “crumbling at the edges.” As soon as the other little kids get home, Sabrina kicks them all out of the house—Eleanor included—for making too much noise. Eleanor walks past Richie’s Rottweiler, Tonya, and follows her siblings to a little playground across the street, even though she wishes she could take a bath during the precious time when Richie isn’t home.

As Eleanor asks her siblings questions about their home life and how they feel about Richie, Ben tells her that they all call him “Dad” now simply because “he’s married to Mom.” Eleanor asks if Ben feels like Richie is his dad, but Ben admits he doesn’t know what having a dad is “supposed to feel like.” Ben asks Eleanor what it was like living with “those people”—last year, Eleanor went to stay with the Hickmans, friends of Sabrina’s. Eleanor says that it was “okay” staying with them, but privately thinks that the Hickmans’ was better than home. Eleanor was only supposed to stay for a few days, but wound up staying a year.

*Even though Park and Eleanor haven’t yet spoken, this brief moment shows that Park already feels a kind of reluctant intimacy with her. He knows her mannerisms, and in spite of the ways in which she makes him nervous, he also finds her arresting and interesting.*



*Rowell’s novel, set in 1986, engages with the lingering effects of segregation in America and the practice of busing. However, Rowell’s choice to use these important social issues as a kind of set dressing—or to give her major white characters a kind of “pass” to think racist thoughts, given the less politically correct atmosphere of the mid-eighties—has garnered criticism in the years since the book’s release.*



*Eleanor and Park are clearly interested in one another—even if the social atmosphere at their school makes them feel like talking to one another or embarking on a real friendship is somehow taboo.*



*The scenes set at Eleanor’s house continue to show just how entirely her family’s lives now revolve around Richie’s needs and desires—even when he isn’t home. Sabrina knows that upsetting Richie means trouble for her and her children, and takes drastic measures to avoid doing anything he might not approve of or that might set him off.*



*Surprisingly, when Eleanor looks back on the year she spent in exile from her own home, she finds herself thinking her circumstances there were better than they are now. This shows just how dire things are in terms of Eleanor’s home life—and how desperate she is for escape from it. Eleanor’s siblings, too, are clearly confused, isolated, and emotionally neglected—but the younger kids don’t necessarily have the language, autonomy, or experience to describe what they’re feeling or why.*



Eleanor looks around the playground for Maisie, who has gone off with the baby, and sees her sitting over near the basketball courts—the “stupid Asian kid” from the bus is playing, and Eleanor leaves the playground as soon as she sees him, warning Ben to look after the others. When Eleanor walks in the front door of the house, Richie is in the living room—she walks past him without saying a word, her “eyes straight ahead.”

*The rigid way Eleanor walks past Richie suggests that she both hates and fears him. This passage marks the first time readers have seen Richie physically—but even though he’s in the house, Eleanor tries her very best to ignore his presence entirely.*



## CHAPTER 9

Wednesday evening after taekwondo, Park sits in his room, planning on how he might congratulate Eleanor on doing so well on her poetry assignment in Mr. Stessman’s class. He thinks of endless combinations of words as he stares at a stack of new comic books on his desk—he is waiting until the bus ride in the morning to read them.

*Park clearly wants to get closer to Eleanor—but his lingering shame and fear of upsetting his limited social clout threatens to stand in the way of their burgeoning friendship.*



On the bus the next morning, Eleanor realizes that the “stupid Asian kid” knows she is reading his comics. He keeps looking up at her before turning the page, making sure she’s ready to move on. Eleanor knows the kid is not one of “the bus demons,” but can tell that he’s “in with them somehow” since they all leave Eleanor alone whenever she’s sitting near Park. When the bus pulls up to school, Eleanor is disappointed—she and the kid have only gotten through half the [Watchmen](#) comic book, and she is sure he’ll finish it without her during the school day.

*Even as Eleanor notices that Park is making some kind of effort to be nice to her and let her in, she continues to refer to him in pejorative and racist terms in her head. Eleanor’s defense mechanisms function much like Park’s social anxiety—they keep her walls up and prevent her from letting people in.*



Eleanor is shocked that afternoon when Park opens up the comic right where the two of them left off in the morning. She is even more shocked when he hands it to her as she stands up to get off at her stop. Eleanor stashes the comic book between her school book and reads it three times that night in secret, then puts it in her grapefruit box for safekeeping.

*In spite of her defenses and fears, Eleanor is clearly happy and excited by Park’s gestures of kindness and goodwill towards her, muted as they are.*



Meanwhile, Park is worried that Eleanor might not give his comic book back. The only thing that scares him more than the idea of her holding it hostage is the idea that she might give it back after all—and then he’ll have to figure out what to say to her.

*By opening himself up to a friendship with Eleanor, Park is confronting his fears of upsetting the social status quo—and finding himself in uncharted waters.*



The next morning, when Eleanor gets to her seat on the bus, Park is looking out the window. She wordlessly hands him the comic book, and he takes it without saying anything either.

*Eleanor and Park’s relationship—if it could be called that at this point—has reached a new status quo, and even though they’re not yet having conversations, the ease and intimacy between them is growing in spite of both their reservations.*



## CHAPTER 10

The following morning, Eleanor boards the bus to find a stack of comics on her seat. Park is already deep in his reading. Eleanor picks up the comics and holds them in her arms, but doesn't start to read—to do so, she feels, would be too much like “admitting something.” All day, Eleanor feels the books burning a hole in her bag, and as soon as she's home she devours them. Long after her siblings have fallen asleep, she continues to read in the room's dim light. She is startled when Richie suddenly jerks the door open and grunts at her to turn the light off. Eleanor does so, haunted by Richie's rat-like face, and then continues to read by the light of the moon coming in from the window.

Park is amazed by how fast Eleanor reads—he has to keep bringing her new comics when she hands the old ones to him wordlessly, but as if she's handling “something precious.” All of the comics Park lends Eleanor come back smelling “like roses.” As the weeks go by, Eleanor speeds through volumes and volumes of Park's comics—but still the two of them don't exchange a word.

One morning, on the bus, Park, having slept in and left home in a hurry, has no comics for Eleanor to read. He tells himself he'll have to speak to her to explain why he has nothing for her, but when the moment comes and she hands him the old comics, he merely shrugs. The two of them sit awkwardly in silence for a moment until Park asks Eleanor if she likes the Smiths' **music**. He has noticed some lyrics to one of their songs written on her paper textbook cover. Eleanor looks at him, surprised. She tells Park she isn't sure—she's never heard them. Park asks her if she just wants people to *think* she likes the Smiths, and immediately feels the air between them turn “sour.”

In English class, Park and Eleanor's class is discussing **Romeo and Juliet**. Most of the class is unresponsive and disinterested, so Mr. Stessman calls on the fiery Eleanor to ask what she thinks. She says she isn't affected by the deaths of the star-crossed lovers—she doesn't see their story as a tragedy, but rather as one in which Shakespeare pokes fun at young love. Mr. Stessman asks someone else in the class to explain why, then, *Romeo and Juliet* has survived and endured for 400 years. Park answers the question, saying that “people want to remember what it's like to be young [...] and in love.”

*This passage shows just how trapped Eleanor feels both at home and at school. She isn't quite sure how to navigate whatever's happening between her and Park—but in the form of comic books, he's offering her a kind of escape from the bleak circumstances of her life. Whether she reads them at home or at school, she knows, she'll have to face separate problems—but even so, being transported by the comics is worth disrupting the unchanging waters of her life.*



*Even without talking, Eleanor and Park are building a foundation of intimacy and equality between the two of them as they bond over their shared desire to let comics transport them to another world, far away from their own.*



*As Park and Eleanor reach a plateau in the relationship they've developed and are forced, by circumstance, to move forward, Park realizes that he feels anxiety about whether or not he can make Eleanor like him. For so long, Park felt embarrassed by the prospect of even just sitting with Eleanor—now what's embarrassing to him is the idea that she might reject him or judge him.*



*As Eleanor and Park's English class discusses [Romeo and Juliet](#), it becomes clear that Eleanor and Park have very different views on love. Eleanor sees love as frivolous and ridiculous, but Park thinks it's a powerful, moving force. As their own love story will come to resemble the famous tale of [Romeo and Juliet](#), these attitudes will serve alternately as roadblocks and catalysts for the love and intimacy they'll soon share.*



That afternoon, on the bus, Park sidles in next to Eleanor, nervous that she won't talk to him. Once he's settled in, though, she says quietly that the lyrics she has written on her textbook are "like a wish list"—songs she'd like to hear. That night, Park makes Eleanor a mixtape, loading the tape up with New Wave **music** he thinks Eleanor might like. Before he goes to sleep, he puts the tape—and five more volumes of comics—into his bag to bring to her.

*As Eleanor and Park begin to bond over their shared love of music, music emerges as one of the novel's most poignant central symbols. Music represents the connection that Eleanor and Park make with one another—and the connections they're forming with their innermost selves as their romantic relationship deepens.*



## CHAPTER 11

After school, Eleanor takes a bath while her mother makes bean soup for dinner—again. Sabrina points out that Eleanor has been quiet lately, and asks her if everything is okay. Eleanor shrugs off the question, gets out of the bath, and dresses quickly. As she passes Sabrina in the kitchen, Sabrina asks Eleanor once more if she's all right. Eleanor insists that she's just been tired and busy with homework lately. She knows her mother won't press the issue any further—since Eleanor has moved back home, she's noticed that her mother "seem[s] to realize that she'[s] lost her right" to know certain things about what going on in Eleanor's head.

*Even when Eleanor's mother tries to connect with her, Eleanor puts up her defense mechanisms and tries to remind herself that as long as her mother is under Richie's influence, she can't be trusted. This is painful for Eleanor, who wants so badly to be able to confide in and trust in her mother.*



Eleanor falls asleep right after dinner that night, tired from staying up all week reading Park's comics each night. She wakes up in the middle of the night to the sounds of Richie's shouting—and Sabrina's crying. Eleanor can sense that all of her other siblings are already awake, sitting up nervously on the floor. Eleanor gets down on the floor with them and holds them, trying to comfort them. They all listen helplessly to the sounds of their mother's tears and shrieks. Eleanor thinks about how in the past, she would have confronted Richie or called 911; now, though, she knows there is nothing she can do but wait the incident out.

*Eleanor has been shown to be horrified by the way her siblings have adapted to living under Richie's rule and have even started considering him their "dad." Now, though, Eleanor is forced to confront how years of witnessing Richie's abuse have dulled her to its horrors as well.*



In the morning, Eleanor wakes up to the sound of her alarm. She smells bacon, and is grateful that her mother is alive and well enough to make breakfast. Eleanor smells like pee—one of her little brothers, Mouse, wets the bed, and she fell asleep on the floor with all her siblings. Eleanor grabs her clean clothes from the day before and heads out towards the bathroom to change. She notices bruises—and a hickey—on her mother's face and neck. Eleanor hurries into the bathroom and washes herself off, then leaves in a hurry for school without even grabbing her books from the bedroom.

*In the aftermath of the harrowing night before, Eleanor finds that both she and her mother have been soiled in different ways. Eleanor has had Mouse pee on her—but her mother has been marked by Richie's physical and sexual abuse.*



## CHAPTER 12

Park gets on the bus and sets a stack of comics—and the Smiths mixtape—on Eleanor’s seat. When she gets on the bus, though, Park can tell that something is wrong. Eleanor is dressed in yesterday’s clothes, her hair is mussed, and she has a “lost” look about her—she doesn’t even have her schoolbooks. Eleanor picks up the comic books and the tape as she sits down and holds them in her lap, but soon tells Park that she can’t accept the mixtape—she doesn’t have a way of listening to **music**. The embarrassed Eleanor covers her face with her hands.

Park takes out his Walkman, puts the tape in, and places his headphones over Eleanor’s ears. He presses play and the **music** starts. Eleanor doesn’t take her hands off of her face the whole way to school. When the bus pulls up, Eleanor and Park get off together and walk inside together—something they’ve never done before, as they usually part ways as soon as they step off the bus. Park follows Eleanor to her locker, then smiles and tells her that “now [she’s] heard the Smiths.” Eleanor laughs happily.

Eleanor regrets not having just taken the tape from Park without a word. She feels stupid for telling Park her business, and worries that on the way home she might accidentally spill the beans about not having “a phone or a washing machine or a toothbrush.” Eleanor has considered asking the school guidance counselor, Mrs. Dunne, for a toothbrush, but is afraid of anyone—especially an adult—finding out the truth about Richie, her mom, and “everything.”

Eleanor is surprised when, in gym class, Tina and the other girls are relatively “un-horrible” to her—but after the session is over, in the locker room, Eleanor understands why. She sees that her locker is covered in menstrual pads smeared with red Magic Marker. Eleanor is shocked by the display, but walks towards her locker “with her chin [...] high” and begins peeling the pads off the front, trying to keep from crying.

After all the other girls walk away, only two girls stay behind—DeNice and Beebi, two of the black girls in Eleanor’s class. They help Eleanor clean her locker up, and tell her not to worry about the “trifling” and “insignificant” Tina and her crew. As Eleanor finishes cleaning up with the help of Beebi and DeNice and heads to lunch, she finds that for some reason, the locker incident hasn’t even affected her that much—all she can think about, she realizes, is Park.

*Park can notice that something is off about Eleanor. Even though it seems like they might not know one another very well, months of sitting together and silently getting to know one another has cued them to each other’s moods and habits.*



*Music presents a way for Eleanor and Park to connect on a deeper, more intimate level. Sharing and reading comic books that take place on other worlds and in other universes is one thing—but bonding over the shared experience of art that grounds them in the present moment is another.*



*Eleanor feels slightly emboldened by the experience of listening to Park’s music. She knows that she is trapped in a prison of silence and secrecy when it comes to the truth about her home life—but for the first time, sees that there might be a way of connecting with someone in spite of all her walls and defenses.*



*It’s bad enough that Eleanor is subjected to witnessing horrible abuse at home—to top things off, she has to contend with additional bullies at school. Through it all—both at home and at school—Eleanor remains stoic, determined not to let those who harm her see how much pain they’re putting her through.*



*Rowell’s introduction of DeNice and Beebi shows that there are good, kind people at Eleanor’s school—but also shows how stratified an environment it is, one in which popularity is in large part based on race.*



The narrative switches to Park's point of view. That afternoon, on the school bus, Eleanor listens to **music** on his Walkman again. As Eleanor's stop approaches, she hands the Walkman back to Park, but he insists she borrow it. Eleanor refuses to take it, claiming she doesn't want to "use up the batteries"—but when Park tells her he doesn't care about them, Eleanor pops the batteries out of his Walkman and gets off the bus. That night, Eleanor listens to Park's music on her Walkman until his batteries run all the way down.

*Eleanor is becoming more confident in her relationship with Park, even as things at school remain a nightmare for her socially. She also can't get enough of Park's music—or the escape that closeness with Park represents.*



## CHAPTER 13

As Eleanor leaves for school the next morning, she feels better than the day before. She feels like she's carrying Park's **music** "in her chest, somehow." The music has made Eleanor feel like "the world [isn't] what she'd thought it was." As she boards the bus, she immediately makes eye contact with Park, and they smile widely at one another. Eleanor sits down, and after a moment of awkward silence, Park asks her if she listened to the tape—Eleanor begins gushing about the music, and they have an impassioned discussion about bands like the Smiths and Joy Division. The conversation turns to comics, and Park promises to bring Eleanor some volumes that will change her mind about "boring Batman."

*This passage shows more acutely how music is a symbol for connection, confidence, intimacy, and self-love. As Eleanor journeys through Park's music, she feels herself growing closer to him—and closer to her own desires, less bothered by the opinions and actions of those around her who seek to tear her down.*



Throughout the school day in the classes they share, Eleanor and Park begin noticing more and more about one another. Park notices the softness of Eleanor's hair, while Eleanor worries that a girl in their history class, Kim, has a crush on Park.

*Music is bringing Eleanor and Park closer to one another, and they are looking at each other with increasingly open minds and hearts as their relationship deepens.*



That night, Park makes Eleanor a new tape—and empties the batteries from all of his and Josh's video game remotes to give to her.

*Park wants to keep growing closer to Eleanor, and music continues to be the conduit between their very different lives.*



## CHAPTER 14

Eleanor, DeNice, and Beebi have become fast friends, and their dreaded gym class now feels less lonely for all of them. The girls laugh and joke as they watch their classmates struggle to swing over a gymnastics horse, and at the end of the period, DeNice and Beebi invite Eleanor to sit with them at lunch. She happily accepts their invitation.

*As Eleanor bonds more deeply with Park, she's also connecting more with herself—and her new friends. This passage externalizes Rowell's argument that love and intimacy with another person create a greater sense of intimacy, confidence, and love within oneself.*



In English class, Park and Cal are teamed up for an in-class exercise, but discuss homecoming plans instead of **Romeo and Juliet**. Cal is nervous that Kim likes Park, and suggests Park ask her to homecoming so that when they all go in a group, Cal can maneuver Kim away from Park. Park is stunned by the stupidity of Cal's plans.

That afternoon, on the school bus, Eleanor sits with Park, discussing comic books. Each day when she gets on the bus she feels a pang of nervousness that he won't talk to her or acknowledge her—but so far, the two haven't been able to stop talking during the entire bus ride each morning and each afternoon. They trade thoughts about **music**, television, movies, and comics, and aren't afraid to argue with one another. They discuss what they'd like their superhero powers to be, and Eleanor says she'd want to be able to fly—Park agrees.

That night, after taekwondo, Park doesn't even bother changing out of his uniform before heading over to Eleanor's to show her something important. On the way, he runs into Steve, who lives on his block—Steve teases him about his "girlfriend Bloody Mary." Park insists Eleanor isn't his girlfriend, but Steve points out that Park is "sneaking out ninja-style" to see her. Though Park doesn't know exactly which house is Eleanor's, he uses the things she's told him about where she lives to figure out which one it must be. He approaches the front door and knocks, passing a large Rottweiler asleep on the porch. A man who looks "too young to be Eleanor's dad" answers the door, and is hostile to Park when he asks for Eleanor, closing the door on his face.

A few moments later, however, Eleanor comes to the door. The panicked look on her face tells Park that it was a "mistake" for him to come over. Her face lights up, however, when Park pulls the newest issue of **Watchmen** from inside his uniform. Park asks if she wants to read it with him now, and Eleanor hurriedly leads Paul across the street to the stoop of the elementary school, where they read together under a large streetlight. When they are finished reading, Park wants to stay and talk to Eleanor, but she tells him that she needs to get home, and hurries back across the street.

Eleanor walks back inside the house to find Richie sitting in the dark, watching TV. She tries to sneak past him to her room, but he stops him to ask if the boy who came to the door is her boyfriend. Eleanor says he isn't—but Richie calls Eleanor "a bitch in heat." Eleanor ignores Richie's words and heads to bed, climbing under the covers and trying to calm herself down and keep from screaming in rage. Eleanor is angry that though she's tried to keep Park "in a place in her head that [...] Richie couldn't get to," Richie has managed to infiltrate that space anyway.

*While Eleanor is realizing that she can find refuge and self-confidence in her new friendships, Park is reevaluating his old, shallow friendships—also another form of self-love and self-care born of his burgeoning intimacy with Eleanor, and with himself.*



*Eleanor and Park are connecting deeply with one another in a way that's startlingly genuine compared to the contrived social environment at their school. Their feelings of shame over their own opinions and ideas have diminished through their connection with one another, and they feel free to talk frankly and passionately to each other—even on the school bus, in full sight of their judgmental peers.*



*Park wants to know even more about Eleanor and connect with her in a new way, so he decides to pay a visit to her house. Once he gets there, he soon realizes that Eleanor's home life is very different from his own—and that serious barriers lie between their experiences of family, and of the world more largely.*



*Though it's risky for Eleanor to upset the status quo at home by leaving to spend some time with Park, it's worth it to her. She values their burgeoning connection, this passage shows, more than her own well-being, and is willing to chance punishment, or more negative attention from Richie, in order to spend some time with Park.*



*Richie's horrible, lewd comment to Eleanor leaves her feeling both vulnerable and enraged. Eleanor wishes she could escape the prison of her home life—but is frustrated by the fact that even when she tries to use Park as a kind of refuge, there are still parts of her life he can't help extricate her from.*



## CHAPTER 15

The next morning, while Eleanor is doing her hair for school, Sabrina comes into the bedroom. Eleanor tells her mother that she doesn't want to talk about what happened last night. Sabrina tells Eleanor that she's too young for a boyfriend—Eleanor says that things between her and Park aren't "like that," and her mother leaves the room. Eleanor fights back tears as she realizes that perhaps Park actually *doesn't* like her "like that."

On the bus, Eleanor sits down next to Park, who immediately apologizes for getting her in trouble the night before. Eleanor looks at Park, unable to stop thinking about how "beautiful" his lips are. Park asks if the man at the door was Eleanor's father—she replies that Richie is her "mother's husband." Park asks Eleanor more about her home life, but Eleanor pushes his questions away, desperate to keep Park separate from Richie's stronghold in her mind. Park asks Eleanor if she wants to borrow the comic to reread it, and she says she does. Park idly rubs the edge of one of Eleanor's scarves, and Eleanor watches him, feeling her face go "soft and gummy." Park takes Eleanor's hand in his, and Eleanor feels herself "disintegrate."

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. As soon as he takes Eleanor's hand, he feels a flash of emotion overcome him. He has held other girls' hands before, but has never felt anything like what he's feeling now. He feels that in holding Eleanor's hand, he has "recognized her." Meanwhile, Eleanor sits very still as Park rubs his thumb across her palm. She feels that Park has "paralyzed her."

When the bus pulls to a stop, Park and Eleanor let go of one another's hands. He wonders if anyone around them can see the "Over-the-top bliss" on both their faces. After getting off the bus, Park walks Eleanor all the way to her locker. Eleanor won't make eye contact with him, and Park shyly asks her if they'll see each other in English. Eleanor simply nods and walks away.

The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view. All morning, she can't stop thinking about holding hands with Park—she had no idea her hand had so many nerve endings. She keeps feeling like she might faint.

*Eleanor lies desperately to her mother in an attempt to throw Sabrina off the train of what's really going on in her life—but as Eleanor verbalizes the fact that Park doesn't like her in a romantic way, she realizes that her own attempt at a lie might actually be the truth. Eleanor realizes she's been getting her hopes up about a relationship with Park—and that for so many reasons, it might be out of reach.*



*Eleanor's fears are put to rest when Park takes her hand in his on the bus. She realizes that all the things she's been feeling for him are reciprocated after all—and that perhaps the only thing more terrifying than Park not returning her feelings is his ability to return them in kind.*



*With every step Eleanor and Park take forward in their relationship, they find themselves reaching new heights of intimacy and learning more about each other. Rowell's whole thesis that true intimacy is knowing and accepting another person is put on display in moments like this.*



*Eleanor and Park are surprisingly shy with one another after their great moment of connection—Eleanor especially. With every step they take forward, they are each embarking on something new—and perhaps feel a little out of their depths.*



*Eleanor is just as lovestruck as Park, and as the day goes by, she experiences an intense physical reaction to her feelings.*



The narrative switches to Park's point of view. Eleanor doesn't look at Park in English or history class, and after school, she isn't at her locker. He worries that he has done something wrong in holding her hand—but when he gets on the bus, she is already sitting in their seat. Park sits down demurely—and is shocked when Eleanor reaches for his hand and holds it tight.

*Park begins second-guessing himself as he realizes how shell-shocked Eleanor is by his having grabbed her hand. As soon as she returns his affection, however, Park realizes that he and Eleanor are indeed embarking on a new chapter in their relationship.*



## CHAPTER 16

Eleanor's weekend creeps by at a glacial pace. All she can think about is Monday, when she gets to see Park again. As she does her homework, she notices that someone has written "do i make you wet" on her geography textbook cover, and crosses it out with black pen, embarrassed. Eleanor watches cartoons with her siblings, listens to Park's **music** on her Walkman, and fantasizes about holding hands with him all afternoon. In the days since they started holding hands on the bus, the two of them have talked less—but Eleanor feels like their connection has gotten stronger, and her attraction to him has grown.

*Eleanor is so happy about the new developments in her relationship with Park that all the other white noise of her life—even the appearance of a lewd, vaguely threatening message on her textbook cover—seems small and faraway in comparison.*



Meanwhile, Park is spending his weekend having driving lessons with his father, Jamie, who is attempting to teach him how to drive stick. Park keeps messing up, and his father keeps reprimanding him for his mistakes and making him start again. Park protests that there's no point in learning to drive manual, since he'll only ever have to drive the family's automatic Impala, but Park's father shouts that Park needs to learn. Park knows that if his mother were around, his father would never talk to him this way. Park's father demands he try again, but when Park continues shorting the engine, his father gets angrier and angrier, at one point hitting the glove box. Park gets out of the car and begins walking home, ignoring his father's angry screams.

*This scene is the closest thing to abuse Park experiences in the book. Jamie loses control of his temper while giving Park driving lessons, unable to impress upon Park the importance of mastering both manual and automatic transmissions, and lashes out both verbally and physically. Park and Jamie's differing opinions about driving represent a bigger metaphorical problem between them: they can't agree on how Park should move through the world. Jamie wants Park to stick to tradition, but Park knows there are other ways of existing.*



On the walk home, Park takes the long way so that he can walk past Eleanor's house. He hopes that he'll be able to see her face through the window, but is unable to catch a glimpse. As he heads home, he dreads the rest of the weekend, and can't wait for Monday to come.

*Eleanor has been using her relationship with Park as a mental escape for some time—and now Park finds himself doing the same thing.*



## CHAPTER 17

On Monday, when Eleanor steps onto the bus, she can't help smiling all the way down the aisle to Park. When she sits down next to him, he takes her hand and kisses it. Park whispers that he missed Eleanor all weekend, and she feels tears spring to her eyes. Neither of them say anything else on the ride to school, even as they squeeze each other's hands the whole way. At school, Park walks Eleanor to her locker. When the bell rings, he springs one of her curls before he heads off to class, telling Eleanor that he's going "Back to missing [her]" until he sees her again.

Eleanor is pulled out of homeroom to meet with her counselor, Mrs. Dunne, who wants to know how Eleanor is doing. Eleanor says she's doing well—and Mrs. Dunne tells her that she looks good. Mrs. Dunne tells Eleanor that she's getting A's in almost all of her classes, and expresses how proud she is of Eleanor. She tells Eleanor that the reason she called her down to the office is because Eleanor's father called the school looking for her—Mrs. Dunne offers Eleanor the use of her office phone to call him back. Mrs. Dunne stands up to leave the room, telling Eleanor that she should feel free to use the phone anytime she needs to.

Eleanor calls her father, who asks how she is—and why she never calls. Eleanor feels there's no use telling her dad that there's no phone in the house—there's no use, she thinks, in telling him anything about what's really going on. Eleanor's dad invites her to come over and babysit her half-brother Matt while he and his fiancée, Donna, go to a wedding on Friday night. He tells her that he'll pay her 10 bucks—and let her order pizza and spend the night. Eleanor agrees, and her dad says he'll pick her up from school on Friday at 3 p.m.

Before the start of English class, Park tells Cal that he's not going to homecoming. Cal begs Park to tag along to help Cal "bait [...] [his] Kim trap." Park is distracted when Eleanor walks in the room and smiles widely at him; he smiles back, but then Eleanor drops her gaze "self-consciously." Cal begs Park once more to at least ahead the homecoming game—Park sighs and nods.

Eleanor is on cloud nine all day. She can't stop thinking about the fact that Park likes her—and misses her when she's not around. Eleanor doesn't even get stressed when the girls in gym class are mean to her. She feels Park has cast a kind of protective "force field" around her.

*Park and Eleanor are growing emotionally closer with every passing day—even the days that they're apart—and becoming more emboldened about how they interact with one another in public. Their love for one another is helping them each to dissolve the shame they often find themselves feeling.*



*From this exchange between Eleanor and her guidance counselor, it's clear to see that Mrs. Dunne knows that Eleanor has been having difficulties. Though Eleanor still has a lot happening at home—and is being bullied regularly at school—things with Park are going to well that they seem to blot out everything else for the moment.*



*Eleanor's father doesn't have a clue as to what's really going on in his children's lives—or the abuse and danger they face daily. Eleanor doesn't see the use in telling her dad, and based on the fact that in spite of living in the same city as her he never makes an effort to see her, it seems like Eleanor knows that her father is not about to provide her an escape route from Richie's house.*



*Cal still has dreams of womanizing every girl in school with Park at his side—not knowing that Park is already invested in someone.*



*Eleanor feels sheltered and held by Park's love. His affection for her makes her feel confident, capable and invincible—it has blotted out so much of the shame that has followed her throughout the last several years.*



## CHAPTER 18

Eleanor tells her mother about her father's offer in front of all the other kids—but Sabrina tells Eleanor she can't go. Eleanor's siblings all start crying because they miss their father. Sabrina asks Eleanor why she cares about spending time with her father, since he's "never cared" about her. Eleanor insists she needs to get out of the house for a while. Sabrina says she'll talk to Richie about it. Eleanor begs her not to, stating that Richie can't start telling her whether or not she can see her own father. Sabrina retorts that Richie is the one who puts food on the table—Eleanor laughs, as there's hardly any food and not even a dining table in the house. Eleanor begs her mother one last time to go, and Sabrina relents. Eleanor is desperate for the chance to talk to Park on the phone at her father's house.

The next morning on the bus, Eleanor asks Park for his phone number. He says that he assumed she wouldn't be allowed to talk on the phone—Eleanor says she probably wouldn't be, if her family even had a phone. Nevertheless, Park starts to write his number on her textbook—Eleanor stops him, telling him she doesn't want her mom to see it. Park notices a "gross" note on her textbook—"suck me off." Eleanor begins scribbling it out, but Park asks her why she'd write something like that. Eleanor insists she didn't write it—but doesn't know who did. Park comforts her, but Eleanor is embarrassed for him to see her looking so vulnerable.

Park asks Eleanor if she still wants his number. She says she does, and explains that she's babysitting at her father's house on Friday. She tells Park to tell her his number, and promises to memorize it. Park sings his number to the tune of "867-5309," and Eleanor laughs, cheered by his silliness.

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. He remembers the first time he saw Eleanor—and how he thought she looked like a train wreck. Now, though, when he pictures Eleanor, all he can think about is how "adorable" she is. The idea of anyone making fun of Eleanor—or leaving lewd notes on her schoolbooks—makes him feel violently angry. Still, he is ashamed to admit there is a part of him that feels "self-conscious" about being seen with Eleanor. Every time he sees her, though, he can't think about doing anything but "whatever he could [...] to make her happy."

*Eleanor knows that if Richie starts to encroach on the little freedom she has left, she'll never get even a shred of it back—and is determined not to let that happen. Even though it is perhaps unfair that Eleanor's dad has reached out to her and not any of his other children, Eleanor doesn't really care. This thread introduces a pattern that will recur throughout the novel as Eleanor is forced to choose between securing whatever rare bursts of freedom she can for herself—and helping her siblings do the same.*



*Eleanor and Park's relationship is a constant dance in which Eleanor tries not to let see Park just how vulnerable she is—and just how fractured her life outside of their relationship is. In this passage, she reveals several vulnerabilities, no doubt making herself nervous that she is going to be too much for Park or drive him away.*



*Park doesn't shy away from Eleanor in her moment of vulnerability—instead, he tries to cheer her up.*



*While Eleanor wrestles with vulnerability and defensiveness, Park wrestles with vanity and insecurity. He worries that others can't see how wonderful Eleanor really is—and will judge him, her, and their relationship without understanding it. This worry doesn't diminish the intensity of Park's feelings, though it does linger at the back of his mind.*



At lunch, Eleanor is so nervous she can barely eat. On the way home from school, on the bus, Park makes Eleanor repeat his number over and over again to make sure she's got it. Park asks Eleanor if it's "stupid" for him to feel like they have a date at last—even though they're together every day, he points out, they have "fifty chaperones" around them at all time in the form of peers, teachers, and parents. Eleanor, too, expresses excitement about their upcoming "date."

*A common thread throughout Eleanor and Park's emerging relationship is their desire for freedom, independence, and time alone together. Both of them feel like the best versions of themselves when they're with each other, but the pressures they face from their respective families and their judgmental peer group often leave them feeling nervous, ashamed, or uncertain.*



## CHAPTER 19

Eleanor wakes up Friday morning feeling like it's her birthday. She's so excited to get out of the house and spend some time at her father's place—and to talk to Park on the phone. Eleanor hasn't seen her dad in at least a year—when he was still in their lives, even, she and her siblings never saw him for more than a few days at a time. On the bus, Park excitedly asks Eleanor what time she's going to call. She tells him she has to wait until her dad's kid settles down for the night. Park conspiratorially tells Eleanor that he has a "list" of "personal questions" to ask her. Eleanor cheekily tells Park he shouldn't expect any answers.

*Even though Eleanor and Park are just planning to talk on the phone, they are both approaching the "date" as a chance to really get to know more about one another, and talk freely and privately for the first time in their relationship. It's a big deal to them, and they're taking it very seriously.*



After school, Eleanor sits on the steps and waits for her father. Enough time passes that she's worried he's not going to come at all—but then he pulls up in a fancy convertible, honking his horn. Eleanor's dad drives her back to his house, which is only 10 minutes from school. They sit on the couch together and watch ESPN while Eleanor's dad smokes cigarettes, drinks scotch, and takes phone calls about cars and bets. Eleanor's father is a gambler, and though there have been times in his life where he's been strapped for cash, she notices now that his house is full of "small luxuries." Eleanor is excited for her dad to leave so that she can eat all the nice food in the house—and order a pizza.

*Even though Eleanor's dad isn't outright abusive, he is selfish and disconnected—and clearly too preoccupied with his own life to check in on Eleanor or her siblings. Eleanor, however, is willing to overlook all this in order to take advantage of some alone time in a nice house stocked with food—and to talk on the phone with Park.*



Eleanor looks through her father's old records, and is taken back to pleasant memories of listening to **music** as a child while her mother cleaned the house. She pushes the almost painfully sweet memories away and begins finding records she can use to make Park a mix tape of his own.

*This passage shows that music has always been important to Eleanor. It's a tool that connects her not just to Park, but to her past.*



After school, Park arrives home to find Tina getting her hair done in the makeshift salon Park's mother, Mindy—Min-Dae, in Korean—runs out of the Sheridans' converted garage. When Tina sees Park come in to say hello to his mother, she asks Mindy if she's met Park's girlfriend yet, looking meanly at Park as she does. Park insists he doesn't have a girlfriend. His mother urges him to go check on dinner, and Park, angry, goes into the kitchen and begins slamming cabinets as he gets dinner ready. His father comes in and yells at him, urging him to take his anger out through exercise instead.

After dinner, Park waits around for the phone to ring. Josh can tell he's anxious, and makes fun of him—in front of their parents—for “dating Big Red.” Park tells Josh that if he ever uses that nickname again, he will “literally” kill him. Josh continues making fun of Eleanor, and Mindy sends him to his room.

Soon, the phone rings, and when Mindy picks up, she tells Park that it's Eleanor. Park runs to his room to take the call there. Park and Eleanor breathlessly express their mutual excitement to say all the “things [they] can't say on the bus.” They begin discussing everything, from Park's Korean heritage (and Park's fear that being half Asian makes him seem “half-girl” to his racist friends) to Eleanor's devil-may-care attitude. Eleanor has an answer for everything Park says to her, but yet somehow avoids answering most of his questions. She refuses to talk about her family or her house, even though Park says he wants to know more about her life.

Eleanor hangs up at one point to put her little brother to bed, promising to call back in fifteen minutes—but barely have seven have gone by before she calls again. Park asks her where she is in the house and what she's doing, so that he can “feel like [he's] with [her].” She tells him she's lying in the dark in front of the living room stereo. They talk about **music** until both of them start to grow sleepy. Eleanor says she misses Park, and wishes they could have some real time alone together. Park hears that she has started crying, and asks her why they can't see each other. Eleanor replies that her stepdad would “kill” her. Park asks her why Richie is so angry with her all the time, but Eleanor says defensively that in her life, there aren't always answers to everything.

Park asks Eleanor why she's mad at him, but she won't answer. In response, she asks him why he likes her in the first place. Park replies that he doesn't just like Eleanor—he “need[s]” her. He says he doesn't know why he needs her so badly—but has found that lately, all he wants is to be around her all the time. Eleanor doesn't say anything, and Park begs her to speak up so that he doesn't feel stupid.

*This passage introduces yet another recurring thread throughout the novel—the fact that Tina, who the novel later reveals once dated Park, harbors a lingering jealousy of his relationship with Eleanor, and seeks to bring both of them down. Park doesn't know how to react to this kind of attention—and at many points throughout the novel, is in active denial about it.*



*Park has to deal with scrutiny over his relationship with Eleanor not just at school but at home, too—and he is constantly fighting off feelings of shame and uncertainty about Eleanor for this reason.*



*Park and Eleanor's deep, wide-ranging conversation covers a lot of ground—but there are still secrets Eleanor is keeping. Park wants to know everything about her because, as Rowell asserts through the theme of love and intimacy, true intimacy is knowing another person fully; but he accepts that there are certain parts of Eleanor's life that she's not ready to discuss.*



*In this conversation, just as in their conversations on the bus, music is the thing that pulls Eleanor and Park back to one another time and time again. Music connects them practically, in terms of their shared interest, but it's also a spiritual conduit that allows them to express things words cannot. In this passage, as the conversation turns more serious, Park's privilege begins to show, and Eleanor tries to impress upon him just how different their lives are.*



*Park's startling confession is very deep for someone his age. He is unable to articulate what draws him to Eleanor so intensely or why he cares for her so profoundly, but it is this indefinable “need” that makes him want to explore their relationship even further.*



Eleanor tells Park to ask her why she likes him. Park does so. Eleanor replies that she doesn't like Park—she thinks that she “live[s]” for him, and feels like she can hardly breathe when they're not together. Eleanor immediately feels embarrassed for having revealed her feelings, but soon Park speaks up to fill the silence. He tells Eleanor that he needs to find a way to see her—even if her “crazy” stepfather is standing in their way. Eleanor insists that Richie would “do whatever he could” to take Park away from Eleanor if he were to find out about them. She reveals that the last time Richie got really mad at her, he kicked her out of the house and refused to let her come home for a year.

Park invites Eleanor to come to his house—his family, he says, would welcome her. Eleanor worries that Park will be embarrassed of her—but Park says she could never embarrass him. Eleanor tells Park that she has seen headlights flashing outside—her father is home, and she has to get off the phone. Before he hangs up, Park tells Eleanor he loves her. Eleanor, stunned, hangs up the phone and pretends to be sleeping on the floor as her father walks in the front door.

## CHAPTER 20

The next day, before leaving her father's house, Eleanor steals some toothbrushes and soap from the hall closet. Her father only pays her seven dollars before driving her home, where he greets all of Eleanor's siblings and gives them car rides around the neighborhood. A few hours after Eleanor's father leaves, Richie orders all the kids to pile into the back of his truck bed—despite the cold weather—so that he can take them to a movie. On the drive back from the theater, the car passes Park's house, and Eleanor wonders which window is his.

Meanwhile, Park regrets telling Eleanor that he loves her—even though he does. He feels, though, that he said the words too soon, especially knowing how Eleanor feels about sappy things like [Romeo and Juliet](#). It is Sunday, and Park is getting dressed to go next door to his grandparents' house for dinner. His father's parents are gregarious Irish people—Park is resentful that he didn't get more of their genes. Over dinner, Park's family teases him about his new girlfriend—and his grandmother expresses sympathy for the girl, who is growing up with the no-good Richie Trout for a stepfather.

*Eleanor reciprocates the all-consuming need Park feels, admitting that her relationship with Park is the one thing in her life that sustains her—and the one thing she doesn't feel she can live without. This also, however, requires Eleanor to open up a little bit and to admit just how fragile things between them are.*



*Eleanor is unable to say the words “I love you” to Park—a fact she worries will derail their relationship. However, Eleanor and Park's different ways of expressing love will become a recurring thread through their relationship, and something they work on together.*



*After Eleanor's father shows up and spends some time with his kids, Richie feels he needs to show the man up by taking them all out and pretending to be a good father himself. This shows just how fundamentally insecure and desperate for control Richie really is.*



*Park is aware of Eleanor's feelings about [Romeo and Juliet](#) and other sappy love stories—and worries that her disdain for those kind of things extends to declarations of love, too.*



Sunday night, Eleanor—who has never lied to her mother about “anything important” before—tells Sabrina that she is planning on going to a neighborhood friend’s house tomorrow after school. Eleanor tells her mother that her new friend is named Tina. Sabrina tells Eleanor it’s okay for her to go over, and expresses happiness over the fact that Eleanor is “finally making friends.”

*Eleanor is ready to spend more time with Park outside of school, and realizes that she’ll have to bend the truth if she wants to make that happen. Eleanor knows that her mother doesn’t care enough about her to really poke into the lie—and while this sad reality hurts her, it allows her to chase down a slice of freedom.*



## CHAPTER 21

As Eleanor boards the bus on Monday morning, she wonders if Park will look different to her now that she knows he is in love with her. When she spots him in his regular seat, she finds that he does look different—he is “more beautiful than ever.” Eleanor sits down beside Park, and they both slouch low in their seats and hold hands. Eleanor hands Park the tape of Beatles **music** she made him over the weekend, and they listen to it on the ride. At Eleanor’s locker, she tells Park that she has told her mother she might go over to a friend’s after school—Park tells her he’d love for Eleanor to come over.

*Eleanor and Park are giddy as they enter a new phase of their relationship—Eleanor is happy to know that Park loves her rather than frightened by the intimacy of that fact, and Park is grateful for Eleanor showing her love in ways other than verbalizing the words.*



The narrative switches to Park’s point of view. As the two of them ride home to Park’s house on the bus together, he can’t “help but see Eleanor the way his mom [is] going to.” Mindy, a beautician, doesn’t like it when women dress alternatively or “like [a] man.” Eleanor isn’t “nice” in general—and Park’s mom “love[s] nice.”

*Park loves Eleanor—but is still nervous about what being with her means and how it reflects on him. There’s a part of him that’s still shallow and desperate for the approval of everyone around him, but the very fact that he’s staying with Eleanor shows that he wants to change and grow.*



As Park prepares to introduce Eleanor to his mother, he advises Eleanor to smile. She gets upset and wants to know why—but before Park can answer her, Mindy has come into the living room. She greets Eleanor, who smiles widely and crookedly, clearly nervous. Eleanor and Park sit on the couch in the living room and turn on MTV, but as they watch in silence, Park can tell that something is wrong. When Park asks Eleanor what’s going on, she tells him she was thrown when he asked her to smile. Park explains that he was nervous—he’s “never brought anyone like [Eleanor] home before.” Eleanor stands up quickly and tells Park she’s leaving and will see him tomorrow. Park begs Eleanor to stay, but she tells him she’ll only embarrass him, and begins crying.

*Park’s innocuous comment to Eleanor completely derails the afternoon. Eleanor—who is nervous about meeting Park’s family, and perhaps looking for a way to hurt herself before he or his parents can hurt her—latches onto the comment and perceives it as Park trying to change her. Eleanor may be overreacting, but there is a kernel of truth in her response to Park’s suggestion, and when she says she wants to leave, Park is forced to reckon with the effect his words have.*



Park pulls Eleanor back down onto the couch, assuring her that he doesn't want her to leave. Eleanor continues crying and says that she hates meeting new people—they “never like [her].” Park puts his arm around Eleanor and asks her if she'll stay. They continue watching TV, but after another 20 minutes or so, Eleanor says she wants to leave again. This time, Park lets her. He walks her to the door and tells her he wanted her to smile because she's pretty when she smiles—Eleanor says she wishes Park thought she was pretty even when she doesn't, and then turns to leave. Park goes inside, and his mother tells him that Eleanor seems “nice.”

The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view. She is worried that Park is going to break up with her tomorrow—she feels she made a fool out of herself in front of his mother, and is grateful she didn't have to meet his dad. Eleanor feels guilty that meeting Park's family was “too much” for her—but part of her knows that as much as Park wants her too, she will “never belong in [his] living room.” These days, Eleanor has a hard time feeling like she belongs anywhere at all.

## CHAPTER 22

The next morning on the bus, Eleanor is saddened when Park hardly even looks at her—and doesn't hold her hand. Eleanor tugs at the edge of Park's t-shirt and asks if he's mad at her. He says that he is, because she “decided to leave [his] house as soon as [she] walked in.” Eleanor admits that she felt out of place at Park's house, and was worried he didn't want her there. Park doesn't immediately tell Eleanor she's wrong, and she realizes that she's “at least a little bit right.” Park is about to say something back, but Eleanor is distracted when the kids at the back of the bus—all dressed in red to celebrate a big University of Nebraska football game later that day—begin chanting “Go. Big. Red.”

When the bus pulls up at school, Park is seething mad, and begins approaching Steve, the originator of the chant, and all his buddies. Eleanor holds him back, but Park says he's tired of the popular kids embarrassing Eleanor. Eleanor asks if what Park really means to say is that he's sick of them embarrassing *him*. Eleanor begs Park not to get into a fight on her behalf, but when Steve calls out another taunt, Park flies at him. Eleanor is surprised to see fight hold his own even against the giant Steve, and eventually let loose a taekwondo kick that leaves Steve bleeding from the mouth. As teachers arrive to break up the fight, a still-furious Park warns Steve to leave “[his] girlfriend” alone.

*Mindy's comment about how “nice” Eleanor seems is obviously fake and meant simply to defuse tension. Park knows that Eleanor is not “nice,” and that's one of the things about her that he likes—even though it makes him nervous about bringing her around his parents. Through this experience, Park learns that he doesn't want Eleanor to act “nice”; he wants her to be herself, and feels ashamed of having tried to influence her behavior.*



*Over the course of her relationship with Park, Eleanor has begun to feel that she belongs with him, and sees him as a refuge from the chaos and displacement of her own personal life. After this afternoon, however, Eleanor feels stupid for having believed Park could sustain her sense of belonging—and worried that she'll never find a place where she feels safe and unjudged.*



*Park calls Eleanor out on the bus ride by forcing her to confront her self-defeating behavior and her fear of being rejected. Eleanor is able to own up to her behavior, but she also forces Park to admit to his own shameful feelings of embarrassment and uncertainty about their relationship. Eleanor and Park are trying to better one another—they want to make sure that not only are they each treating the other well, but that the other person is treating themselves with respect and dignity, too.*



*Park has been dealing with latent feelings of embarrassment about Eleanor since the first day of school. He has been afraid of his classmates' gossip about them, nervous about how his parents will react to Eleanor, and ashamed of his own desire to retain his limited popularity even as he judges Eleanor for her wild outfits and apathetic attitude. Now, though, he pushes all of that aside and decides, once and for all, to stand up for his relationship to Eleanor—to publicly declare her his girlfriend and to punish those who would seek to hurt her.*



As teachers drag Park and Steve away to be disciplined, Eleanor is stunned and unsure of how she should feel—proud, worried, or embarrassed herself. As the day goes by, Eleanor grows increasingly worried about Park, as he isn't in either of their shared classes or on the bus after school, and neither is Steve. All day, though, Eleanor notices that kids throughout school are comparing Park's fighting skills to David Carradine and Chuck Norris. At the end of the school day, Eleanor gets off the bus at Park's stop to go visit him.

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. After the fight, he is suspended for two days. Park's mother is so angry that his father has to come pick him up from school; Jamie is shocked to see Park with a black eye and a broken nose. On the way home, though, Jamie asks Park all about the fight—and what taekwondo moves he used—and the two of them have a rare moment of bonding. Back at home, though, Mindy is so irate that she calls Park a “white-trash monkey” and grounds him until further notice.

The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view as she rings the doorbell at Park's house after school. Park's imposing father, Jamie—who looks like Tom Selleck's character on *Magnum, P.I.*—answers the door. She has some of Park's assignments from school to drop off, so Jamie lets her in to see Park. Eleanor heads up to Park's room and quietly opens the door. He is lying in bed, and his face is swollen and discolored. Eleanor rushes over to sit with Park, feeling a pang of sadness and guilt. As she touches Park's face, Park says he's worried that he's ruined things between them—Eleanor retorts that the only thing Park has ruined is his face. Eleanor urges Park not to get into another fight on her behalf ever again—she promises that as long as Park likes her, it doesn't matter to her what anyone else thinks.

The next day on the bus, no one bothers Eleanor or makes fun of her at all—though after gym class, she finds another lewd message (“*pop that cherry*”) scrawled on her textbook cover. Eleanor rips the whole thing off in anger.

That afternoon, back at the house, Eleanor is surprised to find two new pairs of jeans folded on her bed—her mother has been to Goodwill. The jeans are a little baggy, but they're less threadbare than her other pairs. Eleanor marvels at her mother's ability to find and spend money in secret—she thinks it's as if her mother is “keeping them all alive behind [Richie's] back.”

*Eleanor doesn't know whether to feel ashamed or proud. There's a part of her that is waiting to see how to react based on the judgment of her classmates. As she hears whispers of other students comparing Park to martial-arts legends, she realizes that maybe Park has given both their reputations a boost.*



*Though Jamie is proud of Park both for standing his ground against a bully and for utilizing his taekwondo moves in everyday life, Mindy is horrified by Park's display of violence. Park himself doesn't feel any shame about the incident—in fact, he feels tough and validated.*



*Eleanor is truly grateful that Park stood up for her, and attempts to show him during this visit. At the same time, she doesn't want him ruining his social life or hurting himself on her behalf. Eleanor isn't like Park—she doesn't have the same desperate need for approval he does—and when she tells him that she genuinely doesn't care what anyone else thinks of her or her relationship with Park, she means it. He gives her all the confidence she needs.*



*Eleanor cannot seem to shake the bullies that dog her at every turn. She is filled with shame and self-loathing over the constant abuse, even as she experiences new levels of happiness and confidence in her relationship with Park.*



*Eleanor doesn't understand why her mother has made the choices she's made, or why she lets her children suffer in the name of preserving a relationship that's so painful—but doesn't have the power to challenge her mother, and is forced to take small bits of affection and rare gifts whenever they come.*



## CHAPTER 23

That Friday, Park returns to school, but he's still grounded for weeks after the fight. His mother says he's going to stay punished until he feels sorry about fighting, but the truth is, Park doesn't feel sorry. He stood up to Steve and now feels less anxious around the popular kids, as if he's proven himself to them and freed himself—and Eleanor—from their taunts. Even Eleanor admits she was impressed by Park's fighting technique.

The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view. Since the fight, things have changed for her, too—the whole school knows that she is the reason Park and Steve fought in the first place, and there are even rumors the two of them were fighting for her affection. DeNice and Beebi love gossiping about the fight, and are grateful that someone put Steve's "sorry ass" in line at last. They constantly admire Eleanor's "stone-cold killer" of a boyfriend and congratulate her on landing such a tough, passionate guy.

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. As Christmas break approaches, he is still grounded, and worried that if he stays punished he won't be able to see Eleanor for three weeks. Park asks his father when his punishment will end, and Jamie says Park's grounding will lift when he learns to drive stick. Park's mother interrupts to tell him there will be no driving—and no "trouble girl"—in his future. Park tells his mother she's being unfair, but Mindy retorts, "Good girls don't dress like boys." Park's father urges him to go outside and play basketball or something rather than get in another fight with his mother.

Park goes over to his grandparents' house for a while, and when he gets back, he finds his father waiting up for him in the living room. Jamie tells Park he's not grounded anymore—and that Mindy is sorry for everything she said about Eleanor. He explains that though Mindy is worried about Park growing up and making his own choices, she wants to make peace by inviting Eleanor over for dinner. Park accuses his dad and mother of wanting to make fun of Eleanor for being "weird"; Jamie earnestly replies that he thought Eleanor's weirdness was the very reason Park liked her so much. Park goes up to bed, excited for the chance to invite Eleanor for dinner—in spite of everything.

*Park knows he technically should feel bad about fighting—but considering the boost in confidence it gave him and the freedom from shame it has given Eleanor, he actually feels good about the choice he made. Park is beginning to understand that there are ways to go through life other than the ones his parents have outlined for him.*



*Eleanor feels confident and capable lately—Park has publicly defended her and declared his commitment to her, and the gesture's weight is not lost on Eleanor or any of her friends.*



*Park feels immense pressure from his parents to conform to their ideas of how he should be living his life and what choices he should be making. To Park, this treatment feels egregious and unfair—but he has no idea how good he has it compared to Eleanor and other kids like her.*



*This passage marks a moment that seems like conflict, but it actually represents Jamie trying to get closer to Park. When Jamie calls Eleanor "weird," he doesn't mean it as a bad thing—he's just being honest, and even says he knows that Eleanor's weirdness is a positive for Park. Park still feels his family will never take his and Eleanor's relationship seriously, but he is excited nonetheless for the chance just to be around her more.*



## CHAPTER 24

Eleanor has, to her great shame, gotten good at sleeping through Sabrina and Richie's arguments. Tonight, though, she is startled awake by a noise, and knows that "something [is] different." She hears men's voices outside, followed by slamming in the kitchen and then gunshots. Eleanor panics and flies out of bed, urging her siblings to stay put while she crawls out the window and goes next door for help. At her neighbor's house, Eleanor calls the police. They soon arrive and escort Eleanor back over to her own house to take a look around.

As the police enter the house, Eleanor hears Richie cursing and the kids crying. Sabrina comes out to the living room and reprimands Eleanor for calling the police, begging her to tell the cops it was "all a mistake." The police talk with Richie for a while and then ask Eleanor one last time if everything's all right—Eleanor apologizes for wasting their time. As soon as the police are gone, Richie loses his cool, yelling at Eleanor and punching a hole in the wall. Sabrina defends Eleanor, insisting she was just scared of the gunshots, but Richie accuses Eleanor of trying to get him out of the house. He shouts that he can "get rid of" her if he wants to before Sabrina drags Eleanor away off to bed.

Sabrina brings Eleanor back to her and her siblings' room and explains that Richie fired the gunshots as warning shots to try and scare off some older kids playing in the park behind the house. Sabrina also tells Eleanor that because Richie doesn't have a license for the gun—and, she implies, keeps drugs in the house—the police visit could have meant a lot of trouble for him. Sabrina puts all the kids back to bed and then leaves the room, leaving Eleanor to comfort her siblings.

## CHAPTER 25

On Monday morning, Eleanor seems "off." Park lets her rest her head on his shoulder the whole bus ride, and doesn't bring up coming to dinner at all. Even by the time they get to school and Park walks Eleanor to her locker, she still seems closed-off and strange, and Park is afraid that even if he tells her the good news about being un-grounded, she might not really hear him.

*Eleanor is used to her mother and Richie fighting, and has even learned to tune them out—she has become numb to the constant verbal and physical violence all around her. But when gunshots get involved, she springs into action, desperate to save herself.*



*Even though Eleanor did hear gunshots, Richie manages to get the police to leave—and, through his influence over Sabrina, gets Eleanor to tell the police that she made a "mistake" in calling them. This passage shows how domestic abusers manipulate even those charged with enforcing the law—and how Richie's reign of terror is impossible for Eleanor to topple on her own.*



*Eleanor can hardly believe how many excuses her mother makes for Richie and how badly she allows him to behave time after time. The story implies that Eleanor did the right thing in calling the cops, but she has been made to feel like a villain—a deliberate move on Richie's part meant to further weaken the connection between Eleanor and the rest of the family.*



*Eleanor is deeply affected by the scary events of the previous night, but won't share with Park just how frightening and vulnerable the entire ordeal made her feel. She wants his quiet support instead—but he is made nervous by her almost catatonic demeanor.*



The narrative switches to Eleanor’s perspective. All day, she is consumed of thoughts about where she could possibly go if Richie kicks her out of the house again. She revisits painful memories of the first time Richie kicked her out—the two of them got into a horrible screaming match because Richie didn’t like the sound of Eleanor’s typewriter, and the fight culminated in Sabrina leading her out of the house and bringing her to a neighbor’s. Eleanor had no idea she wouldn’t be allowed back in the house for a year.

*Eleanor is traumatized by the events of the previous year, when her family chose Richie over her—and when her mother left her to fend for herself rather than abandon her abusive husband.*



The narrative returns to Park’s point of view once again. All day, he watches the pensive Eleanor and worries about her. She doesn’t say anything on the bus, but again rests her head on Park’s shoulder the whole way. When Eleanor gets off at her stop, Park follows her off so that he can tell her he’s not grounded anymore—and invite her over. Eleanor doesn’t immediately accept his invitation, and Park asks her if she still wants to hang out. Eleanor nods, but Park sees tears springing to her eyes. Eleanor tells Park she’s “just really tired,” but Park worries she’s “slipping away” from him.

*Park doesn’t know the specifics of what’s going on with Eleanor—but based on his rudimentary understanding of her complicated personal life, he knows that there are things about her he might never be able to comprehend. He worries that their troubles will prove insurmountable, or that Eleanor will drift away from him due to her personal problems rather than giving him the chance to help her.*



## CHAPTER 26

Eleanor misses Park so much she can barely stand it. She is afraid that if he knew how much she really needed him, he’d “run away” from her forever.

*Eleanor is afraid of needing Park too much and driving him away. He’s the first good thing that’s come into her life in a long time, and she couldn’t bear to push him out of it.*



## CHAPTER 27

The next morning, Eleanor actually feels better. Her mother gives her a little gift of a glass flower pin she found at the thrift shop, and there is breakfast on the table. As Eleanor heads to the bus stop, she is afraid Park won’t be there—but is delighted to see that he is as she rounds the corner. She runs towards him and greets him sunnily, and the two joke about her swift change in demeanor. She happily tells Park that she told her mother she’d be going to a friend’s house after school, and Park smiles.

*Eleanor’s difficult home life constantly threatens to tear her down and make her feel worthless, burdensome, and hopeless—but her relationship with Park has given her a new perspective, and on certain days, the love she feels for him allows her to push all of her other doubts aside.*



Park is grateful for Eleanor’s happy, playful mood—even though he’s surprised and a little disoriented by it. He is excited for her to come to dinner, and tries to be careful not to say anything to her about what’s been going on at home that might make her feel uncomfortable, nervous, or unwelcome.

*Park is surprised by Eleanor’s dramatic turnaround, but grateful for the shift in her mood—and wants to keep her happy for as long as he can.*



Eleanor's happy mood persists throughout the day, from English to history to Spanish. She feels pangs of nervousness about going over to Park's creep in from time to time, but she reminds herself to be happy and tries to reassure herself that even if Park's parents aren't the "decent people" she hopes they are, at least she'll have Park with her when she faces them again. There is nowhere, she thinks, she wouldn't go "to be there with Park."

## CHAPTER 28

During lunch hour, Park calls home to tell his mother that Eleanor is coming over after school. He urges his mother to "be nice" to Eleanor—she retorts that she's nice to everyone. That afternoon, on the bus, Park can tell that Eleanor is nervous. He distracts her by talking to her about comic books, but as they get off the bus at Park's stop and start walking to his house, Eleanor begins picking a fight by twisting Park's words about her **outfit**. Park tells Eleanor that she always dresses "Like a sad hobo clown," but that he "love[s]" the way she looks. Eleanor laughs, and Park does too.

The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view as Mindy opens the front door for her and Park. Eleanor is worried that Park's mom hates her, and feels Mindy scrutinizing her **outfit** as the two of them head inside the house. As Eleanor looks around the living room, she can't help but feel jealous of how nice everything is and how different Park's lifestyle is from her own.

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. Every day that week, Eleanor comes over after school. On Friday night, Jamie asks Eleanor to stay for dinner—and to Park's surprise, she accepts the invitation. Park can tell that Eleanor is nervous during the meal, but after dinner, while everyone relaxes together and watches a movie, Eleanor reaches for Park's hand and holds it.

After the movie, Jamie suggests Park walk Eleanor home. Eleanor thanks the Sheridans for a lovely night, and then she and Park head out the front door. Eleanor tells Park that he can't walk her all the way home, but Park steers Eleanor towards the driveway next door, between a pine tree and an RV, explaining that it belongs to his grandparents. Park tells Eleanor he is going to "lose [his] mind" if he doesn't kiss her goodnight. Eleanor says she's nervous to kiss Park, as she's never kissed anyone before, but Park reassures her that it's going to be fine. The two of them share an intense, lengthy kiss, and pull apart and smile at one another before sharing another.

*Eleanor's relationship with Park allows her to feel braver and more confident—especially when she knows he'll be physically present. She's developing a stronger resolve and a sense of fearlessness because of how valued and capable her relationship with Park makes her feel.*



*Sometimes, when Park and Eleanor approach a new phase of their relationship, Eleanor looks to pick a fight or find another way to make herself or Park feel sad, unstable, or uncertain. This pattern, which emerges more powerfully over the course of the novel, could be seen as a defense mechanism on Eleanor's part—an attempt to head off any pain or disappointment that might be waiting down the road.*



*Even though Eleanor feels intimidated by Park's more affluent lifestyle and his judgmental mother, she's grateful for the time she gets to spend at a place as nice as the Sheridans' home.*



*As Eleanor grows closer with Park, she finds herself feeling closer and more comfortable around his family as well. Eleanor is getting to see for one of the first times in her life how a normal, healthy family functions.*



*Eleanor and Park have intense feelings for one another, but have been entirely unphysical with one another up until this point. Now, as they share their first kiss, they find themselves both surmounting the insecurity and shame that's been a part of their adolescence for so long and coming together in celebration of the relationship they're building.*



The narrative switches to Eleanor’s point of view. As she walks in the front door of her house, she finds Richie and all her siblings watching TV in the living room. She quickly dodges his questions about where she’s been, claiming to have eaten dinner at her friend Tina’s, before retreating to her bedroom and climbing into bed still fully dressed.

*Eleanor’s relationship with Park allows her to escape her life for a while, but every time she returns home, the same problems are waiting for her.*



## CHAPTER 29

The narrative switches rapid-fire between Eleanor and Park’s points of view as they reunite on the school bus on Monday. They are both giggly and love-struck like “cartoon character[s],” and continue noticing new things about one another’s faces and bodies. They discuss **music** and laugh joyfully all the way to school.

*Eleanor and Park grow closer every day, and their love overshadows all the conflict and uncertainty that marks the other arenas of their lives.*



## CHAPTER 30

At lunch, Cal tells Park that he and Kim are going out. Cal is grateful that Kim has given up her crush on Park and developed one on him instead. Cal invites Park to come to a basketball game with the two of them, and Park says he’ll think about it. Privately, he thinks that he doesn’t want to go anywhere without Eleanor—and he has a feeling she wouldn’t like going to a ball game.

*Park has trouble picturing himself and Eleanor going out together in public—not necessarily because he’s embarrassed of her, but because their relationship feels too special, private, and specific to share with the world.*



In the locker room after gym class, Eleanor fields a similar invitation from DeNice and Beebi, who invite her to come dancing with them on Thursday. They tell her she can bring Park along—but Eleanor has a hard time imagining the two of them going out together in public and leaving their insular bubble behind.

*Eleanor and Park’s respective inability to imagine their relationship taking place outside of a bubble shows just how protective they are of the intimacy they’re cultivating.*



Eleanor begins spending every afternoon over at Park’s house, and Mindy pressures both of them to get their homework done while they’re together. They study at the kitchen table, exchanging flirty laughs and glances—until the horrified Park notices a new message scrawled on Eleanor’s textbook cover, the lewdest one yet: “*i know you’re a slut,*” it reads; “*you smell like cum.*” Park asks Eleanor why she wouldn’t have told him the messages were still appearing—she retorts that she didn’t want to burden him with something so “gross and embarrassing.” The two of them try to figure out who could be writing the letters, and Eleanor says that though she’s noticed they usually appear on gym days, she can’t narrow it down—everyone in gym class but DeNice and Beebi seems to hate her.

*Even when things are going well between Park and Eleanor, there are external factors that threaten to bring them down. Eleanor tries to forget about the bullying she faces at school and the terror she faces at home—but Park wants Eleanor to take better care of herself and make all the different parts of her life better, not just the parts that involve him.*



Eleanor expresses her suspicion that Tina is leaving the notes—Park says Tina would never do anything so cruel, and explains that they used to be friends, and even dated in sixth grade. Eleanor is shocked and horrified, and demands to know more about their relationship. Park keeps trying to insist that “None of [it] matters,” but he can tell that with each question he shrugs off, Eleanor is looking at him more and more like he’s a “stranger.” Park asks Eleanor point-blank if she has written the messages herself. Eleanor’s face goes ghost-white, and after a moment, she starts packing up her books to leave. Eleanor storms out of the kitchen just as Mindy walks in to say hello to the two of them, and Park is embarrassed all over again.

That night, Park reflects on the disastrous confrontation with Eleanor—and his history with Tina. Though he’s not interested in her romantically she has come onto him several times over the last couple of years, and he knows that any residual popularity he has is because of her. Park resents himself for still “finding new pockets of shallow inside himself,” and for betraying Eleanor even when he doesn’t mean to.

## CHAPTER 31

The next morning, Park shows up to the bus stop ready to apologize to her—but when she isn’t there, he finds himself feeling angry and uncertain of what the fact that they won’t see each other for several weeks means for their relationship. Park shouts “I’m sorry” in the direction of Eleanor’s house.

It is the last day of school before Christmas vacation, and Eleanor tells her mother she is sick so that she can stay home from school. Even though Richie is at work all day, Eleanor stays put in her room until she runs out of things to read—and batteries for her Walkman. She doesn’t get out of bed until Sunday afternoon, but when Mouse, at the sight of her face, demands to know why she’s been crying, she gets back into bed and retreats into fantasies of Park—fantasies that now feel cheap in the wake of their fight.

The narrative switches to Park’s point of view. It is a week into Christmas break, and he hasn’t seen or heard from Eleanor. Jamie tenderly asks Park if he and Eleanor have broken up—and if it’s too late to get her back—but Park shuts down his father’s questions.

*As the novel goes on to reveal, Park sees Tina as his last remaining link to a chance at popularity—or at least the last thing standing between him and total social obscurity. For this reason, he has trouble accepting that she is writing such cruel things to Eleanor, because believing so would mean that he’d need to abandon his ties to Tina. He’s so desperate to preserve that link that he suggests Eleanor herself is writing the sexually explicit messages—a slight she cannot bear.*



*Park continues to feel ashamed about his desire to fit in and cling to his small bit of social clout. He knows that things like that don’t matter to Eleanor, and is almost pained that they matter so much to him.*



*Park has been feeling nervous and ashamed of how things unfolded with Eleanor—but now, when she doesn’t show up to the school bus, he feels almost angry with her for being avoidant and vindictive.*



*Eleanor wants to hide herself away from the world, so embarrassed is she over the direction her and Park’s relationship has taken. She wants so badly to connect with him, but every time they get closer, she finds a reason to pull herself away from him again.*



*Park is embarrassed over the state of his and Eleanor’s relationship—and quite frankly unsure of what has happened between them and where they stand.*



The narrative switches to Eleanor’s point of view. One day, Sabrina wakes Eleanor up early and asks her to walk to the grocery store with her—40 minutes away. They shop for on-sale groceries and then head to the Goodwill to find some cheap Christmas presents. The outing is a little depressing but also kind of nice, and on the walk home, Eleanor briefly considers confiding in her mother about Park, but ultimately decides she can’t.

*Eleanor wishes she and her mother had a better relationship than they do, but she also knows that to trust her mother would be a mistake, as her mother’s allegiances lie with Richie rather than with her own children.*



The narrative switches to Park’s point of view. He rides his bike back and forth past Eleanor’s house each day, waiting for a time when Richie’s truck isn’t in the yard. One day, finally, the truck is gone, and Park sees one of Eleanor’s siblings playing outside. Park pedals up to the yard and asks the older boy if Eleanor is home—he says he’s “not telling” and runs inside the house. Park pedals back home, dejected.

*Park has alienated himself from Eleanor, and has no way of getting back in touch with her due to her insular family and the tenuous situation at home.*



## CHAPTER 32

On Christmas Eve, a box of pineapple arrives as a gift from Eleanor’s aunt and uncle—and along with it, a letter inviting Eleanor to come up to their home in Minnesota for the summer to attend a camp for gifted high school students. Sabrina, touched and overjoyed, reads the letter aloud—Richie instantly protests sending Eleanor away. As the younger kids fight over the pineapple box in the background, Richie grows frustrated, and turns his attention away from Eleanor and onto them. He angrily passes out unwrapped Christmas presents to the children to shut them up, and then hands Eleanor her present—a 50-dollar bill. Eleanor has trouble enjoying her siblings’ excitement, though—she misses Park terribly, and wishes she could go over to his house.

*Richie can’t abide anyone interfering in the insular world he’s trying to create for his family—he sees even the arrival of a gift from other relatives as a slight against him, and becomes determined to vindictively prove that he is just as equipped to provide for his family (even though he’s decidedly not).*



Later in the day, Sabrina comes into Eleanor’s room to tell her to get ready for a family outing to the grocery store. Eleanor suggests that Richie is too drunk to drive them all, and Sabrina accuses Eleanor of trying to ruin a happy day and “undermin[ing]” their family. Eleanor reluctantly agrees to go along on the trip. At the grocery store, Richie waits in the truck while Eleanor, her mother, and her siblings do the shopping. At the register, Eleanor gives her mother the 50-dollar bill—her mother doesn’t thank her.

*When Eleanor tries to look out for her family—and for herself—she’s accused of trying to “undermine” Richie and tear the family apart. This is how abuse functions in Eleanor’s family: Eleanor is so often berated and minimized even when she’s in the right that she’s left confused and uncertain of herself. On top of it all, Eleanor is forced to surrender her Christmas “present” to make sure that the family has enough money for dinner.*



Meanwhile, Park and his mother are at the grocery store, shopping for Christmas dinner. Mindy spots Eleanor with all her siblings and points her out to Park, but the nervous Park insists they move on through the store without saying hello. He knows that greeting Eleanor could get her in a lot of trouble, especially if Richie is in the store.

*Park doesn’t want to greet Eleanor at the grocery store because he doesn’t want to cause trouble with her family for her—but there’s also a part of him that seems nervous or embarrassed to confront her.*



That evening, after dinner and a movie, Mindy comes into Park's room and gives him a present to give to Eleanor. She tells Park that she comes from a big family, too, and understands how, in such families, "everybody [is] spread so thin." Mindy apologizes sincerely and tearfully for how she initially treated Eleanor.

After Park's parents have gone to bed, he dons a coat and sneaks out through the back door. He races to Eleanor's house and walks around to her window, where he taps at the glass. There is no sound from within or movement of the curtain—but after a few moments, Eleanor's face appears at the window and she mouths for Park to head for the school nearby.

The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view. She is shocked to discover Park at her window—shocked, happy, and scared. After sending Park over to the school, Eleanor gets dressed and sneaks out to meet him on the steps of the elementary school. As soon as they are close enough to touch, Park takes Eleanor's face in his hands and kisses her deeply. They both begin to cry, and as they break apart, they apologize to one another for their actions before kissing some more. They stay outside together on the steps in the cold until their feet and faces are numb. Eleanor promises to come by the day after Christmas before hurrying home through the dark.

## CHAPTER 33

On Christmas Day, Eleanor sleeps until noon. Sabrina comes in to wake her up, but apologizes when she sees that Eleanor looks like she's caught a cold. Sabrina tells Eleanor that she'll try to get Richie to change his mind about Minnesota. Eleanor insists she doesn't want to go anyway. Sabrina leaves the room, and Eleanor pretends to go back to sleep.

Park, too, sleeps late on Christmas Day. Josh comes into his room to wake him up, and together they go downstairs to open presents. Park gets clothes, gift cards, cologne, and an empty key ring—but Park hardly cares about getting a license anymore, given how much he loves taking the bus with Eleanor each day.

Park thinks about his conversation with Eleanor last night—for the first time, she began telling him a little about her home life, her siblings, and Richie's reign of terror. Park hadn't wanted to come back inside, even with the bitter cold pressing down on them.

*In this emotional passage, Mindy, obviously affected by the sight of Eleanor's family at the grocery store, reveals that she knows what it is like to come from a family like Eleanor's. She has shielded Park from growing up the way she did—but clearly still bears the emotional pain of living a life "spread so thin."*



*Park knows that what he's doing is risky, but he's filled with an intense desire to see Eleanor and to repair what's broken between them, especially after his emotional discussion with his mother.*



*Eleanor and Park do truly love one another, and in spite of the conflicts and awkwardness they've faced in the last several weeks, as they reunite in this passage they choose to continue loving one another and building their relationship in spite of all the challenges they face.*



*Even on a family holiday, Eleanor tries to retreat into herself and spend the day in solitude. She wants to remain wrapped up in her thoughts of Park rather than focus on her and her family's bleak reality.*



*Park's family's Christmas is luxurious and privileged, drawing a sharp contrast between his reality and Eleanor's. Nonetheless, his thoughts wander continually to Eleanor.*



*Park loves being around Eleanor and always wants to hear what she has to say. Even when the things they discuss are difficult or uncomfortable, being with her is his favorite thing.*



Back at Eleanor's house, Eleanor—who has found that she really is getting a cold—comes out of her room for Christmas dinner. It is the most luxurious meal their family has had in a while—turkey, potatoes, rice pudding, and special Danish cookies. In spite of the rich meal, when it comes time for dessert, there is no pumpkin pie—a fact that sends the intoxicated Richie flying into a rage. He berates Sabrina for cooking a subpar meal, and throws the bowl of rice pudding at the wall before unsteadily lurching from the house to go buy some pie. After he leaves, Sabrina scrapes the top layer of pudding off the floor and serves it to Eleanor and her siblings.

*This passage shows that Richie's desire to humiliate and control Sabrina and her children is so profound that he would even go so far as to ruin their Christmas and waste their short supply of food in order to assert his power over them all. Nevertheless, Sabrina tries to keep her children happy and fed, but it's clear that her resolve has taken a huge blow.*



## CHAPTER 34

The next day, Eleanor arrives at Park's house, and his whole family greets her warmly. She shoves a present into Park's arms, and he opens it—it is a copy of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Eleanor secretly hopes Park won't open the book up just yet—she has written a secret message inside for him. Park excitedly pulls Eleanor up to his room and hands her two presents. One, he says, is a bottle of perfume from Mindy—the other is from him. Eleanor opens Park's present and finds a beautiful silver necklace inside, with a small pendant in the shape of a pansy. Park tells Eleanor he'll understand if she can't take the present home—but Eleanor wants it.

*Though Christmas at Eleanor's house turned out to be a veritable disaster, she is welcomed into Park's house and showered with gifts. Eleanor is happy to be surrounded by love and warmth, but at the same time, all the abundance at Park's house is just a reminder of how lacking things are at her own.*



The narrative switches to Park's point of view. As Eleanor opens his present, he is nervous and regrets getting her something "so public." As soon as Eleanor opens the gift, though, she tells Park she loves it, and asks him to fasten it around her neck. Park does so, full of desire the whole time.

*Eleanor and Park both know it's risky for Eleanor to do anything that might clue her family—especially Richie—into the truth about their relationship, but Eleanor cannot resist having a tangible token of Park's love to help her through her tough times.*



The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view. She and Park sit in Park's family's kitchen, playing cards. When Park and Mindy ask Eleanor how her Christmas was, she gives them generic answers about the dinner they ate and the movies they watched. Eleanor clutches her necklace tight.

*The necklace is already functioning as a touchstone for Eleanor—a way of connecting to Park, and to the person she is when she's around him, even when she's trapped in the dangerous world of her home.*



Eleanor spends most of the rest of her Christmas vacation at Park's house. Eleanor's mother thinks she is at Tina's the whole time, and worries that Eleanor is overstaying her welcome. Sabrina tells Eleanor to invite Tina over to their house—but both Eleanor and Sabrina know something like that could never happen. Eleanor misses the days when her parents were still married and their house was always full of friends and guests.

*Eleanor's mother struggles to maintain the charade that things are normal within her own mind, even though it's clear to Eleanor that their home life has grown so warped that the idea of guests is an impossibility.*



Eleanor always tries to leave Park's house before dinner, so as not to be in imposition—and also because she wants to beat Richie home so that she can take a bath in peace. As school starts back up, Eleanor finds herself frenzied as she tries to balance her time at Park's house with her own routine at home—and finds that she still has to endure teasing and bullying from Tina and her crew almost each day.

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. As school starts back up, he has to fend off questions from Cal about his relationship with Eleanor. Cal wants to know if Park is “getting it” from her, but Park only retorts that Cal's dirty mind and lewd questions are the very reason he didn't tell him about the relationship in the first place.

*The pressures of Eleanor's difficult life are increasing and piling up. Even though her existence has become a balancing act, it's worth it to her to be with Park and to be able to escape her home for a while each day.*



*This passage shows how Park's friends just don't understand the depth or seriousness of his relationship with Eleanor. It also suggests that Cal is a suspect in the case of who's been writing lewd notes on Eleanor's textbooks.*



## CHAPTER 35

One night, as Eleanor hurries to leave the Sheridans' house before dinner, she runs into Park's dad, Jamie, on the front steps. She greets him quickly and hurries past him, but he calls out to her. He tells her that he's “getting tired” of asking her to stay for dinner—he tells her she is welcome anytime, and has a standing invitation. Eleanor is confused, but then Jamie goes on: he says that he knows Richie, and the two of them grew up together. He says that he knows Richie isn't “easy” to be around, and that Eleanor should feel comfortable spending as much time as she needs to with Park and the rest of the family. Eleanor smiles and follows Jamie back inside the house.

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. Even though he and Eleanor spend every afternoon and evening together, it “still [isn't] enough.” Park wishes the two of them could be alone together, but every time Park suggests spending time up in his room—albeit with the door open—Eleanor insists she doesn't want his family to think she's “slutty.”

One evening, as Eleanor and Mindy are discussing Mindy's love of hairdressing, Mindy suggests giving Eleanor a makeover. Eleanor is reluctant, but Mindy insists she won't give Eleanor a noticeable haircut or put on anything that can't be washed off. Eleanor agrees, and Mindy leads her out to the makeshift salon in the garage.

*Though Jamie and Park are often at odds, in this passage, Jamie offers Eleanor a kind of grace and understanding that even Park hasn't been able to give her. Jamie knows all about Richie—and though he doesn't elaborate, the simple fact that Jamie is on Eleanor's side against her stepfather makes her feel validated and supported, more so than she does by her own family.*



*Eleanor and Park can't get enough of one another, but they feel pressure to resist their physical desire for one another even as their romantic and sexual feelings intensify.*



*Eleanor hates all things related to the farce of image, beauty, and self-improvement. She has been determine throughout the entire novel not to change her appearance for anyone—but now, her desire to be polite and respectful weighs out her allegiance to her carefully curated image.*



As Mindy begins giving Eleanor a makeover, Park works as his mother's assistant. Eleanor is slightly embarrassed, but because she is the Sheridans' guest, she is determined to keep her mouth shut and let Mindy have her fun. Mindy washes Eleanor's hair and treats it for dryness with a hot-oil pack, then does Eleanor's makeup. Mindy demonstrates a couple of the eye pencils on a reluctant Park, and Eleanor admires how "dangerous" Park looks with the makeup around his eyes. Mindy blows Eleanor's hair dry with a diffuser while Eleanor and Park play rock-paper-scissors to pass the time.

When the makeover is done, Mindy urges Eleanor to look at how pretty she is in the mirror, but Eleanor feels like she is about to cry. She is embarrassed, she tells Park when Mindy steps out for a second, to have everyone look at her. Park points out that he's always looking at Eleanor—she says she wishes he'd stop. Eleanor looks at herself in the mirror, and though she hates the "fake face" Mindy has given her, she tries her best to stay calm. When Park admires Eleanor's beauty, she accuses him of liking her better as a "different person," but Park insists Eleanor looks just like herself but "with the volume turned up."

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. After Eleanor's makeover is done, he can't figure out "why it upset[s] her so much" to look a little different—he wonders if there's a part of Eleanor that *wants* to look ugly. The next morning, as Park gets ready for school, he puts some of his mother's eyeliner on, and surprisingly feels he looks "more masculine" than he usually does. He leaves his hair wild rather than combing it, and heads down for breakfast—where his father "flip[s]" out over Park's new look. Though Jamie demands Park comb his hair and wash the makeup off his face, Park ignores his father, insisting that "Plenty of guys," like David Bowie, wear makeup. Mindy tells Jamie to lay off Park and let him make his own decisions, and Park takes advantage of the opportunity to rush out the door.

When Park gets on the bus, he makes eye contact with Steve—who immediately asks if he's wearing makeup. Park says he is, and braces for a taunt or a physical assault—but instead, Steve tells him he looks "kind of [...] like Ozzy [Osbourne]" and then goes back to talking with Tina. When Eleanor gets on the bus and sees Park, she rushes over to their seat—and kisses him hard.

*As with all things in her life, Eleanor finds that the embarrassment of getting a makeover is easier to endure with Park by her side. Their connection—and the connection it has allowed Eleanor to feel to her innermost self—allows her to get through the makeover without feeling like she's totally surrendered her sense of self.*



*Though Eleanor is constantly insecure that Park will snub or reject the real her, Park reminds her every time she expresses that fear that he loves her deeply for who she is. Park loves this version of Eleanor not because it's different, but because it allows her to look even more authentically like who she is on the inside.*



*Eleanor's reluctant experimentation with how she presents herself to the world opens up a curiosity in Park about what would happen if he altered the way he looked, too. Park seems to want to get in touch with a deeper part of himself—an instinct surely born of the security, confidence, and self-worth his relationship with Eleanor is allowing him to experience for the first time.*



*Though Park's father suggested that Park's effeminate look would get him in trouble at school, Park is relieved to find that even the school bullies don't care—and Eleanor is excited by his new vibe.*



## CHAPTER 36

That afternoon, Park tells Eleanor not to come over—he is sure that he’s going to be grounded. He goes home and washes the makeup off his face, then confronts his mother to ask if he’s going to be punished. She asks him how his day was, and he says it was fine—most people who noticed his makeup said he looked cool. Mindy asks Park if he is trying to look like a girl, but Park retorts that he’s trying to look more like himself.

That night at dinner, Jamie will barely look at Park—though he asks where Eleanor is. When Park asks his father if he’s grounded, Jamie says he isn’t. Park asks if his dad is planning on talking to him about what happened earlier that morning, but Jamie coldly says he “can’t think of a single thing” he wants to say to Park.

*Park feels that there are going to be consequences for being his true self, but he is prepared to face them down. This moment shows that he has a new allegiance to discovering who he truly is, and not hiding it from anyone for any reason.*



*Park’s father is less than accepting of Park’s experimental new look—and though Park’s confidence is growing lately, he still clearly has concerns about securing his father’s approval.*



## CHAPTER 37

Eleanor, too, is beginning to feel like she never gets any alone time with Park. She has considered sneaking out to meet him, but knows her mother would find out—Sabrina has already discovered the makeup products Mindy gave Eleanor, and Eleanor has had to lie and say they came from Tina. Eleanor, however, isn’t the one who’s been wearing makeup lately—it’s Park who has been showing up to school in eyeliner. Eleanor thinks the makeup makes Park look even cooler and cuter—like himself “with the volume turned way up”—and DeNice and Beebi agree.

The narrative switches to Park’s point of view. Lately, he has been scheming of ways to make his rare alone time with Eleanor last longer, but is hopeless when he thinks of how they can secure more of it—Park knows that with his father giving him the silent treatment lately, he won’t be getting his driver’s license anytime soon. Eleanor has tried to talk to Park about the tension with his dad, but Park is reluctant to discuss their relationship, insisting that his dad only loves him “because he has to.”

The narrative switches to Eleanor’s point of view. Though she was initially embarrassed by Mindy’s makeover and beauty tips, she has actually been using the products and information Mindy gave her—using conditioner, sleeping on a satin pillowcase, and allowing Mindy to try out new Avon products on her when she’s over at the Sheridans’ house. One evening, as Mindy applies eyeshadow to Eleanor’s lids, she says she wishes she’d had a daughter; Eleanor secretly thinks how badly she wishes she’d been born into “a family like this.”

*Things remain dicey and tenuous at Eleanor’s house, and she begins to feel the strain of not being able to get enough time with Park. Even though things are going well at school, the abuse Eleanor has endured means she never feels entirely secure or safe and is constantly waiting for things to sour.*



*Park is wrestling with insecurities of his own as his relationship with his father slowly deteriorates. Even though Park faces judgment at home, though, he’s committed to exploring the truth of who he is.*



*Even though Park is having a difficult time with his father, his family is still positively idyllic to Eleanor compared to the environment she’s grown up in. Eleanor wishes she could feel the comfort, safety, and security of a family that loves her and puts her first.*



## CHAPTER 38

Eleanor hates Wednesdays. Every Wednesday, Park has taekwondo, and Eleanor is forced to go straight home after school and spend all night in her room reading. Eleanor is often cooped up with her siblings, since it's still too cold for them to play outside. One Wednesday afternoon, while Eleanor is reading in bed, Maisie approaches her and tells her that she and the other kids know that Eleanor has a boyfriend. Eleanor denies it, but Maisie says Ben heard the truth from one of Josh Sheridan's friends—Eleanor's secret is out. Ben, who is playing in the corner, looks up at Eleanor blankly. Eleanor warns her siblings that if they tell Sabrina or Richie, Eleanor will get kicked out again.

Ben says that he and Maisie aren't going to tell—but want something in return. Maisie, with a “desperate” look in her eyes, stares hard at Eleanor. Eleanor intuitively understands what her siblings want from her—and tells them that she can't take them with her when she leaves the house every afternoon. Maisie accuses Eleanor of not caring about them. Eleanor says she does care—but she can't help them, since she can't even help herself.

Maisie changes tactics. Staring “hard” at Eleanor, her eyes cold, she demands that Eleanor let them use her secret stash of stuff—comics, makeup, and music. Eleanor tells them they can use what's hers, but they need to put it away when they're done, or else they'll get caught and have everything confiscated.

The narrative switches to Park's point of view. Park, too, hates Wednesdays—he misses being around Eleanor, and hates the cold way he and his father have been interacting since Park started wearing makeup. Though Eleanor insists that Jamie loves him, Park feels his father's love is “obligatory”—in reality, he thinks, his dad can't “stand the sight of him.” Nevertheless, Park continues wearing eyeliner to school each day—even though his dad starts pretending he isn't there.

The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view. Now that Maisie and Ben know the truth, she fears her secret about Park will soon be out. Eleanor worries that “She [is] running out of time with him.”

*Eleanor's life reaches a crossroads as her younger siblings discover the secret she's been working so hard to keep. Eleanor's relationship with Park is predicated on her ability to keep it a secret from her family—and now that divide has been breached. Eleanor is nervous that her siblings will turn against her, given their newfound allegiance to Richie.*



*In this heartbreaking exchange, Eleanor understands that her siblings want what she has been able to secure for herself: an escape from her home life. She is unable to give it to them—and afraid that if they try to tag along with her, she'll lose her one refuge from Richie.*



*Maisie is unable to secure what she wants from Eleanor, which is a physical escape from the house—instead, she settles for being able to use Eleanor's things, which will provide her with a semblance of escape if not a literal one.*



*Again, Rowell shows that in spite of the way strife and conflict have infiltrated his home life, Park is unwilling to surrender the truth of who he is just to make peace with his judgmental father.*



*Eleanor has worked so hard and risked so much for her relationship with Park—and now she fears it is all about to come to an end.*



## CHAPTER 39

Lately, Park has been cycling through new **music** especially fast, listening to everything from punk to New Wave to Elvis Costello. One Thursday night, he suggests Eleanor come up to his room so that he can play her an Elvis Costello tape. Eleanor expresses her usual fear that Park's parents will judge her for going into his room—but when Park asks his father if it's okay for them to go up, Jamie responds he doesn't care what they do as long as nobody gets pregnant.

Eleanor and Park go into Park's room and sit on the floor near the stereo. As Park cues up an Elvis Costello tape, Eleanor asks if Park misses spending time with his other friends, like Cal, considering how much time she's started taking up in his life. Park insists that there's no one he'd ever miss but Eleanor.

Eleanor and Park listen to tape after tape, and, soon after Mindy stops by the open door to check on them, Park leans over to kiss Eleanor. They both lose their balance, and Eleanor falls over on some tapes, smashing a few cases. Eleanor is embarrassed, and though Park tries to assure her he doesn't care, Eleanor stands up to leave.

Back at Eleanor's house, Eleanor walks into her room to find Maisie covered in makeup and perfume. Eleanor should be worried about Maisie—and, by proxy, herself—getting caught, but she's too distracted by the memory of kissing Park. Eleanor wishes Park could kiss and touch her constantly—she feels “like one of those dogs [who's] tasted human blood and can't stop biting.”

## CHAPTER 40

Eleanor is sitting with Park in his room after school one afternoon when he starts encouraging her to check her books every day after gym class—and to tell her counselor, Mrs. Dunne, if it turns out that Tina is the one leaving the nasty notes. The discussion, though, quickly turns to Eleanor defensively grilling Park about his past relationship with Tina. Park insists that the two of them were just 12 years old when they dated—if it could even be called dating—and that “nothing before [Eleanor] counts.” Park tells Eleanor that though she wasn't the first person he kissed, he hopes she is the last.

*In this passage, the symbol of music is rendered as a more literal method of connection, as Park uses listening to music as a kind of excuse for getting some real alone time with Eleanor.*



*This passage hints at the flip side of a love as intense as Eleanor and Park's—all of their other friendships are falling by the wayside as they indulge their obsession with one another.*



*Eleanor's relationship with Park has allowed her to feel more confident in herself—but there are still moments when she is reminded of the things about herself of which she is ashamed or uncertain.*



*This passage shows how even in the face of increasing tension and threats to her relationship with Park, Eleanor remains committed to getting as much out of it as she can for as long as she can.*



*Eleanor is constantly looking for ways to catch Park in a lie or prove that he doesn't really love her—perhaps to confirm her own worst fears and keep herself from being in the vulnerable position of placing her trust in a person who could hurt her. Everyone else in Eleanor's life has let her down, and there seems to be a part of her that believes Park will, too.*



Eleanor is horrified and tells Park to stop saying such things, but Park retorts that Bono from U2 and Robert Smith from the Cure were in their teens when they met their wives. Eleanor taunts Park, calling him “sweet **Romeo**,” but Park begs Eleanor to be serious—and to consider that their love just might last.

*When Park makes a declaration of love for Eleanor, she balks at that as well—Eleanor is unable to allow herself to be truly vulnerable with Park. It’s easier for her to believe that things will go wrong than to believe they might turn out right.*



The next day, DeNice and Beebi wait with Eleanor after gym class while she checks her books for any new writing on her textbooks—she is relieved to find that there isn’t any. Eleanor, who still has to get changed, urges the girls to go on to lunch without her and save her a seat. When Eleanor opens her locker, however, she finds that her **clothes** are missing. The gym teacher enters the locker room to ask Eleanor why she’s still there, and Eleanor explains. After a thorough search, Eleanor and her gym teacher find the clothes—stuffed in one of the toilets. Eleanor’s gym teacher helps her fish the clothes out and place them in a plastic bag, but urges Eleanor to stop “letting” Tina and the other girls get to her.

*The teasing Eleanor has had to face at school seems to have abated lately—but in this scene, it becomes clear that Eleanor’s bullies aren’t finished with her yet. Tina and the others putting Eleanor’s clothes in the toilet symbolizes the fact that they’re trying to wash away her individuality and proclaim it’s worthless enough to belong in the toilet.*



Eleanor realizes that she will have to walk through the halls in her gym suit, even if she just wants to go to her counselor’s office to call home. The thought horrifies her, but she braces herself, and heads out into the hall. She decides to leave campus rather than stay and be humiliated, but as she hurries down the hall towards the main doors, she catches sight of Park staring at her red-faced and open-mouthed.

*Eleanor is embarrassed to be seen in her gym suit—especially by Park, the person whose opinion she values most. Eleanor worries that after seeing her, Park will be less attracted to her, but she never considers that the opposite might be true.*



At home, Eleanor tells her mother the whole story. As she rinses out Eleanor’s **clothes** in the bathtub, Sabrina says Eleanor doesn’t have to go back to school if she doesn’t want to. Sabrina tells Eleanor how lucky she is to have a friend like “Tina” when things get tough. That night, even though Eleanor knows Friday night is movie night at the Sheridans’ house, she stays home in her own bed, afraid to face Park.

*In the face of her shame, Eleanor isolates herself even further by remaining at home rather than seeking out comfort and solidarity from the person who knows and loves her best.*



## CHAPTER 41

On Friday night, Park goes to bed early. He has been fielding questions about Eleanor’s whereabouts from his parents all night and is exhausted. Lying in bed, Park can’t stop picturing Eleanor in her skin-tight gym suit. He closes his eyes and pictures the curves of her body, afraid of how he’ll ever be able to look Eleanor in the face again now that he knows what her body looks like under her baggy men’s **clothes**.

*Eleanor was concerned that Park would cringe at the sight of her body—but the more Park sees of Eleanor and understands about her, the more he loves and desires her.*



## CHAPTER 42

The next morning, Park's whole family is going on an outing to the boat show, lunch, and the mall—but Park doesn't feel like going. He asks if he can stay home and invite Eleanor over instead, and his mother says it's fine as long as Park keeps up with his chores.

Eleanor is walking through the neighborhood when she passes Park's house and sees that the Sheridans' car isn't in the driveway. She goes up to the door and rings the bell—Park opens the door and pulls her inside, and the door isn't even closed before he puts his arms around her and begins kissing her. As Park starts "touching her [in] all the places she [is] afraid to be touched," Eleanor doesn't feel even a little bit embarrassed.

The narrative alternates quickly between Eleanor and Park's points of view as they hungrily kiss and touch one another, pushing back against their own respective internal monologues of shyness and anxiety and exploring one another's bodies freely for the first time. Both of them are worried they won't have another chance to touch each other like this again—or at least for a long time—and as they fall onto the couch, they let their desires take over. Though they don't have sex, they spend the afternoon talking, touching, and kissing, and Eleanor and Park are both surprised to find that they feel no shame or insecurity with one another any longer.

As it starts to get dark out, Eleanor and Park straighten themselves up in case the Sheridans come home from their day out. As the two of them slowly make their way back to reality, Park asks Eleanor about the day before—about why she was walking through the halls in her gym suit. Eleanor explains that someone in gym class took her clothes, but says she doesn't want to talk about the incident in detail. She asks Park if seeing her in her gym suit excited him, and he admits that it did. Eleanor privately rejoices over how "pissed" Tina would be if she knew what stealing Eleanor's clothes ultimately led to.

Park's family comes home, and Eleanor has dinner with them all before heading home. It is late when she gets back to her own house—Richie is awake watching TV, and Ben and Maisie are asleep on the couch beside him. Richie stops Eleanor and asks her where she's been—she tells him, as always, that she's been at Tina's. Richie then asks Eleanor what she bought with her Christmas money. Sabrina comes out of the bedroom and tells Eleanor to go to bed. Eleanor looks Richie in the eye and tells him she bought a necklace.

*As Park's relationship with Eleanor has deepened, his relationship with his family has suffered. He is learning more about who he is both with Eleanor and on his own, and seeing that he is different from his family.*



*For the entirety of their relationship so far, Eleanor and Park have been longing for more alone time together. Now that they have finally carved some out, they plan to delve into a side of their relationship that they've finally developed the confidence to explore.*



*In the context of Eleanor and Park's relationship, sexuality isn't a dangerous, shameful, or destructive force. As the pair explore one another's bodies, using their physicality to express the love and devotion they feel, they discover that sexuality can be pure and nourishing.*



*Tina's been bullying Eleanor so badly all year, it seems, because of her lingering feelings for Park. Now, Eleanor recognizes how Tina's attempt to embarrass Eleanor by making her wander the halls in her gym suit backfired—it only brought Eleanor and Park even closer.*



*This encounter with Richie reminds Eleanor of the danger that exists just around the corner in her house—and suggests that even though Eleanor only continues to feel safer and more at home with Park and his family, things at her own house are still a ticking time bomb.*



## CHAPTER 43

Though Park's parents rarely fight, on Sunday evening, they spend an hour in their bedroom arguing. Park and Josh wonder what they could be fighting about—and Park is afraid that they somehow found out about what he and Eleanor did all day yesterday. He worries that it will be “months before they [are] alone again.”

On Monday morning, Eleanor's guidance counselor, Mrs. Dunne, gives her a new combination lock to put on her gym locker and assures her she and the other teachers are trying to “get to the bottom” of what happened. Eleanor knows from the look Tina gives her each morning on the bus, though, that there is nothing she or anyone can do to stop the bullying. Park, Beebi, and DeNice have all rallied around her, though, in order to show Tina and her crew that Eleanor has friends who have her back.

After school on Monday, Park is surprised when he sees his mother waiting outside for him in the Impala. Eleanor takes the bus home while Park hops in his mother's car. She tells him that she is taking him to the DMV to get his license at last. Park asks if his father knows—Mindy says he does, but that it's none of his “business.” Park passes the test on his first try, and Mindy assures Park she'll talk some sense into Jamie about letting Park drive—in the meantime, he has the license in case of an “emergency.” The next morning on the bus, Park shows Eleanor his license excitedly. She congratulates him and tells him that she wants a picture of him to keep for herself. He promises to bring her one.

That evening, at Park's house, Park gives Eleanor one of his school pictures from October. After dinner, they look through Park's old yearbooks, and Park tells Eleanor that he wants a picture of her, too. Eleanor doesn't have one to give Park, so he offers to take one with his mother's camera.

That night, when Eleanor gets home from Park's, she's in a good mood. Sabrina offers to watch the door for Eleanor while she takes a bath. As Eleanor soaks in the tub, Sabrina tells her about running into a friend whose teen daughter is pregnant—Sabrina tells Eleanor how grateful she is that Eleanor is “so smart about boys.” Sabrina urges Eleanor to keep staying away from boys, no matter what. When Eleanor hears the sound of Richie's truck pulling into the driveway, she hurries out of the bath and into her bedroom.

*Park enjoyed his lazy, sensual afternoon with Eleanor—but has been conditioned to feel shame and anxiety about their search for new forms of intimacy.*



*Eleanor remains pleasantly surprised by the show of support her friends at school show her. The bullying she faces from Tina and the abuse she witnesses Richie dole out often make her feel alone and helpless, but she's built a strong network of people who care about her.*



*Park is growing up and coming into his own—and the tension between his parents over Park's getting his license suggests that Jamie and Mindy are each struggling in their own way with the changes in their son. Mindy believes that Park should be allowed to be who he really is, symbolized by her desire to let him get his license without making him prove something—but Jamie, who is strict and principled, has ideas about how Park should move through the world (both literally and metaphorically).*



*Eleanor and Park want pictures of one another because they have become, in a way, one another's talismans against sadness, pain, and loneliness.*



*This conversation between Eleanor and Sabrina is one of the most frank they have over the course of the novel—even if its foundation is couched in a lie. Sabrina, who has spent years in a partnership with an abusive man, believes all men are dangerous—but Eleanor has come to learn that there are relationships where love, intimacy, and respect are possible.*



## CHAPTER 44

Wednesday night, Richie works late and Sabrina makes frozen pizzas for Eleanor and all the kids. It is a rare happy night in Eleanor's household—and even though she misses Park, lately she feels “safe” and “untouchable” rather than miserable whenever she thinks about him.

*This brief chapter shows the joy and happiness that is possible in Eleanor's family—whenever Richie isn't around, that is.*



## CHAPTER 45

Park, Eleanor, and Mindy are sitting on the couch watching TV one evening—Josh and Jamie are out. Mindy complains that she doesn't feel like cooking, and suggests Park use his driver's license to take Eleanor out for dinner and a movie. Park and Eleanor can hardly believe their luck. Mindy gives them some money for their date and fixes Eleanor's hair up in a bun, then urges them to hurry out and have fun.

*Mindy knows that both Eleanor and Park could use some more joy in their lives—Eleanor especially—and she wants to help them find more time together after seeing how happy they make one another.*



Eleanor and Park are giddy as they start driving through Omaha, and though the fear of Richie seeing them—or Jamie finding out that Park is driving—cloud over the evening, they are full of excitement. Eleanor is impressed by Park's driving and feels like she's about to “swoon” as he drives them towards the lights of Omaha's downtown area.

*Even the negative things in their lives can't drag Eleanor and Park down as they head out on the town for the first time. Every new experience they share brings them closer together, and going out on a real date allows them to explore a new chapter of their relationship.*



As Park shows Eleanor around downtown and takes her to the record store, the Old Market, an ice cream parlor, and a comic book shop, he can hardly believe that they are out on their first real date together. Eleanor, too, is stunned by how happy she feels—and how dreamlike the whole evening is. While feeding swans at a lake in a small park, Park invites Eleanor to go to prom next year. Eleanor accepts, even though she secretly worries that she won't be allowed to go even in a year's time.

*In spite of the happiness of the evening, Eleanor still feels nervous when she considers what her future looks like. This passage foreshadows the difficulties and twists of fate that still lie ahead for Eleanor and Park.*



As Eleanor and Park continue talking about their dreams for prom and exchange banter about their outfits, Eleanor gets the sense that Park is insecure about his looks. When she prods him to talk about it, Park complains that Asian men are stereotyped as effeminate and asexual, and that he's never felt particularly masculine or desirable in his life. Eleanor insists she's deeply attracted to Park because of how he looks, not in spite of it, and Park is cheered by her kind words.

*Eleanor's lack of self-confidence in her appearance is palpable, but she works hard to assert her individuality and lean into the ways in which she's different. For Park, though, his otherness isn't something that can be escaped by changing clothes or hairstyles—and he confides in Eleanor for the first time about the ways in which he's been made to feel different and undesirable all his life.*



When Eleanor and Park walk back over to the Impala, it is only 8:30 p.m. They get into the car and hustle into the backseat. As Park kisses and touches Eleanor, he thinks that he'll never be able to “get enough of her.”

*Everything Eleanor and Park have shared tonight, from their fun and frivolous romp downtown to their very real personal feelings, has brought them even closer together, and they express this surge of intimacy physically as the night draws to a close.*



## CHAPTER 46

Park drives Eleanor back to her house. Richie's truck is sitting in the driveway, but Eleanor is grateful to see that there are no lights on in the house. As Eleanor and Park say goodnight, Park admits that he doesn't "ever" want to say goodbye to her. They exchange a quick kiss, and Eleanor promises Park that she'll see him tomorrow.

As soon as Eleanor walks into the house, she hears the sounds of her mother and Richie fighting. Eleanor hurries into her bedroom, where her siblings are all asleep in spite of the chaos. As Eleanor hurries into bed, she feels something crunch beneath her leg. She feels around and realizes that one of Park's comics is crumpled on the bedspread. Eleanor turns on the light and sees that her bed is strewn with torn comic books, smashed makeup and perfume bottles, and unspooled ribbons of cassette tapes. Her headphones have been snapped in half, and on the foot of the bed there is an angry, disparaging note from Richie—written in familiar, lowercase handwriting.

*As the night comes to an end, Eleanor and Park feel almost invincible and excited about their future—both near and long-term.*



*After the beautiful night Eleanor and Park shared, Eleanor is completely blindsided by the chaos that awaits her at home. Her escapes with Park allow her to forget about the reality of her life—and it's all the more brutal when it comes flooding back in. Additionally, Eleanor realizes that not only have her parents found out her secret about Park—but Richie is the one who has been leave the horrible, lewd notes on her textbooks.*



## CHAPTER 47

As Eleanor reckons with the mess before her, her mind is entirely blank. She tries to think of what "options" she has, but comes up empty on all fronts.

*Eleanor's fight-or-flight response fails her as the sheer terror of what has befallen her—and what punishments might await her—slowly dawn.*



## CHAPTER 48

Memories of Richie's filthy notes on her textbooks flash through Eleanor's head as she quickly packs her backpack, climbs out the window, and runs down the street. She is halfway to Park's house when she hears a voice call out to her. She turns around and realizes she is in front of Steve's house—the garage door is open, and Tina is standing in the driveway. Tina tells Eleanor that Richie has been out driving around looking for her all night.

*Eleanor decides that she needs to escape her home once and for all—no more pretending to be free by spending her evenings at Park's and returning home to see what awaits her. The decision frightens her, but she knows that if she stays around, she could be in extreme danger.*



Eleanor continues to have horrible flashes of the notes Richie has been leaving her. Tina asks Eleanor what's wrong, and invites her inside to "stay out of [Richie's] way until he cools off." Eleanor follows Tina into the garage, where Steve and a couple other kids from school are drinking, smoking, and listening to **music** on a futon. Steve asks Eleanor if she wants him to "kill" her stepdad for her—he's already planning, he says, to kill Tina's terrible stepdad. Tina shoves a beer into Eleanor's hand, and Eleanor drinks some of it. Eleanor closes her eyes and tries to calm down, but as she has more flashes of the notes, she grows paranoid and anxious. She tells Tina and Steve that she needs to find Park.

Meanwhile, Park is having trouble sleeping. He is "torture[d]" by sweet memories of kissing and touching Eleanor, and wonders when the next time they'll get to be alone will be. He hears a voice and a knock at his window, and is surprised to look out and see Steve hanging from the window ledge. Park opens the window and leans out—and is even more shocked to find Eleanor standing with Steve and Tina on the lawn, holding a beer.

Eleanor watches as Park climbs through the window, jumps down to the ground, and runs towards her to embrace her. As soon as his arms are around her, Eleanor starts to cry. Park asks her if she's bleeding, and Eleanor notices that she is—her hand is cut where she touched broken glass on her bed. Eleanor sees a car approaching on the street, and she, Park, Tina, and Steve all scurry back into Steve's garage.

Inside the garage, Park struggles to understand what's going on. He asks Eleanor to tell him what has happened, but Tina answers for her, and says that her stepfather is out looking for her. Eleanor tells Park she has to leave. Park grabs Eleanor's hand and leads her through his yard towards his grandparents' RV. He ushers her inside, sits her down at the small dining table inside, and asks her to tell him what's going on. Eleanor repeats only that she has to "leave." Park asks Eleanor to explain further—Eleanor takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and tells Park everything. When she's finished, Park suggests that maybe Richie is just trying to scare Eleanor, and wouldn't hurt her after all—but Eleanor retorts that Park has never seen the way Richie looks at her.

*Eleanor is surprised to find that Steve and Tina are actually being nice to her—and even more shocked to realize that perhaps she's not so different from them. The revelation that Tina, too, suffers under the watchful eye of a cruel stepfather shows that shame and abuse are more prevalent than they seem—and even those who seem invincible may very well be struggling.*



*Park is snapped from his reveries by a truly odd series of events. After such a blissful night with Eleanor, things are taking a turn—and though Park isn't sure what's going on yet, he can tell that something is wrong.*



*Eleanor and Park are united—at least for a moment—with Steve and Tina as they all rally together to protect Eleanor. It seems like everyone understands just how bad Richie—and other men like him—really are, and how much damage they can do.*



*Even when Eleanor divulges the truth about what's happening to Park, there's a part of Park that can't understand her plight. Park's privileged upbringing has shielded him from how bad things really are for Eleanor, and it's up to her to make him see just how ruthless, dangerous, and lecherous Richie really is.*



## CHAPTER 49

Eleanor thinks about how Richie looks at her—“like he’s biding his time.” Her mind is suddenly flooded with all the things she’s been pretending not to see: how Richie waits up for her, keeps track of her, and is always watching her. Eleanor is frightened and angry, and worries that Richie is planning on “get[ting] around to [her] [...] When there’s nothing and no one else left to destroy.”

*Eleanor has been ignoring the truth about Richie for the entirety of the novel, but now, as all the pieces click into place, Rowell helps readers to recognize the terrifying patterns in Richie’s behavior alongside Eleanor.*



## CHAPTER 50

Eleanor tells Park that she needs to go. Park feels like the world has been turned “upside down.” He encourages Eleanor to wait until the morning and talk to her mother, but Eleanor says that given what Richie’s been writing on her books, she can’t possibly stay there any longer. Park suggests Eleanor go to her dad’s house, but Eleanor says her father doesn’t want her. Park asks her where she’ll go, and she says that she might be able to go up to her uncle’s in St. Paul a little early. Park’s eyes well with tears, and Eleanor herself begins sobbing.

*There is a part of Park that is so desperate to keep Eleanor that he searches for excuses for her to stay, finding hope in a hopeless situation in an attempt to keep her just a little while longer. Eleanor and Park both break down, though, as they realize that there are forces beyond their control that are tearing them apart.*



Park asks Eleanor how she’s going to get to St. Paul—she is planning on hitchhiking, but lies and tells him she’s going to take the bus. Park offers to drive her. He says that his parents will ground him, but that he doesn’t care—he tells Eleanor that in this moment, he doesn’t care about anything but her.

*Once Park realizes that Eleanor is serious about leaving, he becomes serious about getting her out. As badly as he wants her to stay, he is willing to do anything for her—and if leaving is what she needs, he is going to help.*



## CHAPTER 51

Park promises Eleanor that he will come for her after his parents are asleep, touching her chin before leaving and heading back in the house. Eleanor sits down at the table, exhausted. She wishes she could sleep for a little while, but her mind is racing with guilt and fear—she feels guilty about leaving her siblings behind, and worries that Richie is out looking for her somewhere or that her mother has called the police. She wishes she could go back for Maisie and the others, and knows that if she were “brave and noble” like a character in a book, she might. In reality, though, she thinks, she’s just a girl “trying to get through the night.”

*As Eleanor waits for Park to help her escape, the guilt she felt earlier in the novel—when Maisie asked Eleanor to take her and Ben with her to Park’s—resurges in full force. Eleanor knows that she should help her siblings escape Richie’s house, but that to do so would only be putting herself in further danger.*



Park heads inside and goes up to his bedroom. He reaches into his sock drawer for his leftover Christmas money and pulls out 60 dollars—he hopes it will be enough for gas. Park writes his parents a note, explaining that he’s had to help Eleanor through an emergency. He is planning to steal his mother’s keys and sneak out the kitchen door once both his parents are asleep. Park waits until his father comes home and everything goes quiet—by that time, it is well after two in the morning. He stealthily grabs his backpack, heads downstairs, retrieves the keys, and begins to open the kitchen door when his father’s voice stops him and asks where he’s going.

Park explains that Eleanor needs help, and is running away from home to escape her stepdad. Jamie asks if they need to call the police, but Park tries to explain how tenuous the situation at Eleanor’s home is. When Park tells his dad that he’s driving Eleanor to Minnesota, Jamie is nervous for them—but admits he can’t think of a better plan, and gives Park his blessing to go. He hands Park some money and urges him to take the truck before reminding him that if anything goes wrong, he should bring Eleanor back here. As Park gets Eleanor into the truck, starts it up, and smoothly rolls out of the driveway, he begrudgingly gives thanks that he’s able to drive a stick-shift car.

## CHAPTER 52

The first couple hours of the drive are a blur. Park struggles with the transmission a couple of times and even gets on the interstate headed in the wrong direction, but the nervous Eleanor seems not to notice his mistakes. Soon, they’re headed in the right direction, and even sooner they reach Iowa, where they stop for gas and a map. When they get back on the road, Eleanor falls asleep—Park is slightly sad that she’s going to spend their last few hours together unconscious, but knows how exhausted she must be. After another hour or so, Park himself grows tired. He pulls off onto a shoulder, curls up next to Eleanor, and falls asleep.

Eleanor wakes up in Park’s arms. She experiences a rare moment of bliss before her heart starts to break as she remembers what’s going on. Eleanor nudges Park awake and then kisses him deeply, pushing away thoughts of how they’ll soon be parted.

*Park is determined to help Eleanor, even if it risks further straining his relationship with his parents by doing the one thing they have a sore spot about him doing: driving. Park’s devotion to Eleanor is the most important thing in his life, and he is determined to help her escape her dangerous present.*



*Park and his father have been fighting for months over Park’s refusal to do things Jamie’s way—and over Jamie’s refusal to let Park carve out his own path. Now, they finally reach a kind of compromise as Park realizes that his father has only been trying to help him all along, and Jamie realizes that Park is indeed capable enough to make his own way through the world.*



*All throughout their relationship, Park and Eleanor have both been craving more alone time together and more freedom—now they have both, but under terrible circumstances.*



*Eleanor feels safe in Park’s arms—but has reached a point in her life where not even his love can shelter her from facing the truth of her circumstances.*



As Eleanor and Park continue kissing, the narrative shifts rapidly between Eleanor and Park's points of view as they lament what their lives will look like without each other. Park thinks of the deep love his own parents share—and the luck they had in terms of timing. Eleanor and Park reflect separately on how much they love one another and how intensely they desire one another as their kisses grow more intense. Park tells Eleanor they should stop before they do something they both regret, and though Eleanor insists she wants to have sex, Park tells her they shouldn't—he “need[s] to believe that [this] isn't [their] last chance” to do so.

*Eleanor is nervous that she and Park are about to part ways forever, and wants to take advantage of the little time they have left together. Park, though, finds this reality too sad to accept—and so he urges Eleanor to put the brakes on in spite of his own desire for her. Park is afraid that if he and Eleanor consummate their relationship, they'll grow complacent once they're apart rather than work to carve out time and space for one another in spite of their separation.*



## CHAPTER 53

Park goes off into a cornfield to relieve himself, and Eleanor sits on the hood of the truck to get some air. When Park comes back and sees her sitting there, he is taken aback by how beautiful and fierce she looks, and he nearly weeps. Eleanor asks Park if he really believes they'll have another chance to be together—he replies that no matter what happens, he will continue loving her. Eleanor laments that life would bring them together only to pull them apart, but Park insists they'll just have to work hard not to “lose” what they've found.

*In this passage, Park and Eleanor's disparate understandings of life and love bubble back up to the surface. Park, who has known privilege all his life, believes in happy endings, while Eleanor, whose life has been permeated with pain and instability for years, does not.*



At another rest stop, Park calls his parents to check in, and then asks Eleanor if she wants to call her uncle, but she doesn't. She notices how rough she looks—her shirt is stained with beer, blood, and snot. Back in the car, Park removes his sweatshirt and then his T-shirt. He hands her the shirt and puts the sweatshirt back on. Eleanor quickly changes into Park's shirt, and though it's tight, she's grateful for the fact that it smells like him.

*Throughout the novel, Park has learned to let go of his fears of losing his limited popularity by being with Eleanor. Here, he literally gives her the shirt off his back, symbolizing the depth of his compassion for and commitment to her.*



## CHAPTER 54

In no time at all, Park and Eleanor arrive in St. Paul. Driving in the city is difficult, and Eleanor helps Park navigate. As they discuss what it will be like to arrive at Eleanor's uncle's house, Eleanor tells Park that she doesn't want him to come into the house with her—or wait for her outside. She will, she says, be their problem soon enough. Park privately thinks that he's not ready for Eleanor to not be his “problem” any longer.

*Eleanor sees herself as a burden to Park, and hopes that in asking him to pull away as soon as he's dropped her off, she can lessen the pain of their goodbye. Park, though, is happy to be burdened by Eleanor—he loves her, and would do anything for her.*



As Eleanor and Park continue driving, the houses start looking more and more familiar to Eleanor. She starts to get nervous that her uncle will turn her away, but keeps reminding herself that he is the one who invited her to come for the summer. When Eleanor tells Park they've arrived—she recognizes her uncle's Volvo in the driveway—he tells her he wants to circle the block one last time, for just a little more time with her.

*Eleanor and Park thought just hours ago that they had all the time in the world—that their relationship would go on and on. Now, though, as they realize that they have precious few moments left together, at least for a long while, the weight of what's happening really starts to hit them.*



Back at Eleanor’s uncle’s house, Park urges her to call him as soon as she can, and to give him her uncle’s number then so that he can call her too. He promises he’ll write Eleanor letters, and asks her to write them back. Eleanor says she’s worried that her uncle will send her back to Richie’s—Park tells her that if that happens, she should come to his house, where his parents will help her figure out what to do.

Eleanor wishes she could thank Park for “saving her life”—not just now, by bringing her to Minnesota, but “practically every day” since they first met. She thinks that she will “always” belong to Park.

Eleanor confesses aloud that she doesn’t know how to say goodbye to Park—he tells her she doesn’t have to say goodbye, because they’ll see each other again. Park tells Eleanor that she’s the bravest person he knows. She begins crying and asks him to kiss her.

Eleanor finally wrenches herself away from Park and out of the car, unable to bear the “gasping loss of him.” Park tells Eleanor he loves her, and begs her to call him later that evening. Eleanor tries to lighten the mood by joking that it would be totally “anticlimactic” if her aunt and uncle weren’t even home before heading up the stoop to the door. She looks back at Park one last time—he mouths “I love you” once more.

## CHAPTER 55

Park doesn’t ride the bus anymore. He drives his mother’s Impala—even though it is “ruined with memories” of Eleanor. Park misses Eleanor all day, every day, and can’t even listen to **music** in her absence.

Eleanor doesn’t ride the bus anymore, either—her uncle drives her to school. Even though there are only four weeks left in the term, Eleanor goes each day. Her uncle drives down to Omaha to retrieve Eleanor’s things from her old house, even though he and her aunt have already bought her new **clothes**, a bookcase, a boom box, and plenty of blank cassette tapes.

*Park keeps asking Eleanor to keep in touch in all these different ways, but Eleanor is unable to promise him that she’ll follow through. Just as Eleanor has always had a hard time saying “I love you” to Park, she perhaps feels that the vulnerability and weight of such a promise is too much to bear.*



*Eleanor is brimming with emotion but is too afraid to tell Park out loud the truth about how she feels and the magnitude of what he’s done for her.*



*Park remains optimistic even in their final moments together, but Eleanor is falling apart.*



*Eleanor and Park’s goodbye is painful and miserable for both of them—but Eleanor tries to detach herself at the last moment by making jokes and refusing to verbalize the true depths of her feelings. She is well-practiced in keeping her own pain at bay, and uses these skills now as she faces one of the most difficult moments of her life.*



*Park’s life is moving forward and changing, but he longs to linger in the past rather than move on from his relationship with Eleanor.*



*Eleanor, too, struggles with how much of a hold she should keep on the past. So many of her memories from Omaha are painful—and though replacing and paving over them also seems too difficult to do, she knows she must make a choice.*



The narrative switches to Park's point of view. After Eleanor got out of the car when they arrived at her uncle's house, Park waited for her on the street, even though he wasn't supposed to. He watched Eleanor's aunt and uncle welcome her warmly into the house, and only then did he drive away. He sent Eleanor a postcard from the first rest stop he visited on the way back to Nebraska, and another as soon as he got home—but Eleanor didn't call him that first night, and hasn't called or written since.

*As Park reflects on the aftermath of parting from Eleanor, he feels almost ashamed of his faith in the fact that Eleanor would actually keep in touch with him.*



The narrative switches to Eleanor's point of view. She reveals that after her aunt and uncle welcomed her inside that first day, she ran back out to the porch to get one last look at Park—but he was already gone. Eleanor wrote her mother a letter that first night urging her to get out of Richie's house, but she didn't write anything to Park.

*Eleanor thought she was ready to “just stop” things with Park but now sees that she made the wrong choice in cutting things off so definitively. She has the chance to make things better by writing him letters, but it seems that she is afraid to admit her own mistakes—and nervous that making herself vulnerable might leave her hurting worse than she already is.*



Park writes Eleanor letters all the time, but never receives any back. Soon, he gets word that Eleanor's whole family has picked up and moved away, although Richie is still living in the house. Meanwhile, in St. Paul, Eleanor thinks frequently about calling Park—but when her new friend at school Dani asks her if she's ever had a boyfriend or shared a kiss with anyone, Eleanor says she hasn't. She can't bear to think of Park slowly loving her less, so has decided to “just stop” things between them. Back in Omaha, Park sometimes goes by Eleanor's old house just to stand there, hating everything it stands for.

*As Eleanor and Park's lives move forward separately, they approach the passage of time in different ways. The novel suggests that Park lingers too much in the past, while Eleanor denies it too fervently. Their reactions to the grief of losing one another are very different but rooted in the same sense of overwhelming pain, shame, and sadness.*



## CHAPTER 56

Eleanor never opens any of Park's letters. Countless times she gets out a pen and piece of paper and starts writing to him, but “Everything she [feels] for him [is] too hot to touch.”

*It hurts Eleanor too much to put her feelings of sadness and longing into words, so instead, she keeps them pent up.*



Back in Omaha, Park begins wearing his eyeliner in thick black smudges and listening to loud, angry punk **music** at full volume to drown out his feelings. He gets a job at a record store and pines for Eleanor every day. He stops sending her letters—but continues writing to her and keeping the unsent missives in a box under his bed.

*Park can't let Eleanor go, and wants to drown out everything else but his memories of her so that he doesn't lose the feelings he has for her. It's better, in Park's mind, to be miserable about Eleanor than to forget the intensity of their love.*



## CHAPTER 57

Park has stopped trying to “bring [Eleanor] back” but can’t stop walking by her old house, even though she’s been gone almost a year. One afternoon, he watches from across the street as Richie’s truck pulls into the driveway and the driver’s side door opens. Richie steps out of the cab and begins moving slowly and uncertainly. Park approaches him. Richie asks what Park wants, and Park can tell from Richie’s gait and the way he’s slurring his words that he’s drunk. Richie falls over onto his face. Park looks down at his steel-toed Doc Martens and wishes he had the strength to kill Richie. Instead, he just kicks the ground in front of Richie’s face, spraying icy mud into the man’s mouth before walking home.

Meanwhile, in St. Paul, Eleanor lays all her letters from Park out “like tarot cards.” It was bad enough when they were coming every day—now that they’ve stopped coming, though, things feel even worse. Eleanor wonders if it’s “too late.”

*Park is furious with Richie for all that Richie did to Eleanor—and the way his actions ruined Eleanor and Park’s relationship forever. In a way, however, he actually seems to pity Richie in this scene. Park turns what could have been a pivotal confrontation with devastating consequences for both of them into a moment of self-restraint, proving that he is not the type of person to stoop to senseless violence.*



*Eleanor knows that ignoring Park’s letters was the wrong thing to do—and even though she has fears about making herself the vulnerable one, it seems that she knows she has to write him back.*



## CHAPTER 58

Park goes to prom with Cat, a girl from work. Holding Cat’s hand feels, to Park, like holding the hand of a mannequin. The morning after the dance, Park’s father wakes him up by tossing a piece of mail onto Park’s bed—it is a postcard from Eleanor. Park is overjoyed, and as he reads it over, he feels “Something heavy and winged [take] off from his chest.” The postcard is “Just three words long.”

*Park has begun to accept the colorless monotony of life without Eleanor—but then, out of the blue, a postcard from her shows up. Though Rowell doesn’t reveal what the postcard says, the “three words” could possibly be “I love you.” This would suggest that Eleanor does, after all, want to preserve all that she and Park discovered over the course of their crazy year together.*





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