

Maniac Magee



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JERRY SPINELLI

As a child, Jerry Spinelli wanted to be either a cowboy or a professional baseball player. In high school, however, he stumbled upon writing as a future career path when his poem about a championship football game was published in a local paper. He majored in English at Gettysburg College and also took writing seminars at Johns Hopkins University. After writing four unpublished novels for adults, he once again found his path by accident when one of his stories caught the attention of a children's publisher. As a result, *Space Station Seventh Grade* came out in 1982, and from then on, Spinelli wrote exclusively for kids. In 1990, *Maniac Magee* won the Newbery Medal. Spinelli now lives in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, in the Philadelphia metro area. He and his wife, Eileen, had six children together, and they now have over twenty grandchildren.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although it's never stated exactly when the story takes place—which is part of the setting's legendary feel—Spinelli has stated that the story draws from elements of his childhood in a small Pennsylvania town in the 1950s. Although state-mandated segregation would not have been present in Pennsylvania as it was in the Jim Crow South of that time, it's obvious from the physical divisions in Two Mills (and the overt racism of some residents) that social attitudes about race could be just as bad here. Though it appears that Two Mills' schools are integrated, the lives of black and white residents rarely intersect in other ways, and they remain on opposite sides of an arbitrary geographic line, with public places informally segregated. In areas like the greater Philadelphia metro, a policy called redlining—in which African American families, increasingly migrating from the South in search of better opportunities, were denied mortgages in certain neighborhoods—sometimes contributed to the divisions in communities like Two Mills.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Spinelli's novel *Stargirl* (2000) is very similar to *Maniac Magee* in that it features a quirky protagonist of uncertain origin who does acts of kindness for others, leading to ostracism by her community. Another Newbery winner touching on issues of racism and homelessness is Louis Sachar's 1998 novel *Holes*. Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) is a young adult novel set in the Jim Crow South. Christopher Paul

Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* (1998) features an orphaned African American protagonist about the same age as Maniac Magee who faces issues surrounding racism and the search for home.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Maniac Magee*
- **When Published:** April, 1990
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Children's/Young Adult Fiction
- **Setting:** Two Mills, Pennsylvania
- **Climax:** Maniac is unable to rescue Russell McNab from the trolley trestle.
- **Antagonist:** Giant John McNab and Mars Bar Thompson
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Biographical Basis. The fictional town of Two Mills is based on Spinelli's hometown of Norristown, Pennsylvania. Bridgeport, Pennsylvania (cited as Maniac's hometown in the book) is indeed located across the Schuylkill River from Norristown. Other locations in the book are real places, too, like the Elmwood Park Zoo, where Maniac lives with the buffalo, and Valley Forge historical park, where Maniac shelters from the cold.

International Impact. In the early 1990s, the government of South Africa purchased 600 copies of *Maniac Magee* as part of an effort to promote the anti-Apartheid movement—a fact Spinelli cites as one of his proudest accomplishments with this novel.



PLOT SUMMARY

When it comes to Maniac Magee, it's hard to separate truth from myth. To this day, many stories circulate about him around the town of Two Mills, Pennsylvania. What we know for sure is that he was born in the neighboring town of Bridgeport, to an ordinary mother and father, and that he was originally called Jeffrey, not Maniac. But he was suddenly orphaned at three years old, when his parents were killed in a trolley crash.

Little Jeffrey goes to live with his Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan in another town. However, his life with them is miserable because his aunt and uncle hate one another and won't speak. One spring, when Jeffrey is around 10, he sees Dot and Dan sitting on opposite sides of the auditorium during the school musical. He snaps, starts screaming, and runs away, never to return to

school.

Somehow—nobody is quite sure how or why—Jeffrey settles in Two Mills a year later. The first person he meets is a girl named Amanda Beale. Jeffrey thinks she's a runaway because she's carrying a suitcase. But the suitcase is filled with Amanda's personal library—she's hiding it from her messy younger siblings. Amanda is puzzled by this suspiciously friendly white kid showing up in Two Mills' East End (white people normally stick to the West End), but she's a friendly girl herself, so she agrees to lend the awestruck Jeffrey one of her prized books.

That first day, Jeffrey makes several more appearances around Two Mills. He catches a high school varsity player's football pass one-handed. He rescues a terrified kid from the backyard of Finsterwald, a neighbor everyone fears. He hits multiple homeruns against bullying pitcher Giant John McNab—even when McNab tosses a frog instead of a ball. Not long after, the kids of Two Mills start calling Jeffrey "Maniac Magee."

One day, McNab and his gang, the Cobras, chase Maniac into the East End in revenge. Maniac is confronted by a famously tough kid named Mars Bar Thompson, who tries to intimidate Maniac, calling him "fishbelly" and ripping a page out of Amanda's book. Eventually, the two run into Amanda, who yells at Mars Bar and invites Maniac home with her. Maniac has a great time playing with Amanda's younger siblings, Hester and Lester, and eating dinner with the family. When it comes out that Maniac is homeless, the Beales immediately welcome him to stay.

Maniac quickly feels at home with his new "family." He loves tiring out the little kids, untying their shoelace **knots**, and even helping with household chores. He spends the summer playing football and other games with East End kids at the vacant lot, and he wakes up early in the morning to borrow Amanda's books. He doesn't think of the East Enders as "black" or himself as "white."

One day, however, an old man jeers Maniac as "Whitey" during a neighborhood party. The incident unsettles him, and a few days later, somebody scrawls "Fishbelly go home" on the Beales' house. Maniac almost runs away again, but Amanda comes up with a plan to persuade him to stay and to get the entire town on Maniac's side. If he successfully unties famous Cobble's Knot—a huge knot of rope made legendary by a corner pizza joint—everybody will think he's a hero. He agrees to try. It takes Maniac all day, but he successfully unravels Cobble's Knot, unleashing a town-wide celebration. During the festivities, however, Amanda notices that the confetti flying through the air is actually made from the pages of one of her beloved books. Maniac feels to blame for exposing the Beales to others' mockery, and he walks straight out of Two Mills.

Maniac starts sleeping in the buffalo pen at the Elmwood Park Zoo. He becomes ragged and frail. One day, he's discovered by an elderly parkhand, Grayson. Grayson gets food and clothes

for Maniac and gives him shelter in the baseball equipment room of the park's band shell. Gradually, Maniac gets Grayson to open up to him about his youthful dreams of becoming a Major League baseball player. He finds out that Grayson pitched in the Minor Leagues for years, then had his dreams crushed after pitching a lousy game in front of a talent scout. Since leaving baseball, he's only worked dead-end jobs.

One day, Maniac discovers that Grayson doesn't know how to read. They buy picture books and a chalkboard, and Maniac gets to work tutoring Grayson. Within a few weeks, Grayson reads *The Little Engine That Could* without help. While he can never fulfill his baseball dreams, Grayson feels pride in himself for the first time in many years. He and Maniac celebrate a joyful Thanksgiving and Christmas together, and Maniac feels like he's finally home. But a few days after Christmas, Grayson dies quietly of old age. Maniac, devastated at being orphaned once again, runs away.

Maniac wanders for a while, homeless, and finally settles into a replica cabin in the Valley Forge historic park, expecting to freeze or starve to death. But a couple days later, two little boys, Piper and Russell, interrupt his sleep. The boys are attempting to run away to Mexico. Maniac coaxes them home to Two Mills by promising to show them a shortcut to Mexico. But when they reach town, Maniac discovers that the boys are Giant John McNab's little brothers. After Maniac helps Giant John save face by claiming he'd thrown a pitch that Maniac couldn't hit, John lets him stay at the McNabs'.

Maniac quickly discovers that the McNab home is filled with trash and neglect. Their father, George, is often drunk, rarely home, and full of paranoid theories about a coming invasion by "the enemy"—the people of the East End. But Maniac stays, feeling compelled to help Piper and Russell by bribing them with pizza and "heroic" feats in exchange for the boys going to school. Their determination to run away reminds him of himself. The boys also remind him of Hester and Lester Beale—but unlike the Beale home, the McNabs' environment is toxic.

Maniac goads Mars Bar Thompson into attending Piper's birthday party, realizing that racial hostility stems partly from ignorance of one another's lives. The meeting ends badly, with Mars Bar angrily returning home to the East End and Maniac leaving the McNabs' for good. However, Maniac and Mars Bar start running into each other during their early morning runs around town, and they wordlessly begin running together. One day, the two come across a crying Piper McNab, telling them that Russell is stuck on the trolley trestle, too scared to move. Maniac, remembering his parents' deaths in the trolley crash, silently walks away, leaving Mars Bar to save the day.

A couple days later, Mars Bar tracks down Maniac, who's retreated to the buffalo pen at the zoo. Maniac tells Mars Bar the story of his parents' deaths. Mars Bar invites Maniac to stay at his house, and when Maniac declines, Mars Bar gets Amanda, who climbs into the buffalo pen and rants at him until Maniac,

laughing for the first time in ages, agrees to leave with her. Listening to Amanda grumble, he realizes that he's finally being called home.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee – Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee is a legendary figure in the history of Two Mills, Pennsylvania. Throughout most of the story, Maniac is a homeless orphan who longs for a family and a home. He is from the neighboring town of Bridgeport, and after his parents were killed in a trolley crash when Jeffrey was three, he moved in with his Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan but he ran away around the age of 10 or 11, winding up in Two Mills. There, Jeffrey’s friendliness, feats of athleticism, and fearlessness of bullies earn him the nickname “Maniac.” Maniac first befriends Amanda Beale and her family and he feels at home in Two Mills’ East End, which is predominantly black. He leaves the East End after the Beales are targeted by those who dislike Maniac. He also creates a home with an elderly zoo worker, Earl Grayson, whom Maniac teaches to read. After Grayson dies, Maniac takes young Piper and Russell McNab under his wing, making them attend school and trying to offset the racist ideas they’re learning at home. Maniac runs almost everywhere he goes, is gifted at untying **knots** (including the famed Cobble’s Knot), and is allergic to pizza. He doesn’t go to school, finding it reminds him of his lack of a home, but he loves learning and devours books. He always seeks out the best in people—even in bullies like the East End’s Mars Bar Thompson and the West End’s Giant John McNab—and he tries to encourage people to fulfill their potential. These traits ultimately distinguish Maniac more than his ability to run fast or hit endless home runs.

Amanda Beale – Amanda is the first person who talks to Maniac in Two Mills. She is a kind, studious, spirited girl. Amanda carries her entire book collection around town in a suitcase so that her younger siblings, Hester and Lester, won’t color on them. Her suitcase piques Maniac’s curiosity when he arrives in town, and when he convinces Amanda to lend him a book, they soon become friends. Amanda is a loyal sister and friend who fiercely defends Maniac, even when others in the East End question whether Maniac belongs in a black neighborhood and give the Beale family a hard time as a result. She even hatches a plan for Maniac to undo Cobble’s **Knot** in hopes of winning everyone’s approval. When Maniac resorts to living in a buffalo pen at the end of the book, Amanda climbs in and scolds Maniac in a sisterly way until he agrees to move in with the Beales once more.

Earl Grayson – Grayson is an elderly parkhand who works at the Elmwood Park Zoo. He is an outwardly gruff man though he is actually kind at heart. Grayson discovers the homeless

Maniac living in the buffalo pen at the zoo and makes sure that Maniac is fed, clothed, and sheltered. Gradually, he and Maniac form a family unit of their own. Grayson grew up neglected and poorly educated and he ran away at 15 to join the minor leagues, but he fell short of his major league baseball dreams and he has always worked menial jobs since then. When Maniac teaches Grayson how to read for the first time—and shows Grayson love and affection—Grayson feels valued for the first time in many years. He dies of old age soon after he and Maniac celebrate Christmas together.

Giant John McNab – Giant John McNab is a huge 12-year-old, the pitcher for Two Mills’ Little League baseball team. He’s also a bully, part of a gang called the Cobras. Maniac Magee breaks Giant John’s strikeout record the day he arrives in Two Mills, and from that moment on, Giant John has it in for Maniac. Giant John lives with his drunken father, George, in a filthy house along with his little brothers, Piper and Russell, and he has absorbed his dad’s racist ideas. Giant John spends much of his time drinking and smoking with the Cobras and letting his little brothers do the same. Giant John tolerates Maniac after Maniac rescues the runaway Piper and Russell and brings them home.

Piper and Russell McNab – Piper and Russell are Giant John’s little brothers and George McNab’s sons. They are around eight years old. They frequently try to run away; Maniac crosses paths with them when all three find shelter in the Valley Forge historic park. Maniac soon assumes a brotherly responsibility for the boys, especially when he sees their dirty, neglected situation at home—they drink and smoke along with Giant John’s Cobra friends and they rarely go to school. Maniac bribes them into attending school by fulfilling various dares and drawing positive attention from their classmates, making the boys feel important for the first time. After Russell gets stranded on the trolley trestle and is rescued by Mars Bar, there’s hope that the boys will not grow up embracing George and Giant John’s racist attitudes.

Mars Bar Thompson – Mars Bar is so nicknamed because he’s often seen eating his favorite candy bar. He is revered as the toughest kid in Two Mills’ East End and he bullies Maniac relentlessly when Maniac first arrives there. He jeers Maniac as “fishbelly.” He prides himself on being “bad,” i.e., tough. He’s also extremely fast and he challenges Maniac to a footrace, which Maniac wins, prompting Mars Bar’s hatred. Still, Maniac sees potential in Mars Bar and admires his sense of pride. Seemingly by accident at first, he and Maniac begin silently running through town together in the early mornings. Mars Bar later rescues Russell McNab when Russel gets stranded on the trolley trestle. Then, at the end of the story, Mars Bar invites Maniac to stay with him at his home, showing that he now considers Maniac a friend. Amanda renames Mars Bars “Snickers,” a less threatening nickname.

Finsterwald – Finsterwald lives at 803 Oriole Street.

Finsterwald never actually appears in the story—he’s just the subject of ominous rumors spread by generations of West End kids. It’s believed that if a kid—like Arnold Jones—is dropped into his backyard, the kid will go crazy with fear—a condition called the “finsterwallies.” Nobody understands exactly what Finsterwald does to cause such terror. Maniac Magee is the only kid who isn’t afraid of Finsterwald. In fact, he even knocks on Finsterwald’s front door and walks away smiling, though nobody knows what transpires between Maniac and Finsterwald.

Mrs. Beale – Mrs. Beale is the mother of Amanda and Hester and Lester Beale and the wife of Mr. Beale. She spends much of her time cleaning up the youngest children’s messes. Mrs. Beale is warm-hearted and hospitable, welcoming Maniac into the household as soon as she learns he’s homeless. She becomes a beloved maternal figure in Maniac’s life.

Mrs. Valerie Pickwell – Mrs. Pickwell has 11 children who are called home for dinner by her whistling each night. Besides Mr. Pickwell, her household also includes Grandmother and Grandfather Pickwell, Great-grandfather Pickwell, and whatever down-and-out person the family is helping at the moment. She calls these individuals her “small nation.” Like her husband and kids, Mrs. Pickwell is an unfailingly kind, generous, and hospitable person who symbolizes the best that Two Mills’ West End has to offer.

George McNab – George is the father of Giant John and Piper and Russell McNab. He is rarely home, is covered with tattoos, and appears to be an alcoholic. George has very hostile and paranoid racist beliefs, building a “pillbox” in his house so he’ll be ready to fight the East End “rebels” when, according to his expectation, they try to overrun the West End.

Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan – Dot and Dan are Maniac’s aunt and uncle. Maniac lives with them for eight years after his parents are killed. Dot and Dan hate each other, but as staunch Catholics, they refuse to get a divorce. As such, they spend Maniac’s childhood refusing to speak to each other, eat meals together, or even share kitchen appliances. Maniac runs away from Dot and Dan when he can no longer stand their silence and hostility.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Beale – Mr. Beale is the father of Amanda and Hester and Lester Beale and the husband of Mrs. Beale. He works in a factory and welcomes the homeless Maniac to join the household.

Hester and Lester Beale – Hester and Lester are Amanda Beale’s four-year-old sister and three-year old brother. They color on everything, including Amanda’s beloved books, and generally create chaos around the house—until Maniac joins the family and is able to tire them out with fun and games.

Brian Denehy – Brian Denehy is the star quarterback of Two

Mills’ varsity high school football team.

James “Hands” Down – Hands is a receiver on Two Mills’ varsity high school football team. He lives in the East End. He likes Maniac and spends hours practicing football passes with his young friend.

Arnold Jones – Arnold Jones is the generic name given to a kid of about 10 years old who gets thrown into Finsterwald’s backyard by high school bullies, gets the “finsterwallies,” and is rescued by Maniac Magee.

Mr. Cobble – Mr. Cobble owns Cobble’s Corner, a grocery-store-turned-pizza-shop in Two Mills. Cobble’s Corner is also the home of Cobble’s **Knot**, which Maniac famously untangles. Mr. Cobble awards Maniac a year’s worth of free pizzas for achieving this feat.



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.



MYTH, REALITY, AND HEROISM

Maniac Magee is the story of an orphaned kid to whom ordinary rules don’t seem to apply: Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee doesn’t have parents, runs away from his gloomy adoptive home, and doesn’t go to school. What’s more, he distinguishes himself in the town of Two Mills by pulling off a series of unlikely deeds, which is how he becomes known as “Maniac.” The story is even told from the perspective of later years, giving the characterization of Maniac a legendary feel: “Maniac Magee was not born in a dump. He was born in a house, a pretty ordinary house, right across the river from here [...] And he had regular parents, a mother and a father. [...] Of course, to be accurate, he wasn't really Maniac then. He was Jeffrey.” The storytelling teeters on the edge of myth and reality, making Maniac seem mysteriously untouchable, yet also ordinary. Through this narrative approach, Spinelli suggests that despite his “maniac” reputation, Jeffrey Magee is ultimately an ordinary kid in the ways that matter most—especially when it comes to the genuine heroism of confronting fears and overcoming prejudices.

Maniac Magee is portrayed as a larger-than-life hero, who pulls off zany and improbable exploits that get retold over the years. When Maniac comes up against the town’s bullying Little League pitcher, Giant John McNab, and keeps hitting homeruns, McNab tries to outsmart the new kid with an unconventional pitch: “It wasn't a ball at all, it was a frog, and McNab was on the mound cackling away, and the kid at the

plate was bug-eyed. He'd never—*nobody'd* ever—tried to hit a fastfrog before. So what did the kid do? He *bunted* it. [...] The kid was trying for an inside-the-park home-run bunt—the rarest feat in baseball [...] McNab could already feel his strikeout record fading to a mere grain in the sandlot of history.” Clearly, Maniac isn't afraid to attempt things that seem improbable or even inexplicable to those around him. The excited tone—as if someone is breathlessly recounting the story years later—reinforces the legendary air surrounding Maniac at this point of the story.

Continuing with the legendary feel, the narrator sums up Maniac's early weeks in Two Mills like this: “And how he came to be called Maniac. The town was buzzing. The schools were buzzing. [...] The stranger kid. Scraggly. Carrying a book. Flap-soled sneakers. The kid who intercepted [high school quarterback] Brian Denehy's pass to [the receiver] and punted it back longer than Denehy himself ever threw it. The kid who rescued Arnold Jones from Finsterwald's backyard. The kid who tattooed Giant John McNab's fastball for half a dozen home runs, then circled the sacks on a bunted frog. Nobody knows who said it first, but somebody must have: ‘Kid's gotta be a maniac.’” Jeffrey Magee's “maniac” status revolves around the fact that, though he looks unremarkable and even “scraggly,” he does things nobody in the town thinks is possible—he makes improbable sports plays, rescues kids who've been abandoned as a lost cause, and matter-of-factly confronts bullies. The legendary tone suggests that Maniac is a semi-mythical figure whose feats will go unmatched.

Yet, at the same time, Maniac is a deceptively ordinary kid. For instance, Maniac isn't the infallible person others seemingly perceive him to be. When little Russell McNab is trapped on the trolley trestle—the same one on which Maniac's parents were killed—Maniac is too traumatized to act, leaving another kid to act as the hero: “Mars Bar stared with growing astonishment at Maniac, whose wide, unblinking eyes were fixed on the trestle, yet somehow did not seem to register what was there. [...] With the drenched, mud-footed kid clawing at him, he turned without a word, without a gesture, and left the platform and went downstairs. Shortly he appeared on the sidewalk below. He crossed Main and continued walking slowly [...]” This scene shows that Maniac is human—haunted by fears like anyone else, he sometimes can't rise to the occasion. What's more, other people are capable of doing the kinds of heroic acts that get attributed to Maniac, as Mars Bar does here.

When Maniac, dared by some younger kids, knocks on the door of Finsterwald (a terrifying neighbor who is rumored to make children disappear), he returns from the encounter unharmed. “The door closed. Maniac bounded down the steps and came jogging toward them, grinning. Three kids bolted, sure he was a ghost. The others stayed. They invented excuses to touch him, to see if he was still himself, still warm. But they weren't positively certain until later, when they watched him devour a

pack of butterscotch Krimpets.” Maniac's encounter with Finsterwald, though making the younger kids think he's superhuman, actually demonstrates that heroism doesn't mean being invincible; it simply means having the courage to be kind and reach out to people, especially when others won't.

Thus, Spinelli's bigger point about Maniac is that real heroism isn't about flashy achievements, but about quite ordinary kindness (like knocking on an ostracized neighbor's door). But by embedding Maniac's less conspicuous struggles and acts of kindness within a story of seemingly larger-than-life actions, Spinelli taps into the magical, adventurous feel of childhood and encourages young readers to believe that lasting heroism is within their reach, too.



RACISM

The town of Two Mills is neatly divided into two segregated halves: white people live in the West End and black people live in the East End. When Maniac Magee (a white kid from elsewhere) arrives in town, running from a life as an orphan, he doesn't know this. In fact, he doesn't seem to be aware of racial difference at all. Racial prejudice is incomprehensible to him because he is just an orphan looking for a sense of belonging, and he sees everyone he meets as potential friends and family, regardless of race. By telling the story of Two Mills through Maniac's innocent perspective, Spinelli suggests that racism, which is founded on ignorance and lack of empathy, ultimately doesn't make sense and can only be defeated by people who are willing to cross invisible boundaries in order to make friends.

Maniac lacks awareness of the hostility between racial groups in Two Mills, which leads him to think and behave in innocent ways that kids who've lived in the town all their lives probably wouldn't. In one instance, Mars Bar, a black boy who is the East End's most notorious bully, sarcastically offers Maniac a bite of his candy bar (trying to provoke him into a fight). Maniac actually accepts, to the astonishment of everyone watching: “The kid had done the unthinkable, he had chomped on one of Mars's own bars. Not only that, but white kids just didn't put their mouths where black kids had had theirs, be it soda bottles, spoons, or candy bars. And the kid hadn't even gone for the unused end; he had chomped right over Mars Bar's own bite marks.” Spinelli uses this lighthearted scene to highlight the ugliness of racism in a deeper way. A local white kid would consider a black kid's candy bar to be untouchable, whereas Maniac just sees it as the sincere offering of a possible friend.

After being befriended by Amanda Beale, a black girl, and then invited to live with the Beale family for a while, Maniac still feels baffled by the concept of racial difference, thinking, “he still couldn't see it, this color business. He didn't figure he was white any more than the East Enders were black. He looked himself over pretty hard and came up with at least seven different shades and colors right on his own skin, not one of them being

what he would call white.” In other words, Maniac—having gotten a taste of genuine family life for the first time—still thinks about race in a superficial, literal way and finally decides, in light of his experience, that it doesn’t make much sense to him—a reaction Spinelli uses to signal that, in fact, racism is an arbitrary and foolish prejudice.

However, Maniac’s innocence doesn’t last forever: he is initially rejected because of his naïveté of the town’s racial hostility, leading him to recognize the reality of racism and its roots in ignorance. During a community party in the East End, Maniac gradually picks one jeering voice out of the happy crowd: “The voice was behind him, saying the same word over and over [...] But when he saw the brown finger pointed at him (not a speck of icing on it), and the brown arm that aimed it and the brown face behind it, he knew the name [he heard] was ‘Whitey.’ And it surprised him that he knew.” The parenthetical remark about icing refers to Mrs. Beale, who would always offer him a taste of frosting while she baked his favorite cake. That maternal image contrasts harshly with the accusing finger of the elderly man, who then tells Maniac to leave the East End and join “his kind” on the opposite side of town. Suddenly, the reality of hostility based on race—an idea that has been present only vaguely in Maniac’s mind—becomes unavoidably manifest, because this time it is directed at him.

Not long after this incident, Maniac does walk out of Two Mills, feeling responsible for bringing hostility on the Beales, who’ve sheltered him. “So he turned and started walking north on Hector, right down the middle of the street, right down the invisible chalk line that divided East End from West End. Cars beeped at him, drivers hollered, but he never flinched. [...] [People on] [b]oth sides were calling for him to come over. And then they were calling at each other, then yelling, then cursing. But nobody stepped off a curb, everybody kept moving north, an ugly, snarling black-and-white escort for the kid in the middle.” Maniac is portrayed as being “in the middle” of a divided town whose two sides refuse to face each other directly. The reactions of others suggest that an innocent outlook like Maniac’s can’t survive in a community that is divided by hatred.

When Maniac eventually wanders back to Two Mills, having been rejected by everyone, he has a clearer perspective on the racism he’s encountered in various residents: “Remembering how little Grayson had known about black people and black homes. Thinking of the McNabs’ wrong-headed notions. [...] *What else would you expect? Whites never go inside blacks’ homes. Much less inside their thoughts and feelings. And blacks are just as ignorant of whites [...] and the less they knew about each other, the more they invented.*” Now that Maniac has been exposed to the ugliness of racism and experienced some degree of ostracism himself, he has a better understanding of what fuels it: in his opinion, simple ignorance and a refusal to understand other perspectives or get too close to other people’s lives. Such

ignorance allows harmful fabrications to take root and flourish, further dividing the community.

When Maniac hides in the town zoo, figuring he’s not wanted elsewhere, he is eventually found and coaxed to leave by Mars Bar (who has softened toward him) and Amanda, whose household he finally rejoins. The simplicity of the ending reflects the simplicity of Maniac’s perspective on racism throughout the story. Maniac doesn’t spontaneously heal the town’s deep-seated divisions; rather, his willingness to simply befriend individuals who are outwardly different from him, and even to live with them, is meant to signal a hopeful approach for the future. In this way, Spinelli vindicates Maniac’s perspective—the key to countering hostility and division, the book suggests, is friendship.



LOVE, LOSS, AND HOME

Maniac’s story is largely that of an orphan finding home—but it isn’t a tidy, decisive event. For Maniac, it’s a gradual, painful process in which he’s

constantly aware of the losses he’s experienced in the past, and he fears facing them all over again. Maniac lost his parents in an accident when he was a little boy, then ran away from his aunt and uncle’s loveless household. When he winds up in the town of Two Mills around age 11, he experiences several different kinds of homes, being taken in by the Beale family, later taking shelter with a lonely old man named Grayson, and briefly living with the troubled McNabs. Through Maniac’s journey through various homes and his struggles with grief and homelessness, Spinelli argues that, while loss and pain cannot be avoided, they are worth facing in order to find genuine love and a sense of home.

Early in the story, Maniac perceives home in terms of his fear of lack, and his understanding of home is fragile as a result. When Maniac starts living with the Beale family, he doesn’t want them to use his nickname—bestowed by the strangers of Two Mills—in their house: “He told [Mrs. Beale] what he told everyone. ‘I’m Jeffrey. You know me.’ Because he was afraid of losing his name, and with it the only thing he had left from his mother and father. Mrs. Beale smiled. ‘Yeah, I know you all right. You’ll be nothing but Jeffrey in here. But—’ she nodded to the door—‘out there, I don’t know.’ She was right, of course. Inside his house, a kid gets one name, but on the other side of the door, it’s whatever the rest of the world wants to call him.” In one way, Maniac’s real name, Jeffrey, is a connection to his dead parents. In another way, the use of his name establishes him as part of the Beale household—known here in a way that he isn’t known by people outside. It’s this sense of being known that he most fears losing, perceiving that the outside world could take it away from him.

While on his own, Maniac never attends school because it reminds him of his homeless status. When asked why he’s not in school, “Maniac felt why more than he knew why. It had to do

with homes and families and schools, and how a school seems sort of like a big home, but only a day home, because then it empties out; and you can't stay there at night because it's not really a home, [...] [a place where] where you walk right in the front door without knocking, where everybody talks to each other and uses the same toaster." It's not that Maniac objects to school on principle, but that he doesn't want to face the reality of leaving school and having nowhere else to go. Other kids can take things for granted like not knocking and using the same toaster, but Maniac doesn't have these things, and he intuits that going to school will only make that lack feel starker to him. In other words, he still defines home in terms of what he *doesn't* have.

In the middle part of the story, Maniac begins to find security in a makeshift home founded on mutual love. After running away from the Beales (fearing he's brought the town's hostility on their home), Maniac finds himself making a home with Grayson, an elderly, lonely zoo employee, who becomes concerned about the orphaned kid and lets him sleep in an unused storage room. Before long, the old man's concern transforms the shabby environment: "Maniac had a toaster oven now, compliments of his whiskered friend. In fact, little by little, Grayson had brought him a lot of things: a chest of drawers for his clothes, a space heater, a two-foot refrigerator, hundreds of paper dishes and plastic utensils, blankets, a mat to sleep on [...] In time the place was homier than [Grayson's] own room at the Y." But it isn't the accumulation of possessions that makes the little room feel like home. Rather, it's the fact that Grayson cares about Maniac and quietly goes out of his way to demonstrate it—giving Maniac a place to feel tangibly cared for, which he's lacked for most of his life.

This is further illustrated when Maniac and Grayson celebrate Thanksgiving together in their makeshift home. After a generous feast and dancing to Grayson's polka records, Maniac finds some paint and carefully marks the outside of the park shelter with a 101, naming their residence "101 Band Shell Boulevard." It's not a real address, but that doesn't matter—by labeling their shelter, Maniac makes the symbolic point that he and Grayson, through shared affection, hospitality, and celebration, have now made a home together.

Having now experienced others' love, Maniac comes to a more mature understanding of home, even amid loss. After Grayson dies of old age a few days after Christmas, Maniac, grieving and feeling orphaned anew, eventually finds his way back to Two Mills. He goes to live with the McNabs, an impoverished, dysfunctional household filled with trash, beer, and pests. Maniac realizes that he might have physical shelter here, but he doesn't have a home: "Maniac lies between the two brothers, on the bed. [...] Unable to sleep, asking himself: What am I doing here? Remembering: Hester and Lester [Beale] on his lap, Grayson's hug, corn muffin in the toaster oven. Thinking: 'Who's the orphan here, anyway?'" In other words, since getting

a taste of a real home—a place where affection and simple comforts are shared—Maniac realizes that he, though an orphan, has had something that the neglected McNab kids still don't have.

Later, Maniac leaves the McNabs and wanders back to the zoo where he first met Grayson, taking shelter in the buffalo enclosure. Discouraged and imagining that there's nothing left for him in Two Mills, he's awakened by a furious Amanda Beale, the first friend he made in town. Ranting at his stubbornness, Amanda talks sense into Maniac: "I don't care if you sleep on the floor or the windowsill or what—but you are going to sleep *there* and not *here*. And you are going to sleep *there tonight* and *tomorrow* night and the night after *that* and the night after *that* and *every* night [...] *This is not your home!*" Amanda confirms what Maniac had perceived earlier—that home is where people care about him, a place where he can take for granted that he's welcome.

The story ends with Maniac quietly walking home with Amanda, finding her sisterly outburst comforting. "He was quite content to let Amanda do the talking, for he knew that behind her grumbling was all that he had ever wanted." To discover home in this way, Maniac has had to face his worst fears—rejection, loneliness, and effectively being orphaned all over again. Ultimately, he comes to believe that while loss cannot be outrun, real love is worth the risk.



HUMAN DIGNITY, CONNECTION, AND COMMUNITY

In some ways, *Maniac Magee* is the story of an exceptional individual: many scenes revolve around

Maniac's attention-grabbing accomplishments and the sensation they create around Two Mills. Yet, in another way, Maniac's real achievements go relatively unnoticed, most notably his relationships with ignored or neglected people and the transformative effects these relationships can have. Such relationships, like those with Earl Grayson and the McNab boys, are sustaining for Maniac as well, as he sees that his own struggles and potential are connected to others'. By portraying Maniac's quiet but meaningful relationships with other people in this way, Spinelli argues that human lives are interconnected, and that recognizing others' potential can be transforming both for individuals and for communities at large.

After Maniac begins living with Grayson, an elderly zoo employee who becomes concerned about the homeless kid, Grayson's life, too, is transformed when Maniac affirms his dignity and potential. When Maniac first meets Grayson, he sees a grizzled old man who's been down on his luck. But when Grayson talks about the position he played in baseball's minor leagues, he transforms before Maniac's eyes. "Grayson said, 'Pitcher.' This word, unlike the others, was not worn at all, but fresh and robust. It startled Maniac. It declared: I am not what

you see. I am not a [...] bean-brained parkhand. [...] I am a Pitcher.” Having fallen short of his baseball dreams, Grayson has spent most of his life believing he isn’t fit for much except maintenance jobs. But Maniac’s genuine interest helps Grayson reconnect with his old passion—and, more importantly, with his dignity.

Maniac sees Grayson’s inherent dignity, and, while it’s too late for Grayson to become a successful ball player, Maniac harnesses Grayson’s passion in order to teach him how to read—something Grayson’s always been ashamed of not knowing how to do. One of their reading lessons is described in baseball coaching terms: “But the kid was a good manager [...] He would never let [Grayson] slink back to the showers, but kept sending him back up to the plate. The kid used different words, but in his ears the old Minor Leaguer heard: ‘Keep your eye on it. . . Hold your swing. . . watch it all the way in. . . Don’t be anxious. . . Just make contact.’” This touching scene shows how Maniac cares for Grayson by recognizing his potential and encouraging him to be his best.

Maniac’s loving encouragement helps Grayson to reconnect with his own sense of purpose and dignity for the first time in decades: “The old man gave himself up willingly to his exhaustion and drifted off like a lazy, sky-high fly ball. Something deep in his heart [...] soared unburdened for the first time in thirty-seven years, since the time he had so disgraced himself before the Mud Hens’ scout and named himself thereafter a failure. [...] it was the boy’s embrace that covered and warmed him.” Grayson recovers a sense of his own dignity, thanks to Maniac’s readiness to see him as a person worthy of respect and encouragement.

When Maniac himself loses his sense of purpose through grief, caring for others helps pull him out of it—the recognition of others’ potential is connected to the recognition of one’s own. After Grayson’s death, Maniac, devastated, “drifted from hour to hour, day to day, alone with his memories, a stunned and solitary wanderer. He ate only to keep from starving, warmed his body only enough to keep it from freezing to death, ran only because there was no reason to stop. [...] He returned only long enough to pick up a few things [including] the old black satchel that had hauled Grayson’s belongings around the Minor Leagues.” When Maniac finds himself a “solitary wanderer” once again, he nearly stops taking care of himself, because he’s disconnected from other people’s sense of purpose and dignity and thus from his own.

In fact, Maniac is so stricken with grief that, once again homeless, he almost lets himself freeze to death: “Dreams pursued memories [...] and the gaunt, beseeching phantoms that called to him had [...] the faces of his mother and father and Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan and the Beales and Earl Grayson. [...] No one else would orphan him.” Maniac is so wrapped up in sorrow over the many people he’s lost that he no longer sees any point in life—somewhat paralleling Grayson, who fell into a

rut over his unrealized dreams. Spinelli doesn’t condemn this realistic response to grief, yet it’s only after Maniac is distracted by the arrival of the runaway McNab children that he pulls himself together and, by deciding to help the little boys, commits to living life again (remembering his own potential in the process). In this way, Spinelli suggests that commitment to the wellbeing of others is what makes one’s life worth living.

When Maniac moves in with the McNabs, offering himself as a positive role model in their neglectful home, he recognizes their potential, much as he did Grayson’s: “It was a maddening, chaotic time for Maniac. [...] When he asked himself why he didn’t just drop it, drop them, the answer was never clear. [...] In some vague way, to abandon the McNab boys would be to abandon something in himself. He couldn’t shake the suspicion that deep inside Russell and Piper McNab [...] were identical to Hester and Lester Beale. But they were spoiling, rotting from the outside in, like a pair of peaches in the sun.” Maniac’s reaction suggests that he knows he might have turned out much like the McNab boys if he hadn’t found loving encouragement—and that, if they received nurture, the McNabs might turn out more like the sweet-tempered, affectionate Beale kids that Maniac loves.

Maniac’s thinking about both himself and the people he meets—Earl Grayson, the Beales, the McNabs—echoes the book’s larger emphasis on community as a whole. Spinelli repeatedly emphasizes the importance of meeting people where they are, and how that mutual recognition of human dignity is transformative both for individuals and, potentially, for entire communities. In the book, the long-term outcome of such relationships isn’t always spelled out: for example, the McNab boys’ future is uncertain. But the very fact of Maniac’s commitment to them—showing concern for their welfare and resisting the racism and other harmful values they’ve absorbed—is shown to be a worthwhile effort in itself, even when the outcome is unknowable.



SYMBOLS

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



KNOTS

Knots symbolize problems that appear unsolvable on the surface, but that—in careful, deft hands—can be gradually unraveled. Maniac Magee is gifted at untying knots. He’s the first member of the Beale household who can successfully untangle little Hester and Lester’s shoelace knots, and soon Hester and Lester send their friends to Maniac to get their sneakers’ knots untied, too. Most memorably, Maniac unravels the legendary Cobble’s Knot, a four-blocks-long ball of string that has thwarted a whole generation of kids. Maniac

takes his time with the task and has a surgical delicacy: “He had to find the right routes to untangle the mess, or it would just close up again like a rock and probably stay that way forever.” These words might as well apply to the much knottier problem of race relations in Two Mills, Pennsylvania, as Maniac learns throughout the story that forging friendships between kids of different backgrounds isn’t a quick, miraculous fix, but a process that requires time, wisdom, and patience.

black residents and white residents of Two Mills) that nobody else will. Spinelli uses the “manic” aspects of Maniac’s character as a kind of background to Maniac’s deeper kindness, suggesting that, in fact, true heroism—of the less flashy kind Maniac displays in his friendships—is within reach of ordinary kids, too.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown edition of *Maniac Magee* published in 1999.

Before the Story Quotes

●● They say Maniac Magee was born in a dump. They say his stomach was a cereal box and his heart a sofa spring.

They say he kept an eight-inch cockroach on a leash and that rats stood guard over him while he slept. They say if you knew he was coming and you sprinkled salt on the ground and he ran over it, within two or three blocks he would be as slow as everybody else.

They say.

What’s true, what’s myth? It’s hard to know.

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote contains the opening sentences of *Maniac Magee*. They sum up a few of the fantastical and downright silly stories that have circulated about Jeffrey “Maniac” Magee since he arrived in the town of Two Mills, Pennsylvania. The point of these rumors is that they create a sense of whimsical, childlike fantasy surrounding Maniac’s origin and abilities. Nobody in Two Mills knows exactly where Maniac came from, how he got here, or why he’s so good at some things, like running. Both here and throughout the story, Spinelli isn’t too concerned to separate “truth” from “myth.” In fact, he suggests that prying these elements apart would be beside the point. What Two Mills residents remember most about Maniac is that he’s wildly unusual, and as the story unfolds, his remarkable deeds—like his speed, athletic feats, and his ability to untie stubborn knots—fade into the background. In a more lasting way, he is distinguished by his willingness to confront bullies, befriend overlooked people, and cross boundaries (like the social boundary between

Chapter 3 Quotes

●● “Where are you from? West End?”

“No.”

She stared at him, at the flap-soled sneakers. Back in those days the town was pretty much divided. The East End was blacks, the West End was whites. “I know you’re not from the East End. [...] So where do you *live*?”

Jeffrey looked around. “I don’t know ... maybe ... here?”

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee, Amanda Beale (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

On his first day in Two Mills, Maniac crosses paths with Amanda Beale, a black girl about his age. The meeting is puzzling for Amanda, who tries to put Maniac (Jeffrey) in an understandable category but comes up short. White kids don’t live in the East End of Two Mills, so what is he doing here? The even more baffling thing about Jeffrey is that he seems undaunted by the fact that he’s the only white kid around—even oblivious. Meanwhile, for Jeffrey, the most striking thing about Amanda is that she’s a potential friend. She’s the first person in Two Mills who has answered his “Hi”—itself a startling greeting in this divided town—and she also carries an entire suitcase full of books, a point of connection for the two of them. The quote helps establish Jeffrey’s outsider status by showing how little he recognizes or cares about the racial boundary that divides the town. It also shows his readiness to find potential friends wherever he looks and, because of that, to seek out the best in others and recognize common ground.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ The town was buzzing. The schools were buzzing. [...] Buzzing about the new kid in town. The stranger kid. Scraggly. Carrying a book. Flap-soled sneakers. The kid who intercepted Brian Denehy's pass to Hands Down and punted it back longer than Denehy himself ever threw it. The kid who rescued Arnold Jones from Finsterwald's backyard. The kid who [...] circled the sacks on a bunted frog. Nobody knows who said it first, but somebody must have: "Kid's gotta be a maniac."

Related Characters: Giant John McNab, Finsterwald, Arnold Jones, James "Hands" Down, Brian Denehy, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes how Jeffrey Magee came to be called "Maniac." On his very first day in Two Mills, he performs a series of stunts that are remembered long after—intercepting a varsity player's football pass with only one hand, saving a hapless kid from an allegedly scary neighbor, and disrupting a bullying pitcher's strikeout streak. Each of these stunts has something in common—namely, the fact that Jeffrey steps onto unfamiliar turf. The amazing catch and "fastfrog" hit might be triumphant in their own right, but Jeffrey's athletic skill is secondary to the fact that he's unafraid to enter places—whether it's someplace relatively harmless like the high school football field, or someplace that's dominated by a bully (like Giant John's Little League field), or a place that inexplicably drives other kids crazy with fear (Finsterwald's). While these feats earn the nickname "Maniac" from other kids, they also look forward to a much more consequential boundary-crossing: when Jeffrey crosses Two Mills's racial boundary to befriend black kids in the East End. Even Giant John's gang doesn't dare try such a thing, but eventually Jeffrey demonstrates that the West Enders' fear of the East End makes no more sense than their fear of Finsterwald's.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛☛ Dead silence along the street. The kid had done the unthinkable, he had chomped on one of Mars's own bars. Not only that, but white kids just didn't put their mouths where black kids had had theirs, be it soda bottles, spoons, or candy bars. And the kid hadn't even gone for the unused end; he had chomped right over Mars Bar's own bite marks.

Related Characters: Mars Bar Thompson, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after his arrival in Two Mills, Maniac gets chased into the East End, which is strictly divided from the West End along racial lines. However, he seems oblivious to the fact that he's the only white kid in the neighborhood. He's quickly confronted by Mars Bar Thompson, who has a reputation as one of the toughest kids around. When Mars Bar tries to provoke a fight by jokingly offering Maniac a bite of his candy bar, Maniac obligingly takes a bite, to the shock of everyone watching. They're stunned because black and white kids wouldn't normally come into such close physical contact—in a community so deeply divided on racist grounds, white kids would probably see such an act as strictly off-limits, even contaminating. Even though the story doesn't take place in the Jim Crow South, it alludes to some of the dehumanizing divisions that existed nationwide during the time the book is set (implicitly the 1950s). Maniac, however, seems completely oblivious to such divisions. It's another example of his readiness to cross boundaries that others see as uncrossable—and to see a mildly hostile offer as a genuine act of friendship.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☛☛ [O]ne day [...] Mrs. Beale said it: "You that Maniac?" He told her what he told everyone. "I'm Jeffrey. You know me." Because he was afraid of losing his name, and with it the only thing he had left from his mother and father. Mrs. Beale smiled. "Yeah, I know you all right. You'll be nothing but Jeffrey in here. But—" she nodded to the door—"out there, I don't know." She was right, of course. Inside his house, a kid gets one name, but on the other side of the door, it's whatever the rest of the world wants to call him.

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee, Mrs. Beale (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In *Two Mills*, Jeffrey quickly gains the nickname of “Maniac” for his unbelievable exploits. He never seeks out the title or introduces himself as such to others. After he finds a temporary home with the Beale family of Two Mills’ East End, it becomes clear why. Orphaned as a little boy, “Maniac” has nothing left of his parents but the name they gave him. More than that, the use of his birth name is a marker of being known—of having a real home and family. That’s why he doesn’t want Mrs. Beale to call him by a name that was bestowed on him by others—by a name that belongs to the outside world. But Mrs. Beale acknowledges that it’s hard to control what the world calls a person. On another level, the outside world seems to be more comfortable with the mythical version of “Maniac”—the one who pulls off seemingly impossible feats—than the one who does daring but achievable things like befriending those who are different. It’s an example of how a legendary version of heroism can sometimes be less threatening for people than everyday heroism.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☛☛ Maniac kept trying, but he still couldn't see it, this color business. He didn't figure he was white any more than the East Enders were black. He looked himself over pretty hard and came up with at least seven different shades and colors right on his own skin, not one of them being what he would call white (except for his eyeballs, which weren't any whiter than the eyeballs of the kids in the East End).

Which was all a big relief to Maniac, finding out he wasn't really white, because the way he figured, white was about the most boring color of all.

But there it was, piling up around him: dislike. Not from everybody. But enough. And Maniac couldn't see it.

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up Maniac’s experience as the only white

kid in Two Mills’ predominantly black East End. Even after spending a whole summer living in the East End, Maniac persists in a literal understanding of racial identity and difference. Maniac’s “blindness” about color appears to be quite naïve. But by using Maniac’s childlike perspective, Spinelli doesn’t try to sentimentalize serious issues like racial segregation, but instead suggests that a person primarily sees what he or she wants to see. Because Maniac is a homeless orphan, he arrives in Two Mills ready to find friends and a home—and he immediately recognizes those things in the Beale family. His perception of the Beales and their neighbors as “black” (and himself as “white”) lags far behind. Spinelli also shows that this naïve perspective can cause problems. Not long after, Maniac is singled out as white and decides to leave the East End because he sees that his presence is bringing unfair ostracism on the Beales. While Maniac’s friendship with the Beales is vindicated at the end of the book, his wanderings in and out of Two Mills’ divided communities suggest that there isn’t an instant fix for the town’s fractured history.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☛☛ After polishing off the Krimpets, Maniac did the last thing anybody expected: he lay down and took a nap right there on the table, the knot hanging above him like a small hairy planet, the mob buzzing all around him. Maniac knew what the rest of them didn't: the hardest part was yet to come. He had to find the right routes to untangle the mess, or it would just close up again like a rock and probably stay that way forever. He would need the touch of a surgeon, the alertness of an owl, the cunning of three foxes, and the foresight of a grand master in chess.

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

When Maniac considers leaving town because of some East Enders’ hostility and rejection, Amanda comes up with an idea she thinks will win everyone over: Maniac should unravel the famous Cobble’s Knot, a giant ball of string that has thwarted every Two Mills kid who’s attempted it. The image of untying a knot symbolizes the seemingly intractable problem of racial division in Two Mills. Maniac’s recognition that, if he doesn’t take just the right approach,

the knot “would just close up again [...] and probably stay that way forever,” shows that his understanding of such problems is starting to develop. Earlier in the story, Maniac has a very naïve and superficial view of the racial divide. As he encounters opposition alongside the Beale family, however, he sees that things won't be solved as straightforwardly as he'd imagined. His wise and realistic attitude about Cobble's Knot shows his growing patience about encountering social problems, too. In a broader sense, then, Cobble's Knot is a turning point in Maniac's maturation.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☛ So he turned and started walking north on Hector, right down the middle of the street, right down the invisible chalk line that divided East End from West End. Cars beeped at him, drivers hollered, but he never flinched. The Cobras kept right along with him on their side of the street. So did a bunch of East Enders on their side. [...] And then they were calling at each other, then yelling, then cursing. But nobody stepped off a curb, everybody kept moving north, an ugly, snarling black-and-white escort for the kid in the middle. And that's how it went. Between the curbs, smackdab down the center, Maniac Magee walked – not ran – right on out of town.

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

After Maniac unravels Cobble's Knot, his triumph is short-lived. Somebody rips up Amanda's beloved encyclopedia volume and tosses the pieces around town like confetti, prompting Maniac to leave Two Mills—despite his happy home with them, he fears his presence compromises the Beales' safety. Maniac's walk down the middle of Hector—the dividing line between the town's predominantly white West End and predominantly black East End—clearly symbolizes Maniac's feeling of being caught in the middle of his chosen community. He's accompanied by an uneasy escort of black and white residents who yell at both him and each other, suggesting that there isn't an obvious home for Maniac in Two Mills right now. Nobody knows quite what to do with a figure like him—they enjoy his heroic feats, but his more mundane behaviors, like befriending outsiders, make onlookers uncomfortable. Maniac ultimately leaves Two Mills for a while in order to better understand what it means to find

one's home.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☛ Maniac felt why more than he knew why. It had to do with homes and families and schools, and how a school seems sort of like a big home, but only a day home, because then it empties out; and you can't stay there at night because it's not really a home, and you could never use it as your address, because an address is where you stay at night, where you walk right in the front door without knocking, where everybody talks to each other and uses the same toaster. So all the other kids would be heading for their homes, their night homes, each of them, hundreds, flocking from school like birds from a tree, scattering across town, each breaking off to his or her own place, each knowing exactly where to land. School. Home. No, he was not going to have one without the other.

Related Characters: Earl Grayson, Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

When Maniac befriends Earl Grayson, Grayson wonders why the scraggly kid doesn't go to school. Maniac hasn't attended school since he ran screaming out of a musical performance, in protest of his aunt and uncle's division. His staying out of school is more of an instinct than a considered decision, as his thoughts here show. School only makes sense to Maniac in terms of its relationship to home. If he doesn't have a home, his presence at school will only painfully underscore his status as a homeless orphan and the fact that he doesn't have “a place to land” like all the other kids. This is something that Grayson, himself a dropout and runaway, instinctively understands, so he doesn't press the matter. Grayson and Maniac, in fact, end up creating a home that's *also* a school of sorts, as Maniac tutors Grayson and gives the old man the joy of reading for the first time. In that sense, Maniac does discover, albeit fleetingly, a place to land.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ But the kid was a good manager, and tough. He would never let [Grayson] slink back to the showers, but kept sending him back up to the plate. The kid used different words, but in his ears the old Minor Leaguer heard: "Keep your eye on it. . . Hold your swing. . . Watch it all the way in . . . Don't be anxious . . . Just make contact."

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee, Earl Grayson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

This quote reflects Grayson's background as a minor league baseball player. As a young man, when he had a chance to audition before a scout for a more prestigious league, Grayson blew the opportunity with a terrible pitching game. At that point, not only did Grayson lose his passion for baseball, but he largely lost his self-respect. His effort—in quite advanced age—to learn to read with Maniac's help suggests that it's never too late to fulfill one's potential. While Grayson can't relive that disastrous game and realize his dream of becoming a major leaguer, he can push himself to achieve other things he believed beyond his grasp—reaffirming his sense of dignity at the same time. Maniac's patient encouragement of Grayson also shows the boy's knack for seeing the best in other people and helping them achieve their potential, especially where others might not see much of it.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☝☝ The old man gave himself up willingly to his exhaustion and drifted off like a lazy, sky-high fly ball. Something deep in his heart, unmeasured by his own consciousness, soared unburdened for the first time in thirty-seven years, since the time he had so disgraced himself before the Mud Hens' scout and named himself thereafter a failure. The blanket was there, but it was the boy's embrace that covered and warmed him.

Related Characters: Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee, Earl Grayson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up the family dynamic between Grayson and Maniac. Grayson rescued and sheltered Maniac when he had nowhere else to go, accepting him for who he is—a runaway and school dropout not too unlike his own youthful self. And Maniac responds by loving Grayson and seeing what most people don't notice about him—a man with stories worth telling, a man he can learn from, and someone to whom Maniac himself can give a precious gift. Even more than the ability to read—which Grayson has just celebrated with the boy—Maniac has helped restore Grayson's sense of self-worth and dignity. This quote is a good illustration of the book's argument that such mutual love is what makes a true home and is therefore worth fighting for. It's also the first of several key points in the story when Maniac helps a person in this way—other examples being Piper and Russell McNab and Mars Bar Thompson later in the story.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝☝ Maniac drifted from hour to hour, day to day, alone with his memories, a stunned and solitary wanderer. He ate only to keep from starving, warmed his body only enough to keep it from freezing to death, ran only because there was no reason to stop. [...]

He returned [to the band shell] only long enough to pick up a few things: a blanket, some nonperishable food, the glove, and as many books as he could squeeze into the old black satchel that had hauled Grayson's belongings around the Minor Leagues. Before he left for good, he got some paint and angrily brushed over the 101 on the door.

Related Characters: Earl Grayson, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Not long after they celebrate Christmas together, Grayson quietly dies of old age, leaving Maniac bereaved and distraught once again. This quote sums up Maniac's emotions in the immediate aftermath of Grayson's death. Much as he had after leaving his aunt and uncle's home, and again after leaving the Beales' house, Maniac is a "solitary wanderer," disconnected from love and thus unable to put down stable roots. Without such roots, he lacks a sense of self, much less an sense of purpose—so he only takes care of himself enough to stay alive. Connection to others is such a big part of Maniac's sense of purpose that life just doesn't

seem worth living without it. That's also why he paints over the house number he'd placed on the band shell—he'd believed that he'd found a home and family at last, only to have it taken away from him once more. It's one of the few times Maniac shows anger in the story—not so much self-pity as regret that he dared to trust in a parental figure again, only to lose them.

☛ Dreams pursued memories, courted and danced and coupled with them and they became one, and the gaunt, beseeching phantoms that called to him had the rag-wrapped feet of Washington's regulars and the faces of his mother and father and Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan and the Beales and Earl Grayson. In that bedeviled army there would be no more recruits. No one else would orphan him.

Related Characters: Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan, Earl Grayson, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

After Grayson's death, Maniac runs again—wandering through nearby towns until he finds himself in the Valley Forge historic park, where Washington's Continental Army spent the winter of 1777–1778, suffering great privations in the brutal winter. While Valley Forge evokes thoughts of tenacity in the midst of great hardship, Maniac chooses it as a place to die. His thoughts roam over all the people he's lost in various ways in his life, beginning with his parents and ending most recently with Grayson. He doesn't want to be abandoned again. All of his losses seem to meld into a single phantasmic figure that overpowers him with grief. If Maniac shows a consistent weakness in the story, it's his understandable tendency to freeze and lose hope in the face of such deep grief. But shortly after this, Piper and Russell McNab tumble into Maniac's path, helping him connect to his sense of empathy and purpose once again. This reinforces the story's argument that connection and community are what ultimately make life worth fighting for.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☛ Maniac lies between the two brothers, on the bed. Do cockroaches climb bedposts? Unable to sleep, asking himself: *What am I doing here?* Remembering: Hester and Lester on his lap, Grayson's hug, corn muffin in the toaster oven. Thinking: *Who's the orphan here, anyway?*

Related Characters: Earl Grayson, Hester and Lester Beale, Piper and Russell McNab, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

After Maniac rescues the runaway McNab boys, he finds himself spending the night in their filthy house. This moment is a big readjustment of perspective for Maniac, who is still fresh from his grief over Grayson's death. Though he's still technically a homeless orphan, Maniac realizes that his experience differs vastly from what Piper and Russell McNab have endured. He's been part of a loving family (the Beales) and enjoyed a tender bond with the grandfatherly Grayson. As fleeting as those relationships were, they were genuine. The McNab kids, by contrast, live with a dad and older brother who drift in and out of their lives, expose them to addiction and violence, and teach them to hate and fear people who are different from them. This is what prompts Maniac to ponder the nature of true orphan status—the McNabs, after all, seem to fit the term much more than Maniac does. This realization also prompts Maniac to take brotherly responsibility for the boys and try to influence them toward better things, like going to school and learning to respect others.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☛ The door closed. Maniac bounded down the steps and came jogging toward them, grinning. Three kids bolted, sure he was a ghost. The others stayed. They invented excuses to touch him, to see if he was still himself, still warm. But they weren't positively certain until later, when they watched him devour a pack of butterscotch Krimpets.

Related Characters: Piper and Russell McNab, Finsterwald, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

As Maniac becomes involved in the McNab boys' lives, he finds a way to motivate them to go to school—performing various feats that thrill the boys and also, by association, win them the respect and approval of their classmates, making them feel noticed for the first time. One day, Piper

and Russell dare Maniac to stay in Finsterwald's backyard for 10 whole minutes. He not only achieves this, but offers to knock on the front door, too. Nobody can see or hear what happens when Maniac speaks to Finsterwald, but he emerges unharmed from the encounter. This so-called heroic feat is a good example of the kind of ordinary courage Maniac shows which baffles other kids most of all. It also shows that, often, fear is a matter of perception. For all the kids know, Finsterwald might be an ordinary guy, but they've allowed his legend to balloon into something monstrous. Only Maniac is brave enough to find out. The same dynamic is at work in relationships between most of Two Mills' black and white kids—imagination gets in the way of reality.

Chapter 40 Quotes

☝ It was a maddening, chaotic time for Maniac. Running in the mornings and reading in the afternoons gave him just enough stability to endure the zany nights at the McNabs'. When he asked himself why he didn't just drop it, drop them, the answer was never clear. [...] In some vague way, to abandon the McNab boys would be to abandon something in himself. He couldn't shake the suspicion that deep inside Russell and Piper McNab, in the prayer-dark seed of their kidhoods, they were identical to Hester and Lester Beale. But they were spoiling, rotting from the outside in, like a pair of peaches in the sun. Soon, unless he, unless somebody did something, the rot would reach the pit.

Related Characters: Hester and Lester Beale, Piper and Russell McNab, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Taking care of the McNab kids is a frustrating experience for Maniac, since their home environment is a nightmare, and the kids challenge Maniac at every turn. But Maniac's reaction to the kids shows what's distinctive about his character. In Piper and Russell, Maniac sees what *he* might have turned out like if there'd been nobody to find him and care for him when he ran away. He also sees them as similar to the Beale kids whom he loves—with the potential to be kind, fun, and loving. But the difference is that the McNabs' home doesn't offer them the safety and nurture to be regular kids. Maniac fears that at some point, the boys will reach a point of no return unless the "seeds" of their childhoods are protected, so he tries to fill that role as best

he can. This quote exemplifies Maniac's ability to see the potential in those others might reject, as well as his instinctive desire to seek a semblance of home wherever it's lacking.

Chapter 42 Quotes

☝ What had he expected? A miracle? Well, come to think of it, maybe one had happened. While he was looking for one miracle, maybe another had snuck up on him. It happened as he was clamping and lugging Mars Bar down the gauntlet of Cobras, trying to keep him alive - and what was Mars Bar doing? Fighting *him*, Maniac, straining to get loose and bust some Cobras. Out-numbered, out-weighted, but not out-hearted. That's when Maniac felt it - pride, for this East End warrior whom Maniac could feel trembling in his arms, scared as any normal kid would be, but not showing it to them. Yeah, you're bad all right, Mars Bar. You're more than bad. You're good.

Related Characters: Mars Bar Thompson, Jeffrey Lionel "Maniac" Magee

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Ever since Maniac first met Mars Bar Thompson, Mars Bar has prided himself on being "bad." Maniac uses this fact to goad Mars Bar into attending Piper McNab's birthday party in the hopes of challenging the McNab kids' racist assumptions. Quickly, Maniac realizes that this was a naïve approach and unfair to Mars Bar—showing that his understanding of Two Mills' complex social realities has deepened since the beginning of the story. At the same time, Maniac observes that underneath his façade of toughness, Mars Bar has a deep sense of his own dignity—ready to fight a crowd of bullies who've disrespected him. This is the beginning of an unspoken alliance between the two and another good example of Maniac's ability to see others' potential. Mars Bar is also a foil for Giant John McNab, the West End's equivalent tough guy figure. While Giant John seems to oppress other kids out of a sense of his own inadequacy, Mars Bar shows a glimmer of self-respect, which manifests in acts of kindness later on.

Chapter 44 Quotes

☝☝ Mars Bar stared with growing astonishment at Maniac, whose wide, unblinking eyes were fixed on the trestle, yet somehow did not seem to register what was there. Nor did he seem to hear Piper pleading. With the drenched, mud-footed kid clawing at him, he turned without a word, without a gesture, and left the platform and went downstairs. Shortly he appeared on the sidewalk below. He crossed Main and continued walking slowly up Swede, Piper screaming after him from the end of the platform.

Related Characters: Piper and Russell McNab, Mars Bar Thompson, Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Maniac’s reaction when a panicked Piper McNab informs him that his brother Russell is trapped on the trolley trestle, too scared to move. Maniac is the hero Piper instinctively runs to in this situation, but it’s finally a moment when Maniac shows his limitations. Maniac’s parents died when their trolley was driven off the trestle, and the clear reminder of their fate is enough to cause him, too, to freeze. Though the rescue isn’t shown and is only recounted after the fact, Maniac’s fear gives Mars Bar an opportunity to shine; his rescue of Russell proves Maniac’s instincts about him and also demonstrates what the story has been hinting all along—that heroism is within reach of ordinary people, too. The moment suggests that Maniac’s grief over his parents will always be with him and that it’s okay for him not to be the hero on every occasion. This humanizing of Maniac also seems to open the door for him and Mars Bar to become real friends.

Chapter 45 Quotes

☝☝ "They didn't wanna go home. They stayed all day. My mother babyin' 'em, feedin' 'em. I tell her not to, she swats me away. Sometimes my mom ain't got no sense. She makes me play games with them. [...] They're getting out the car, and know what they say to me - I'm in the car too - " He wagged his head. "They ask me to come in and play that game a theirs. Rebels. They, like, beg me. They say, 'Come on - *pleeeese* - if you *play* with us, we'll let you be *white*.' You *believe* that?"

Related Characters: Mars Bar Thompson (speaker), Piper and Russell McNab, Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

A couple days after the incident on the trolley trestle, Mars Bar tracks down Maniac, who’s taken refuge once again in the buffalo pen at the zoo, and tells him what happened. After he rescued Russell, the McNab boys wouldn’t let go of Mars Bar, so he finally took them home with him. At Mars Bar’s house, Mars Bar’s mother seemed to recognize that they’d never had motherly nurture, and the McNab boys finally got an inkling of a real, loving home.

Here, the boys’ gratitude to Mars Bar is still expressed in terms of their racist upbringing, yet with the difference that they now see him as a friend rather than an enemy. This suggests that Mars Bar was the hero the McNabs needed even more than they needed Maniac, and that through friendships like this, there’s hope for them to rise above the toxic environment in which they’ve been raised.

Chapter 46 Quotes

☝☝ Maniac said nothing. He was quite content to let Amanda do the talking, for he knew that behind her grumbling was all that he had ever wanted. He knew that finally, truly, at long last, someone was calling him home.

Related Characters: Amanda Beale, Jeffrey Lionel “Maniac” Magee

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

This quote contains the last lines of *Maniac Magee*. After Maniac runs away for the last time and hides out at the zoo, Mars Bar and Amanda track him down and try to convince him to come out. Finally, only Amanda’s climbing into the pen with him and berating Maniac in a sisterly way is enough to convince him to return to the Beales’ house with her. Though he’s tried to stay away from the people he loves out of fear of losing them again—even to the extent of living among animals, rejecting human society—Maniac finally accepts that the love of a true family is worth the risk of loss and grief. It’s also noteworthy that Amanda accepts Maniac for who he is, recognizing his faults—like his fear and stubbornness—and not seeking him out because of his famous talents and abilities. With this final passage, Maniac

can finally stop running and come home.



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.

BEFORE THE STORY

It's hard to know what's true and what's myth about Maniac Magee. They say he was born in a dump, led a pet cockroach on a string, and would lose his mythical speed if he ran over salt. Finsterwald is now gone, but the band shell is still there, and so is Cobble's Corner. In fact, if you ask, the man behind the counter at Cobble's Corner will show you the famous wad of string.

Today little girls in Two Mills will jump rope and sing a chant about Maniac running all night and kissing a bull. Sometimes one of the girls is from the West side of town, and the other girl is from the East side of town—which is really the best legacy Maniac Magee has left, “even if it wasn't really a bull.” Anyway, “the history of a kid is one part fact, two parts legend,” and it's important “not to let the facts get mixed up with the truth.”

The story has a mythical tone from the beginning, creating the expectation of a main character with remarkable abilities whose origin is a mystery. Yet places and objects still bear witness to Maniac Magee's existence, suggesting that myth and reality will be mixed together in this story.



Maniac Magee leaves behind a legacy of overcoming divisions, though the nature of those divisions isn't clear yet. There's a distinction between fact and truth in Maniac Magee's life, suggesting that Maniac's impact might be more important than the specific facts about him.



CHAPTER 1

Maniac Magee wasn't born in a dump. He was actually born in an ordinary house, across the river from Two Mills, in Bridgeport. He also had an ordinary mother and father. One day, however, his parents left him with a babysitter. They were killed during the famous crash of the P & W high-speed trolley, when its drunken motorman drove the trolley off the trestle into the Schuylkill River below. Maniac was suddenly orphaned at three years old. But he wasn't called Maniac back then—he was Jeffrey Lionel Magee.

Jeffrey went to live with his Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan, in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania. Dot and Dan hated each other but refused to get a divorce. By the time Jeffrey came along, they were neither speaking nor sharing. His aunt and uncle had two bathrooms, two refrigerators, even two toasters. For eight years, they even tried to “share” Jeffrey, eating dinner with him on alternating nights.

Though much is legendary about Maniac Magee, certain facts of his biography can be established—including one that's especially significant for his development as a character: he's an orphan. Maniac lost his original family and home at a very young age, and he'll always be searching for another.



Jeffrey's childhood experience of home is marked not by love and security, but by division and hostility—things he will hate and resist later in life.



Then, one spring, Jeffrey was in the spring musicale at his school. Since there was only one show, Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan had to attend together, but they sat on opposite sides of the auditorium. During “Talk to the Animals,” Jeffrey, who was in the chorus, began screaming. At first, nobody noticed. The song ended, and Jeffrey kept screaming. Everyone stared as he pointed to his aunt and uncle and yelled, “Talk, will ya! Talk!” Then he sprang down from the risers, off the stage, out the door, and into the night. He never returned to school.

After years of being trapped in the middle of his aunt and uncle’s silence and pointless division, Jeffrey finally can’t stand it anymore and flees. The song “Talk to the Animals” is also a wry reference to the fact that Jeffrey is later more comfortable living among animals than with people who won’t communicate.



CHAPTER 2

Everybody knows that Jeffrey wound up in Two Mills, but nobody knows why it took him a year to cover the 200-mile distance from Hollidaysburg. Everyone just calls it The Lost Year. Nobody knows why he stayed in Two Mills, either. Maybe it’s because his hometown, Bridgeport, is right across the Schuylkill River. But some people say that he just got tired of running, or was simply happy to make a friend.

Jeffrey eventually crosses much of Pennsylvania, ending up in the greater Philadelphia suburbs, where he was born. His “Lost Year” adds to the sense of myth surrounding Jeffrey—it’s not very likely that a kid would succeed in running away and surviving on his own in secret—yet the important thing is that Jeffrey winds up in Two Mills.



Nowadays, lots of people claim to have seen Jeffrey Magee the day he first arrived. The truth is that only a handful of people did, and all they saw was a “scraggly” boy whose sneaker soles flopped open with every step he took. What people remember most, however, is that he said “Hi” to them as he passed, causing them to pause and wonder. People didn’t normally greet strangers like that.

Jeffrey isn’t anything extraordinary on the surface. Yet his simple greeting suggests that he’s kinder and more open to other people than the average person in Two Mills. It sets the tone for the rest of the story, where a simple gesture often has a much greater impact than a heroic act.



CHAPTER 3

The first person who talks with Maniac is Amanda Beale, and that happens by accident. It’s around eight in the morning, and Maniac sees Amanda carrying a suitcase and figures she’s a runaway like him, so he says, “Hi.” She’s suspicious at first, wondering what this white kid is doing in the East End, but she’s also a friendly person, so she says “Hi,” too. When Jeffrey asks if she’s running away, she laughs and laughs. At last she tells Jeffrey that she’s just going to school. She opens up the suitcase to reveal dozens of books crammed inside.

Jeffrey/Maniac is drawn to people who, like him, seem to be looking for a home. This is also the first hint in the story of the extreme racial divisions in the town—it’s notable that a white kid would even speak to a black kid.



Jeffrey kneels in the middle of the crowd of rushing students to admire the books. There are all kinds, including an encyclopedia volume, the one for the letter A. Amanda proudly explains that it’s her library. Then she suddenly realizes that the street is emptying and she’s going to be late for school. Jeffrey offers to carry her suitcase, but she snatches it away from him.

Jeffrey hasn’t attended school for at least a year, and books are a luxury for him. Though Amanda is friendly to Jeffrey, his gesture toward carrying her suitcase makes Amanda uncomfortable—both because she’s protective of her books and because it would be conspicuous in this racially divided town.



Amanda asks who Jeffrey is—she knows he isn't from the East End, like her. Two Mills, after all, is “pretty much divided,” with black people living in the East End, and white people in the West End. Jeffrey says that he's originally from Bridgeport, across the river, but he's not from anywhere in particular right now—maybe here.

Jeffrey asks why Amanda is carrying a suitcase full of books to school. She explains that her little brother and sister love to color on everything, and her dog, Bow Wow, loves to chew on everything, so she just carries her library to school each day to keep it safe. As the bell rings and Amanda hurries toward school, Jeffrey jogs alongside, begging to borrow one of her books.

Amanda glares at the “grungy” stranger, wondering why he isn't bothering some white girl in the West End instead—yet she doesn't walk away. Jeffrey promises that if she lends him a book, he'll be sure to return it. Amanda grudgingly gives him her address, but she points out that “you can't come there. You can't even be *here*.” But as the second bell rings, Amanda, in a panic, grabs a random book from the suitcase, hurls it in Jeffrey's direction, and runs into school. Jeffrey gratefully picks up the book, and Amanda Beale is late to school for the first and only time in her life.

CHAPTER 4

That first day, Jeffrey makes three more appearances around Two Mills. The first one occurs on a high school soccer field, while the 11th-graders are having gym class. Some of the students are playing soccer, while about a dozen of them, including star varsity quarterback Brian Denehy and receiver James “Hands” Down, are practicing football. Just before Hands can catch a pass that Brian has thrown to him, the ball disappears. The high school kids see a younger kid weaving through the football field with the ball. When he reaches the soccer field, he turns and punts the ball, and it spirals perfectly through the air, landing in Hands's hands. Then the kid disappears. Later, everyone realizes he'd done all of that one-handed. In his other hand, he'd been clutching a book.

The racial division in Two Mills is openly described—the town is strictly segregated, something that wouldn't have been unusual in a Pennsylvania town in the 1950s. Jeffrey seems oblivious to this reality, however.



Jeffrey continues to show interest in Amanda, eager for friendship as much as for books.



Amanda understandably questions Jeffrey's motives, and she also takes for granted that her neighborhood is off limits to a white kid like Jeffrey. Yet something about him intrigues her, and she entrusts him with one of her precious books.



Though Jeffrey's first encounter in Two Mills is an ordinary one, the rest of his day is recalled in legendary terms. His appearance on the high school football field establishes a pattern where Jeffrey isn't afraid to venture into territory where others would say he wouldn't belong—and to show that he can hold his own, as he does with his astonishing catch.



CHAPTER 5

Jeffrey's second appearance in Two Mills that day occurs in the backyard of 803 Oriole Street. This is Finsterwald's house—an infamous place to the kids of Two Mills. Nobody knows exactly what Finsterwald does to kids. All anyone knows is that, to this day, if you see a “poor, raggedy, nicotine-stained wretch” around town, he was probably once a normal kid who stumbled onto Finsterwald's property by accident. That's why no kid dares chase a stray baseball or boomerang into Finsterwald's backyard.

But this particular afternoon, screams are coming from a 10-year-old in Finsterwald's backyard. Nobody's sure of his name nowadays, but for convenience, he's called Arnold Jones. Several high school kids are hoisting Arnold Jones above Finsterwald's fence while he screams in desperation. But of course the high school kids drop Arnold Jones into the yard. Then they wait and watch. Arnold Jones just crouches there, his teeth chattering and his body trembling—a condition the kids call “the finsterwallies.” The high school kids clap and cheer.

Years later, no one can say exactly what happened. Some say that Jeffrey just hopped the fence; others say he just opened the backyard gate and walked in. But everyone remembers seeing the raggedy kid walk in and approach Arnold Jones, who promptly fainted in shock. Jeffrey put his book between his teeth, picked up the limp Arnold Jones, and hauled him out of Finsterwald's backyard, depositing him on the front steps. When Arnold Jones wakes up and realizes where he is, he takes off. Jeffrey, meanwhile, just stretches out on the front steps and begins to read.

CHAPTER 6

An hour later, Mrs. Valerie Pickwell whistles from her back door. Mrs. Pickwell has a legendary whistle. It successfully calls home all 10 Pickwell kids for dinner every night. There's nothing special about the whistle, but to a Pickwell kid, it's magic. From all directions, the kids run home, joining the parents, baby Didi, the grandparents and great-grandfather, and a down-and-out taxi driver.

After dinner, the Pickwell kids get into a conversation about “that kid” who was seen sitting at the table that evening. Everyone assumes that he was a guest of somebody else. When they look again, they see that Jeffrey has already gone—he's running along the steel rails of the railroad tracks, book in hand.

Jeffrey again crosses a boundary that nobody else would dare. This time, though, the stakes are higher than just running across the football field. It's not clear precisely what kind of threat Finsterwald poses, or if he's really a threat at all—but the kids of Two Mills have developed a legend about him that might be scarier than reality.



Older kids use the stories of Finsterwald to terrorize younger kids, suggesting that not only are racial divisions a problem in Two Mills, but that there's an atmosphere of bullying in general.



As a newcomer, Jeffrey doesn't have any reason to know about the legend of Finsterwald, but he knows what the cries of a helpless kid sound like, and he calmly comes to the rescue. He's willing to cross boundaries that others won't in order to give help where it's needed. As an outsider, he doesn't have the same ingrained fears as those who've grown up here.



Mrs. Pickwell is an example of someone who, like Jeffrey, can turn the ordinary into something “magic”—just by caring about her kids and anyone else who happens to need a good meal. The Pickwell house is a ideal home in the book, a place of love and shelter for those who don't find it elsewhere.



The Pickwells are so used to seeing strangers' faces at their dinner table that Jeffrey isn't unusual. Even though he was welcome here, however, Jeffrey still seems to be searching for something else.



CHAPTER 7

The next time somebody spots Jeffrey, it's at the Little League field. Pitcher Giant John McNab has just set a Two Mills Little League record by striking out 16 batters. McNab is a huge 12-year-old who only throws fastballs. Kids shake at the thought of facing his pitches. Even though that evening's game has ended, McNab is still making the remaining kids come up to bat, hoping to extend his pitching streak for as long as possible. He laughs as he tallies up the strikeouts of the humiliated kids.

Then, suddenly, a new kid appears at the plate. He isn't wearing a Little League uniform. He sets down his book, takes his batter's stance, and looks expectantly at John McNab. When McNab protests the "runt's" presence, Jeffrey calmly borrows a red cap from another player and returns to the plate. McNab laughs and pitches, and Jeffrey manages to hit the ball to center field. McNab stops laughing. He lobs another fastball, which Jeffrey again hits. As Jeffrey starts hitting one home run after another, the kids on the sidelines let loose and cheer.

Finally Giant John excuses himself to pee in the woods. When he finally returns, his eyes are gleaming. When he winds up to pitch once more, everyone sees that he hasn't pitched a ball at all—it's a frog. Jeffrey bunts the frog and takes off around the bases. McNab can't believe it, and by the time he finally pursues the frog—which is hopping down the third-base line—Jeffrey is on the way to a home run. McNab tries to herd the frog across the baseline so that it'll be a foul, but the frog doesn't cooperate. He can only chase the frog around the field as the watching kids cheer Jeffrey home. Jeffrey grabs his book and jogs off the field, with McNab yelling threats after him.

CHAPTER 8

Jeffrey's adventures on his first day in Two Mills led to his being called "Maniac." The whole town, both West and East ends, was buzzing about him—his amazing football interception, his rescue of Arnold Jones, and his homerun after bunting a frog. At some point, somebody must have said, "Kid's gotta be a maniac," and everybody else agreed. Before long, only Amanda Beale knows him as anything else.

However, Maniac has no address. So he sleeps in the deer shed at the Elmwood Park Zoo, even sharing the deer's apples, carrots, and stale bread. He reads and re-reads the book he borrowed from Amanda Beale. He spends the rest of his time wandering—which, for Maniac, means running, all the while carrying Amanda's book and keeping it in perfect condition. Then, one day, his life takes a surprising twist.

Jeffrey is again drawn to a scene where bullying is rampant—the Little League field dominated by Giant John McNab. The kids are so scared of McNab that they'll even continue batting after the game is over.



Jeffrey has no obvious right to be here—he's not a member of the team and just borrows part of another player's uniform—but he doesn't let that stop him. It shows that Jeffrey doesn't see the boundaries that other kids see. Here, where other kids see an unbeatable bully, Jeffrey sees an opportunity.



This hilarious scene adds to the legendary atmosphere of the story. Spinelli's point with stories like this one is not to claim that they happened exactly like this, but to suggest that, when a kid is willing to cross an invisible boundary and stand up to a bully, incredible things can happen.



Jeffrey's unpredictable, surprising activities on his first day in Two Mills lead to the bestowal of his nickname. Jeffrey never seeks out the nickname "Maniac," though—he doesn't appear to see himself or his actions as heroic.



Maniac wants to find a home, but he's lived for so long without one that he seems to be more comfortable wandering—and living with zoo animals lessens the risk of losing or being abandoned by loved ones again.



CHAPTER 9

Giant John McNab can't get over his failure to strike out Maniac. He sees it as a blemish on his record. The only way he can think of to erase that blemish is to beat the kid up. So he and his friends, who call themselves the Cobras, search town for Maniac. They find him at the tracks, running along the rail. The Cobras start throwing stones and chasing Maniac. Maniac runs and runs, weaving desperately through town, everything a blur. Then, suddenly, the Cobras' voices grow faint. Maniac turns to see them stopped a block away, waving their fists and then starting to laugh.

The Cobras stopped short at Hector Street, which is the boundary between Two Mills's East and West ends. Kids never cross that line, except for school or sports, and even then, they never act as if they *belong* on the other side. The Cobras laugh because they figure that Maniac will discover the truth quickly enough.

CHAPTER 10

At the moment, Maniac is just glad he's no longer being chased. He catches his breath. He recognizes some of the streets from his wanderings and from the day he met Amanda. But today is Saturday, and the streets are filled with kids. One kid plants himself directly in front of Maniac. Maniac steps back, and the kid steps forward. They make their way down the block this way, the kid jumping in front of Maniac each time Maniac tries to turn around. The kid's eating a candy bar.

When Maniac asks, hoping to find Amanda's house, the kid declines to tell him where Sycamore Street is. Other kids call encouragement to the kid, who is Mars Bar Thompson. Mars Bar suddenly smiles. He offers Maniac a bite of his candy bar. Shrugging, Maniac accepts and bites off a chunk. The whole neighborhood watches in silence. They've never seen a white kid do such a thing before. Maniac hadn't even bitten off the unchewed end; he'd bitten right over Mars Bar's own bite marks.

Mars Bar is baffled, and he gets mad, thumping Maniac on the chest and asking if Maniac thinks he's "bad" or something. Maniac is confused. He figures he's neither bad nor very good, but somewhere in between. When Mars Bar challengingly asks if Maniac thinks *he's* bad, Maniac just says that's none of his business. Mars Bar gives up on this and steals Maniac's book instead, ripping a page and mocking Maniac as "fishbelly" when he tries to grab it back. A housewife intervenes and shoos Mars Bar away, going back inside before Maniac can thank her.

When the Cobras try to get back at Maniac for doing the unthinkable and publicly showing up Giant John (crossing an invisible line), they chase him across a more visible line without his knowing it.



Maniac doesn't know just how racially divided Two Mills is or the consequences of crossing its boundaries. The Cobras laugh because they assume that crossing into the East End will be its own punishment.



Maniac is oblivious to what it means that he's crossed into the black neighborhood—in fact, he hardly seems to recognize the fact. The kids of the East End, however—and one in particular—immediately recognize him as an outsider.



Maniac doesn't notice Mars Bar's sarcasm. To him, the offer of the candy bar is a gesture of friendship. This is another example of Maniac's readiness to find friends—he assumes the best about people. When he bites the candy bar, it's shocking to the East End kids—prevailing racist attitudes meant that most white kids wouldn't touch food that had already been bitten by a black kid.



Mars Bar can't intimidate Maniac because Maniac is comically oblivious to Mars Bar's tough guy persona. He continues taking Mars Bar literally, again showing how much of an outsider he is.



CHAPTER 11

Maniac smooths out the crumpled page of Amanda's book and wonders how he can give it back to her in this condition. Eventually he runs into Mars Bar again, this time with other kids. They slowly back him up against a brick wall, demanding the book. Just then Maniac hears Amanda calling his name. She walks her bike over and demands to know who ripped her book. When Mars Bar tries to blame it on Maniac, Amanda doesn't believe him. She kicks his prized sneakers while yelling that dealing with her little siblings is bad enough; she won't have anybody else messing with her books. Mars Bar runs away, to the mocking laughter of some high school kids. Amanda sadly examines the crumpled page, but Maniac promises they can fix it. She invites him over, and he accepts.

Amanda shows that she has an open mind about Maniac—she gives him the benefit of the doubt and doesn't assume he's to blame for Mars Bar's misdeed. Her invitation home is a further proof of her kindness and her own willingness to cross boundaries for the sake of possible friendship.



CHAPTER 12

At Amanda's house, Mrs. Beale is busily scrubbing purple crayon marks off the TV. Amanda introduces him, and Mrs. Beale remembers him as "the book boy" Amanda had mentioned. They're interrupted by a crash from the kitchen, where a little girl, four-year-old Hester, and a little boy, three-year-old Lester, have just broken a jar. Maniac romps with the kids and their dog, Bow Wow, in the backyard while the mess is cleaned up. He ends up staying for dinner and helping Amanda repair her book. He even reads a bedtime story to the little kids.

Maniac immediately makes himself at home at the Beales'. If it's unusual for a white kid to blend right into a black family's life in this neighborhood, Maniac again appears to be oblivious to this. Maniac responds to the warmth of true family love wherever he finds it.



When Mr. Beale offers to drive Maniac home, Maniac doesn't know what to say, so he just gets into the car. When Maniac points to a random house after just a couple of blocks, claiming it's his, Mr. Beale quickly figures out what's going on. He points out to Maniac that this is a black neighborhood. Maniac, almost in tears, tells Mr. Beale the truth. Mr. Beale takes Maniac back to his house. No sooner is the explanation out of Mr. Beale's mouth than Mrs. Beale tells Maniac he's staying with them.

The Beales, on the East End, are much like the Pickwell family over on the West End—when someone is in need, they're quick to welcome that person into their home, no matter how it might look to outsiders.



Amanda is tucked in with Hester and Lester so that Maniac can have her bedroom. Before he goes to sleep, however, Maniac steps outside. He stares at the house number on the doorframe, smiling. Then he says goodnight to the Beales. He finally has an address of his own.

To Maniac, the house number symbolizes that he's finally landed in a concrete, specific place he can call home.



CHAPTER 13

Maniac fits into the Beales' home right away. He plays with Hester and Lester and reads to them. He walks Bow Wow and even helps with the dishes and other chores without being asked. Mrs. Beale is astonished by the neatness of Maniac's bedroom. In fact, it looks like he doesn't sleep in the bed. One night, she discovers that he sleeps on the floor. He can't stand feeling too comfortable.

With Maniac there, other interesting things begin to occur around the Beale house. For example, Hester and Lester stop coloring on everything—they have Maniac to distract them. Amanda no longer feels the need to lug her books around in a suitcase. Everyone's fingertips heal, because Maniac takes over the job of untying the little ones' shoelace **knots**.

One day, Mrs. Beale finds Maniac covered with raised red blotches. She takes him to the doctor, and he's diagnosed with a pizza allergy. At first, they think that's impossible, since such a thing would have been discovered before now. But when the doctor asks Maniac, "You have eaten pizza before, haven't you?" Maniac's expression tells them the truth.

Maniac doesn't have a typical kid's aversion to chores or tendency to make messes. It's as if he doesn't want to take his new home for granted. He's also spent so much time homeless that some of the comforts of home feel alien to him.



Maniac's presence—just his participation in the normal rhythms of family life, nothing spectacular or heroic—has a positive impact on those around him. He also shows a liking for tackling thorny problems, which will be significant later.



The "pizza allergy"—which of course doesn't really exist—adds to the legend surrounding Maniac and, more to the point, it shows that he's been deprived of many of those things that are considered normal in kids' lives.



CHAPTER 14

Maniac loves his new life. He has new sneakers to replace the flap-soled ones. He loves the silence of his early-morning runs through the neighborhood. He loves going to church with the Beales, where there's an exuberant choir and everyone shouts, "Hallelujah! Amen!" including Maniac. He loves the holiday block parties and the variety of people. He thinks of the Beales as his family.

Maniac can't figure out why the people of the East End consider themselves to be "black." He sees a wide range of rich brown skin tones, but no black. He loves joining kids of all colors at the vacant lot for sports and games all summer, often forgetting to return home for lunch. One day Hands Down shows up at the vacant lot, and he and Maniac spend hours practicing passes and plays.

Eventually, kids at the vacant lot start asking him, "You that Maniac?" One day Mrs. Beale asks him the same thing. Maniac tells her he's just Jeffrey. He fears losing the name his parents gave him. Mrs. Beale promises that in her house, he'll only be Jeffrey. But as for outside—she can't control "whatever the rest of the world wants to call him."

Maniac has carved out a home for himself among the Beales. He has the material things he needs. He even feels comfortable in environments where most white kids perhaps wouldn't, like the Beales' church. In other words, he isn't self-conscious about his place in their world, though others would see him as an outsider.



Maniac has a naive, superficial perspective on race. In particular, he takes language about color literally and doesn't understand why it's seen as a defining aspect of people. He continues to innocently enjoy his role in the East End community.



Maniac's reputation in the West End has spread, but Maniac doesn't really want to be connected with that. He just wants to stay connected to family—both his birth family and his adoptive family. But he can't stay sheltered from the outside world forever.



CHAPTER 15

In Two Mills's East End, Maniac becomes famous—for his running, his sports skills, his pizza allergy, his shouting in church. Little kids, sent by Hester and Lester, bring him their shoelace **knots** to untie. Big kids come to the vacant lot to test his football skills. Hands Down teaches Maniac trash talk, and Maniac loves the spiritedness of it.

One day, Maniac tries trash talk at home in front of Mrs. Beale. She doesn't like it—the language of the vacant lot doesn't belong in her kitchen. She slaps him on the mouth. She's immediately sorry, but before she can apologize, Maniac is hugging her and crying.

Another thing Maniac loves about his new life is his access to Amanda's library. He even wakes up early in the morning so he can sneakily read her prized encyclopedia volume before he walks Bow Wow. And sometimes Maniac just loves sitting in the Beales' house, looking out, and loving “being on the inside.” However, while Maniac loves his new life, not everyone in his new life loves *him*.

Maniac's reputation starts to catch up with him in the East End. No matter how much he just wants to fit in, he inevitably stands out.



This scene is an early clue that Maniac's innocent attempts to blend different worlds won't go as smoothly as he imagines.



Maniac relishes his insider status, something he's never had before. The ease and innocence of his early days with the Beales create a contrast with the way the outside world will soon react to him.



CHAPTER 16

Maniac has a sort of blindness. He fails to see things like the fact that big kids don't like being shown up by little kids, and that some kids don't like kids who are different—especially a different color.

Maniac doesn't understand “this color business.” He doesn't understand what makes the East Enders “black”; he doesn't understand what makes him white. He looks himself over, and he can't find a truly white shade anywhere. It's a relief to him, since being plain white would be pretty boring. However, there's still a growing dislike all around him. He can't see it—until, one day, he can.

Maniac's innocence, which helps him cross boundaries so readily, is poised to get him in trouble. Though he means well, he's unaware of more complicated social dynamics around him.



Maniac's total innocence of racial dynamics is another aspect of his mythical character—it's a bit hard to believe that a real kid of his era would take such a literal view of the idea of skin color, for example. But his exaggerated innocence is meant to highlight the foolishness of arbitrary divisions between people.



CHAPTER 17

One hot August day, somebody opens the fire hydrant on a street corner, and soon the gushing water is filled with screaming, happy people. Maniac joyfully joins the crowd—until he starts noticing a single, thick voice calling a name over and over. The voice is saying “Whitey.” To Maniac's surprise, he knows the voice is addressing him.

The scene of community happiness is harshly disrupted. The fact that it's just one person shows how powerful a single discordant voice can be within a community. Though Maniac has seemed oblivious to racial dynamics, somehow he senses that he's being singled out.



The voice tells Maniac, “You move on now, Whitey [...] Time to go home now.” It’s an elderly man in slippers. When Maniac insists that he is home, the man says that Maniac needs to return to “his own kind,” and that white people just keep wanting more and more. Maniac figures that the man must be hard of hearing, and keeps loudly repeating that he lives at the Beales’ address. Hester and Lester yell at the man in Maniac’s defense. The old man keeps ranting to the crowd at large, until a woman drags him away.

The old man sees Maniac as a symbol of white people’s encroachments into black communities. Maniac can’t understand, because to him, the East End simply means home and community—hence repeating his address to the man.



Maniac stops sleeping well. He gets up even earlier and jogs around Two Mills. One day, at the end of a jog, Hester and Lester and Amanda run out and try to distract Maniac from approaching their house. When Maniac breaks away from them and looks at 728 Sycamore, he sees Mrs. Beale frantically scrubbing at graffiti which reads, “Fishbelly go home.”

The encounter with the old man is unsettling for Maniac, and he begins to sense that his adoptive community might not be permanent. The graffiti confirms this—and it rubs salt in the wound of his homeless past.



CHAPTER 18

Amanda tries to talk a sullen Maniac out of leaving the Beales. She doesn’t understand that Maniac feels hurt not primarily for himself, but for her and her family. When Maniac jogs off, she pedals her bike all over town, even crossing the river into Bridgeport, in search of him. He’s not to be found. Finally, Maniac sneaks in late that night, and Amanda snaps sarcastically at him so he won’t know how relieved she is. The next morning, after Maniac helps a little kid undo a **knot** in his yo-yo string, Amanda gets an idea. She thinks she has a plan to get the entire town on Maniac’s side. She tells him about Cobble’s Knot.

Amanda shows that she’s a loyal friend who accepts Maniac as part of her home and community and won’t listen to other people’s objections about him. When she notices his skill at undoing knots, she has an idea—why not transfer this ordinary knack into something more epic?



CHAPTER 19

The legend of Cobble’s Knot goes like this: Mr. Cobble was running a struggling corner grocery store. One day he noticed a giant **knot** dangling from the flagpole in front of his store. He decided that he’d offer a prize to anyone who could untangle the knot. He’d call the newspaper and get lots of free publicity. The contest scheme kept Cobble in business, except that nowadays, he’s running a pizza joint. And to this day, nobody has successfully untied the knot. It’s about the size of a volleyball and has thwarted a future magician and a future pickpocket.

Cobble’s knot is part of the legendary landscape of Two Mills. Amanda senses that if Maniac could unravel this famous knot, he’ll be accepted as a true member of the community.



Amanda convinces Maniac that if he successfully unties the **knot**, he’ll become a hero, and nobody will mess with him. Maniac teases Amanda that she just wants the pizza prize, since she knows Maniac is allergic. But then he agrees to try.

Untying the knot is a meaningless gesture on the surface, but Amanda’s plan shows her love for Maniac and her determination to help him find a permanent place in the community.



CHAPTER 20

From the moment Maniac takes Cobble's **Knot** in his hands, everybody knows that the knot is in big trouble. Maniac spends a long time examining the knot, sometimes with a playful little smile on his face. When Maniac doesn't untangle the knot within moments, the gathered spectators eventually grow bored and wander off, everyone except Amanda. Gradually, throughout the day, people drift back, both black and white (Cobble's Corner is on Hector, the boundary between the West and East Ends). By now, Maniac has discovered the end of the knot. The crowd regathers, with Cobble selling pizza at a fast clip. A little kid offers Maniac some butterscotch Krimpets.

At this point, to everybody's surprise, Maniac takes a nap. Maniac knows the hardest part is yet to come: he needs to figure out the right path to untangling the knot, or else he'll just make it worse. After 15 minutes, he wakes up and starts again. By dinnertime, Cobble's knot has been reduced to a pile of string.

The position of Cobble's Knot at the intersection of the black and white communities in Two Mills is significant—it suggests that Maniac's success could even have a unifying effect on the community at large. Also, this is the first time that Maniac's love of butterscotch Krimpets (a storebought pastry) is established—a lighthearted trait that shows that Maniac is a normal kid in many ways.



Maniac's careful, measured approach to the knot shows that he understands the seriousness of the task. The knot symbolizes the difficulties of other problems in Maniac's life that require a mature, thoughtful approach—such as the divides in Two Mills.



CHAPTER 21

Cobble's Corner explodes into celebration. Maniac accepts the certificate for a year's worth of free pizzas. Mr. Cobble grabs the coiled string, which turns out to be four and a half blocks long. Eventually, though, Amanda grabs a piece of homemade confetti that's flying through the air. Soon she's running, grabbing pieces of confetti, and crying, "Oh no!" Maniac follows. At home, he finds her crying, clutching the battered remains of the encyclopedia A volume.

Maniac decides he can no longer put the Beales in a position to get hurt like this. He starts walking. Eventually, he runs into John McNab and the Cobras, hissing threats at him. So he keeps walking down the middle of Hector, drivers yelling and honking at him. On one side of the street, black kids follow him; on the other side, white kids follow him. Both sides yell at him and at each other. In the middle, Maniac walks right out of town.

At first, it looks as if Maniac's triumph will be exactly what Amanda hoped it would be—it endears Maniac to both sides of the Two Mills community and unites everyone in celebration. But the joy is short-lived, as something precious to Amanda has been maliciously destroyed.



Maniac feels responsible for the Beales being targeted. His exodus from Two Mills is symbolic, as neither side—West End or East End—entirely seems to want Maniac to be theirs. There isn't a place in the community for someone like him, and he again finds himself in search of a home.



CHAPTER 22

The baby buffalo at the Elmwood Park Zoo wakes up one morning and discovers a stranger sitting in its lean-to, munching a carrot. Pretty soon, the baby buffalo befriends the stranger and cuddles with it in the mornings. But one day the stranger, while climbing over the enclosure fence, falls and lies still.

Maniac, unable to find a place for himself among other people, once again resorts to living with animals. But without a connection to other people, he's clearly suffering.



A old man is driving through the zoo in a pickup. He spots the kid's huddled body and stops. The kid is bony and dressed in rags. The old man hoists the kid into his truck and takes him to the baseball equipment room in the park's band shell. Eventually, the kid comes to and asks where he is. The man tells him, and he identifies himself as Grayson. He gets Maniac some food. While grateful, Maniac is still hungry. He asks for butterscotch Krimpets.

Grayson wants to know Maniac's name first. When Maniac explains that he'd been living in the East End, Grayson scrapes some dirt off Maniac's arm and studies his skin. He doesn't ask any more questions. They get in the truck and go in search of butterscotch Krimpets.

Maniac, who's beginning to starve, is discovered and taken in by a kindly stranger. Grayson's appearance in the story shows that kindness and human connection can be found even where they're least expected.



Grayson's gesture of scraping the dirt off of Maniac's arm shows that the idea of a white kid living in the East End is unthinkable to him.



CHAPTER 23

Grayson buys Maniac a huge helping of Krimpets. Then he takes him to the Two Mills YMCA, where Grayson lives, so that Maniac can use the showers. Since Grayson's spare clothes are way too big for Maniac, he takes Maniac to buy some new ones. Grayson questions Maniac about what he intends to do—what about school? Maniac explains that nobody can make him attend school if they can't find him. Grayson looks at Maniac “with a mixture of puzzlement and recognition.”

When Grayson asks Maniac why he won't go to school, Maniac can't put the answer into words. It has to do with his lack of a home. All the other kids at school have homes to go to. Only Maniac would be stuck having one without the other. He tells Grayson that if Grayson tries to make him go to school, he'll just run away.

Grayson continues to show care and concern for Maniac's needs. Beyond that, Maniac's defiant avoidance of school feels familiar to Grayson, suggesting that the two will find a deeper connection as time goes on.



Maniac thinks about his avoidance of school and realizes it's closely tied to his homelessness—going to school would only highlight what he lacks.



CHAPTER 24

That evening, as Maniac wolfs down food at a diner, Grayson abruptly asks if black people eat mashed potatoes, too. Maniac thinks he's kidding at first, but then says that of course they do. He tells Grayson about his family, the Beales. He also confirms that black people use the same kind of toothbrushes as white people do. He seems shocked when Maniac adds that Maniac even drank out of the same glasses as the Beales did. He's never been inside a black family's house.

When Grayson drops Maniac off at the band shell, he offers to let Maniac sleep in his room at the Y instead. Maniac is tempted, but he feels like he always has bad luck with parental figures. To spare Grayson's feelings, he asks for a bedtime story. Grayson pretends that he doesn't have any stories. But before he goes out the door, Maniac gets him to admit what he'd dreamed of being as a kid: a baseball player.

Grayson's complete ignorance of the lives of black families—and how similar they really are to white people's—shows that lack of familiarity is one of the roots of racism in Two Mills. As Maniac himself comes to realize, the less people have personal contact with each other, the more dehumanizing their assumptions will become.



On some level, Maniac fears that his repeated loss of family and parental figures is his fault, and he wants to keep his distance. However, in keeping with his instinct for human connection, he still reaches out to Grayson, wanting to understand what makes him who he is.



CHAPTER 25

The next morning, as Maniac and Grayson eat breakfast together, Grayson admits to Maniac that he once played baseball in the minors. Maniac is amazed, but Grayson's voice has "a frayed weariness."

But when Maniac asks what position Grayson played, Grayson says, "Pitcher." This time, his voice sounds "fresh and robust." His tone startles Maniac. The tone suggests, "I am not what you see."

At lunchtime, Maniac won't let Grayson return to work until he tells one story about the Minor Leagues. So he tells Maniac about playing ball in Bluefield, West Virginia. A gas station attendant had played a trick on Grayson when he first arrived—claiming that the local diner gives free meals to rookies. The story ends with Grayson missing his first baseball game because he's washing dishes at the Blue Star restaurant to work off the huge meal he'd just consumed. After that story, Maniac doesn't leave Grayson's side. He starts helping Grayson with his zoo maintenance work every afternoon. They eat meals together and even spend weekends together.

All the while, Grayson keeps claiming, "I ain't got no stories," but Maniac repeatedly coaxes baseball stories out of him—stories of Grayson's time in minor league teams all over the country, and the happy story about striking out Willie Mays in Mays's final at-bat before moving up to the Majors.

Grayson's saddest story is about the scout who visited from the Toledo Mud Hens. The Mud Hens were one step below the Majors, so this was Grayson's big chance. But in the next game, Grayson pitched the worst game of his life and was benched by the third inning. He was 27, but he hung on in the minors until he was 40, at which point he figured he was only fit for menial jobs.

CHAPTER 26

Pretty soon, Grayson and Maniac start tossing a baseball back and forth during these stories. Before long, Grayson is giving Maniac informal instruction while they talk. The old man's hands can no longer grip a baseball, except for a pitch called a "stopball," which he claims always stops just as it crosses home plate. Maniac knows Grayson must be telling a tall tale—yet, no matter how hard he tries, he can never hit a "stopball" out of the infield.

Grayson feels that his minor league career is unimpressive, but from Maniac's perspective, it's remarkable, and a point of connection between the two of them.



Grayson's tone suggests that, deep down, the old man still has a great deal of pride. Maniac is able to recognize his inherent dignity.



Though Grayson denies that he has any stories worth telling, Maniac has a subtle way of coaxing tales out of his new friend—forging a basis for an ongoing friendship and also reaffirming Grayson's dignity in the process. Like Maniac, Grayson has lacked personal connection over the years and has suffered from that.



Maniac continues to display his knack for recognizing what makes people who they are and helping them tap into that potential.



For Grayson, the loss of a possible career in the majors was really a kind of loss of family, and hence a loss of a sense of self. In this sense, he's a homeless orphan much like Maniac.



Like Maniac, Grayson has his own improbable talents, and Maniac's friendship and trust gradually coaxes those secrets out into the open. Love and personal connection are founded on such shared experiences and mutual recognition of each other's value.



As fall progresses, Grayson eventually discovers that Maniac has been collecting books and spending his mornings studying. Grayson has been giving Maniac a small daily Krimpet allowance, but Maniac has been spending it all on the library's used book sale. He's collected everything from geometry to travel books to mysteries to astronomy. A couple of days later, as they're tossing a baseball around, Grayson casually asks Maniac, "So why don't you go ahead and teach me how to read?"

Grayson's abrupt admission that he's illiterate comes as a surprise, after he and Maniac have already established a mutually trusting relationship. Maniac trusts by this point that Grayson won't force him to attend school, and Grayson trusts Maniac with the knowledge that he's never learned to read.



CHAPTER 27

When Grayson was a kid, his parents were often drunk and left him alone. At school, he was put in classes that didn't teach him much of anything. One day, he heard the teacher whispering to the principal that she didn't believe this bunch would ever learn to read; so he stopped trying. At just 15, he ran away. That was when he joined the minors.

Grayson suffered a neglected childhood and was a runaway much like Maniac. In that sense, his failures in baseball are a culmination of a life in which others didn't recognize much potential in him.



Grayson arranges to work part-time for a while. Then he and Maniac buy a stack of picture books, like *Mike Mulligan's Steam Shovel* and *The Little Engine That Could*. They also buy a small blackboard and chalk. It takes Grayson three days to learn the alphabet. Within a couple weeks, he learns to sound out unfamiliar words.

Maniac, however, readily sees potential in Grayson. While Maniac refuses to attend school because of his lack of a home, he and Grayson create an unlikely home-school hybrid.



Grayson masters consonants pretty quickly, but vowels are sneaky and confusing. Maniac is a great coach, however. The elderly baseball player hears Maniac's encouragement as though he's saying "Keep your eye on [the ball]." One day, Maniac writes a sentence on the board, and Grayson successfully sounds it out. They cheer in celebration.

Grayson hears Maniac's patient coaching as if the kid is a baseball coach, suggesting that for Grayson, learning to read is healing old wounds of failure. Maniac's coaching instinct is part of his ability to see the potential in everyone.



CHAPTER 28

It takes Grayson an hour to read *The Little Engine That Could*. When he finishes, he's surprised when Maniac doesn't jump and cheer like before; instead, he quietly says, "Amen." Maniac explains what he learned in the Beales' church—that "Amen" isn't just for the end of a prayer, but for when somebody says or does something you really like. Then Maniac gives Grayson a big hug.

Even in his elderly years, Grayson has achieved something new that required tremendous courage and effort from him. Maniac's quiet word of affirmation recognizes the gravity of his friend's accomplishment.



By now, Maniac's room has been furnished with various items Grayson has brought him—among other things, a space heater, refrigerator, blankets, and a toaster oven. Maniac fixes Grayson a celebratory corn muffin and apple juice. Maniac persuades Grayson to stay the night. As Grayson drifts off to sleep, he feels unburdened for the first time in 37 years, warmed by Maniac's affection. He whispers, "Amen."

Maniac and Grayson have established a home together—an unconventional one, but a home nonetheless. Grayson's achievement means a great deal to him, but what truly warms his heart and reconnects him with a sense of dignity is Maniac's affection. This, too, is what makes their apartment a real home—not just the furnishings.



CHAPTER 29

Grayson and Maniac celebrate Thanksgiving together in Maniac's baseball room. Maniac cooks a chicken in his toaster oven, and there's a range of side dishes, including SpaghettiOs and butterscotch Krimpets. As they sit down to eat, Maniac remembers silent Thanksgivings with Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan. He says grace, thanking God for the best Thanksgiving he's ever had, for the warmth they enjoy, and "for our own little family here." He also prays for the Beales.

After the meal, they listen and dance to polka music on the record player that Grayson brought over. That night, Grayson digs out some paint, and Maniac goes outside and happily paints a number on the door. He christens their home "101 Band Shell Boulevard."

Maniac's new life, even though it isn't a conventional household, is more of a home than what he had with Aunt Dot and Uncle Dan, because there's genuine love and fellowship here.



Just as he admired the house number on 728 Sycamore Street at the Beales', Maniac acknowledges the makeshift home they've created by giving it an unofficial address.



CHAPTER 30

Christmas is even better than Thanksgiving. By this time, Grayson has moved out of his room at the Y and into the baseball room. They decorate the room as extravagantly as they can. They're so filled with Christmas spirit that they even go into the woods and decorate a tree with pinecones, sumac berries, Queen Anne's lace, and other natural "ornaments."

Grayson's and Maniac's hospitable spirit overflows from their own home and into the world around them, implying that the love that's nurtured in a genuine home will make the world around it better.



CHAPTER 31

Early on Christmas morning, Maniac and Grayson venture out into the still-dark morning. They visit their tree in the woods. They wander through the zoo, wishing a merry Christmas to the animals. Maniac gives the baby buffalo a scarf. Then they go home for breakfast and gifts. Among Maniac's gifts for Grayson is a handmade book titled, *The Man Who Struck Out Willie Mays*. Among Grayson's gifts for Maniac is the baseball glove he'd used in the Minors. Maniac can't take his eyes off it. But five days later, Grayson dies.

Christmas is a culmination of Maniac's and Grayson's relationship. Their gifts to each other (and to the animals) are tokens of their existing love, knowledge, and respect for one another. Yet the happiness Maniac experiences in his new home isn't to last—he's on the precipice of yet another loss.



CHAPTER 32

Normally, Grayson is the first one up. But on December 30th, Maniac is startled awake by silence. When he shakes Grayson, he realizes the truth. He sits by Grayson all day, holding his limp hand and talking to him. He even reads aloud *Mike Mulligan's Steam Shovel*, Grayson's favorite. Only that night does he finally cry.

Grayson has apparently died in his sleep of old age. Maniac has again lost someone he loves, and he grieves in the best way he knows how.



Grayson's funeral takes place on January 3rd. The pallbearers are from Two Mills's trash collecting team. Nobody else shows up—just Maniac and the funeral director. The minister gets held up in traffic. The pallbearers get restless in the cold. Finally, Maniac can no longer bear watching and waiting. He takes off running.

The makeshift (and undignified) character of Grayson's funeral shows how little he was regarded by the wider world—and how much Maniac's love therefore meant to him. Maniac's instinct in the face of loss and grief is, once again, to run.



CHAPTER 33

Maniac grieves. He drifts around, eating only enough to stay alive. He collects a few belongings from the band shell—mainly books and Grayson's baseball glove. Before leaving the band shell, he paints over the 101 on the door.

Without Grayson, Maniac's new home is no longer a home. And without family or home, Maniac loses his sense of purpose.



After leaving the band shell, Maniac wanders, usually jogging, sometimes sprinting, through Two Mills and all the surrounding towns. Each time he crosses the Schuylkill River, he averts his eyes from the P & W trolley trestle. He can't stop from imagining the trolley plunging into the river, carrying his parents to their deaths. After a while, he avoids the bridge altogether.

Grayson's death brings the memory of Maniac's parents' deaths more vividly to the forefront of his mind. He wanders again, fearful of facing deeper grief and loss and so not wanting to stop in any one spot.



Maniac spends his nights in the buffalo pen, or sometimes in an abandoned car or vacant building. He does odd jobs but refuses to beg for food. One day, he wanders into Valley Forge—the site where Washington's army had nearly starved and frozen to death one winter. Maniac lodges in one of the small replica cabins. He stays there the next day, too, and the next night. Dreams and memories get mixed up. He's waiting for death.

When Maniac stops running, he surrenders to the idea of death. Grief has overwhelmed him, and he is no longer willing to fight for a sense of home and identity that repeatedly eludes him and leaves him grieving.



CHAPTER 34

During Maniac's second night in the Valley Forge cabin, he hears voices—little kids' voices. The next morning, he drags himself out into the cold and peeks into the neighboring cabin. Two little boys, one with a missing tooth and the other with a screechy voice, stare back at him. They inform Maniac that they're running away to Mexico. Maniac hides a smile at this and explains that Mexico is pretty far away. The kids show him the bag of candy, cupcakes, and even butterscotch Krimpets they've brought along for provisions.

True to his character, the only thing that can jolt Maniac out of his surrender to grief and death is the possibility that someone else needs him—in this case, two little runaway kids. In keeping with the story's theme of community, connection with other people is a big part of what makes life worth living.



The kids reveal that they're Piper and Russell, from Two Mills. Maniac tells them that they've won a large pizza from Cobble's Corner, and that if they walk back to Two Mills with him, he'll show them a shortcut to Mexico. After polishing off their pizza, the boys agree to spend the night at their house before trying again for Mexico. As they leave Cobble's, Giant John McNab suddenly stomps toward them. The little boys cling to Maniac as McNab demands, "So what're you doing with my little brothers?"

Without even thinking about it, Maniac commits himself to making sure of the little boys' safety, showing again that he's oriented toward seeing and answering the needs of other people. What he doesn't anticipate is that the boys will entangle him in the tensions of Two Mills once again.



CHAPTER 35

Maniac learns that Piper and Russell run away from home almost every other week. When the little boys find out who Maniac is, they can't stop laughing—they know the story of Maniac bunting Giant John's "fastfrog" pitch. Maniac doesn't like seeing the kids laugh at their older brother, so he invents a story about John throwing a pitch he couldn't hit (he's actually describing Grayson's "stopball"). After that, Giant John lets his brothers bring Maniac home.

The McNabs' house reeks. The first thing Maniac sees is a mutt peeing on the floor. Nobody cleans it up. The whole house, in fact, is covered with waste and trash of various kinds. There's a hole in the ceiling. The refrigerator contains nothing but mustard and beer. And there are roaches everywhere.

A tattooed man in a sleeveless sweatshirt—George McNab—comes home with a Burger King bag. He immediately starts chugging a beer, unconcerned about Maniac's presence in his kitchen. Piper and Russell run in and start squabbling over the food.

To Maniac, the rest of that night is like "scenes from a loony movie." The Cobras come over to smoke and drink beer with Giant John. Piper and Russell join the bigger kids in smoking and drinking. There's a football game in the living room. A box turtle randomly appears from behind the stove. Russell and Piper fire toy machine guns at the departing Cobras, telling Maniac that this is how they're going to take down the "enemy"—from the East.

Early in the morning, Maniac lies between Piper and Russell in bed and wonders what he's doing here—and who is truly the orphan in this situation. Downstairs, he hears George McNab come home, drunk.

CHAPTER 36

Maniac makes a deal with Piper and Russell: if they go to school for the rest of the week, he will show them the shortcut to Mexico on Saturday. But when Saturday comes, Maniac convinces them that it's "volcano season" in Mexico, and that they'd better postpone the trip. Meanwhile, he bribes them with Cobble's free pizza.

Even though Maniac has every reason to dislike and fear Giant John, he doesn't want John's little brothers to shame him, so he helps him save face—again showing Maniac's character and concern for the dignity of others.



The minute Maniac steps inside the McNabs' house, he realizes it's not much of a home. The kids are obviously neglected, and it's a far from nurturing environment.



As reflected by the neglected environment, the boys' father seems to put the minimum of effort into caring for them, too.



The McNabs' home is the opposite of a place of love and flourishing. The little kids don't receive any guidance or encouragement, and they've been taught to harbor hostility toward people who are different from them—namely, toward people from the East End.



From this sad situation, Maniac recognizes that, though he's technically an orphan, he's known far better homes than the McNab kids have.



Maniac, believing in the little boys' potential as he does everyone else's, does the best he can to help the McNab boys within their unhealthy environment.



Piper and Russell have their own ideas, too. At school, they've become famous for their association with Maniac. For the first time, they feel important. They start craving this feeling. They start making deals with Maniac. If they attend school for another week, Maniac has to spend 10 minutes in Finsterwald's backyard.

So next Saturday, a crowd of terrified kids watches as Maniac calmly stands in the center of Finsterwald's backyard. When 10 minutes are up, Maniac is still smiling. He decides to add to the deal in exchange for another week of school attendance—he'll knock on Finsterwald's front door. The kids are so terrified that a few of them get the "finsterwallies" on the spot. But they follow Maniac around to the front of the house, huddled together. They're convinced they're witnessing the end of Maniac's life.

The kids watch as, in answer to Maniac's knock, Finsterwald's front door cracks open. They're standing too far away to see or hear anything else. But moments later, the door closes, and Maniac jogs toward them with a grin on his face. Some kids run, others touch Maniac in awe, wondering if he's a ghost. But later, they watch him eat a pack of butterscotch Krimpets and decide he must be alive.

CHAPTER 37

Finsterwald's is the first of many heroic feats Maniac performs. He races a freight train and wins; he walks barefoot through a rat-infested dump; he climbs into the buffalo pen at the zoo and kisses a baby buffalo (that one is his idea). He sees himself as paying Piper and Russell's "tuition" to make sure they keep going to school. The boys, meanwhile, feel more and more important because of their association with Maniac. But one week, they give him "the most perilous challenge of all"—to enter the East End.

CHAPTER 38

About 30 kids follow Maniac as far as Hector Street. Maniac isn't afraid of anyone in the East End. He's more afraid of the problems his presence might cause. After four blocks, he hears a familiar call of "Yo—fishbelly!" It's Mars Bar. Mars Bar brags to Maniac about how "bad" he's become and shows off his expensive new sneakers. He also informs Maniac that he's been working out. He challenges Maniac to a footrace.

Piper and Russell decide to leverage their connection with Maniac by getting him to do some of his characteristic heroic feats, enjoying the notoriety it brings them.



As usual, for Maniac, the so-called heroic feats are not the point, in and of themselves. He uses those actions to try to prompt Piper and Russell to rise to their potential. This is consistent with his character throughout the story—he never sees stunts, like the Finsterwald visit, as ends in themselves.



Exactly what happens when Finsterwald opens his door is never shown. The point is that Maniac is willing to reach out to someone that nobody else will—for him, the essence of real heroism.



Maniac continues nurturing the McNab boys in his own untraditional way—keeping them in school (hence not running away, and away from their dad's and brother's influence) by doing things nobody else dares. To the boys, entering the East End is the scariest dare they can imagine.



Maniac fulfills the kids' request to make the most daring boundary-crossing of all (in their eyes) by entering the East End. He's quickly met by his old nemesis, who still feels like he has something to prove to Maniac.



The race is arranged then and there. Seemingly all the kids of the East End pour into the streets; mothers watch out windows; traffic is detoured. Even as the crowd finally grows silent and the race starts, Maniac isn't sure what to do. He wants to win, of course, but he's also thinking about his competitor, and where he's racing, "and what the consequences might be if he won." Yet, when Mars Bar gains the lead, Maniac instinctively bursts ahead—and wins.

The crowd goes crazy. Maniac won the race running backwards. Maniac can't figure out why he did it. Was he trying to show up Mars Bar and get back at him? Even amid the exuberance of winning, he sees the hatred in Mars Bar's eyes. Maniac is carried along by a boisterous crowd, wishing he could just escape back to the West End, when suddenly he hears the familiar squeals of Hester and Lester. He's on Sycamore Street, and Amanda and Mrs. Beale, beaming, are coming out of their house.

CHAPTER 39

The next morning, Maniac emerges from the Beales' house, still overjoyed from the previous day's reunion. He runs back to the West End. Piper and Russell are genuinely surprised and relieved to see him, thinking the East Enders had surely killed him. When they enter the McNabs' house, he sees George McNab, Giant John, and some of the Cobras lugging cinder blocks inside.

Maniac realizes that the McNabs are following through on their plans to build a "pillbox"—a defense against an expected invasion by the "rebels," which is what they call the East Enders. Maniac talked to Giant John about it once in an attempt to understand—Giant John is convinced that the black residents of the East End are preparing to overrun the West End. Now that the McNabs are putting their plan into action, Maniac finds that their wretched house feels more unclean than ever.

CHAPTER 40

Maniac spends the day running, but that night, he answers Mrs. Pickwell's dinner whistle. This time, he's not a stranger—the Pickwell kids cheer when he arrives, and even better, Mrs. Pickwell treats him like family. There's a down-and-out shoe salesman at the table, too. Enjoying dinner, Maniac compares the Pickwells to the Beales and finds the two families similar—"whoever had made Hector Street a barrier, it was surely not these people."

Unlike his previous visit to the East End, Maniac is wiser now. After his experience with Cobble's Knot, he knows that this race could have complex, unintended implications, no matter what his personal intentions. This shows how much Maniac has matured since he was expelled from town the previous summer.



Maniac's normalcy comes through here—he's a typical kid who instinctively wants to win, even to show off a little. Even though he's rewarded by a reunion with his beloved Beales, he knows that his victory will prove to be costly for his relationship with Mars Bar.



Even though Maniac is happiest with the Beales, he is faithful to his commitment to the McNab boys. The boys believe that the East Enders are vicious—and when Maniac returns to their house, he gets a clearer picture of why.



While Maniac has encountered racist misconceptions before—through Grayson, for example—those were often in a subtler form. Here, he's confronted with the full poison of the McNabs' beliefs about their black neighbors.



The Pickwells mirror the McNab family—both are loving, open, generous households ready to believe the best of those both within and without. Eating with them restores Maniac's faith in humanity, and specifically in Two Mills.



Back at the McNabs', Maniac finds he no longer has much influence over Piper and Russell, especially with summer approaching. The kids are beginning to build a raft and daydream about escape. It's unclear to Maniac why he continues to care. He feels that, somehow, abandoning the McNab boys would be "to abandon something in himself." Deep down, he thinks, the boys are so much like Hester and Lester Beale, but unlike the Beales, their environment is rotting them from the inside.

One day, Maniac finds Piper and Russell punting Grayson's baseball glove back and forth like a football. He explodes at them for 10 minutes. This wins Maniac a few days of respect and obedience. But then, angered by their pretending to attack the "rebels," Maniac stomps the boys' toy guns into bits. The boys tell him to leave their house, and Maniac does. A few days later, however, the boys find Maniac at the library and beg him to come to Piper's birthday party the next day. Maniac agrees—on the condition that he can bring any guest he wants.

CHAPTER 41

Piper and Russell never expected Maniac to walk into their house with a black kid. But there's Mars Bar Thompson, standing casually in their living room. Maniac had remembered Grayson's remarks about black families and realized that when people never venture inside each other's homes, harmful misconceptions grow. So Maniac challenged Mars Bar to come over to the East Side; if he didn't, Maniac goaded, then that would make Maniac "badder" than him.

But before the McNabs', Maniac takes Mars Bar to the Pickwells', wanting Mars Bar to experience the best of the West End. All 16 Pickwells welcome Mars Bar and make a fuss over him. The kids beg him to perform his trick of stopping traffic with nothing but a nonchalant shuffle and a glare. Mars Bar softens slightly, enjoying the fact that his tough reputation has spread to the West Side. But Maniac knows things will be different at "Fort McNab."

Maniac sees the McNab boys as being much like himself. If Maniac hadn't encountered loving homes along the way, he might have turned out like them. He chooses to believe that even the McNabs could be as sweet and affectionate as the Beale kids, if only someone shows them love before it's too late. This is the epitome of Maniac's willingness to see the best in others.



Even Maniac has his limits—the kids' disrespect of Grayson's glove, of him, and of their neighbors pushes him over the edge. But he still doesn't give up on them, beginning to hatch a plan of his own.



Maniac has the right instinct about the roots of racism in Two Mills: that it stems from ignorance of one another's lives. This shows that Maniac has matured in his understanding of the situation in Two Mills since he first arrived there. Still, he brings Mars Bar blindly into a situation that Mars Bar isn't prepared for.



Where the McNabs are the worst that Two Mills' West End has to offer, the Pickwells are the best. Maniac wants Mars Bar to experience their warmth and love before he encounters the McNabs, hoping that Mars Bar will be able to see some potential in the latter, too.



CHAPTER 42

Maniac shows Piper his birthday gift, a compass, and promises to give it to him when the school year ends. George McNab leaves the room, saying, “Let me know when it leaves,” referring to Mars Bar. The kids are distracted by loud, silly games, but these soon devolve into “Rebels,” a game of “blacks vs. whites.” Most of the kids crowd into the “pillbox,” wanting to be “whites.” When one kid, a member of the Cobras, leaps from the hole in the ceiling and startles Mars Bar, Maniac has to restrain Mars Bar and Giant John from getting into a fight. John stops when Maniac reminds him that he owes Maniac for bringing his little brothers home.

Out in the street, Maniac follows Mars Bar, who finally yells at Maniac for “suckering” him and heads back to the East End. Maniac feels he deserves that—he shouldn’t have expected a miracle. Yet he feels proud of Mars Bar for showing pride—ready to take on the Cobras even while badly outnumbered. Mars Bar isn’t “bad,” he thinks; he’s good.

The McNabs’ racism is vicious, worse than anything Maniac has directly encountered before. While the little boys’ “Rebels” game might retain an element of innocence (as will be shown later), George McNab’s very real hatred of black people shows where such “games” lead.



Maniac quickly recognizes that his efforts to combat the McNabs’ racism were naïve. He’s come a long way from his attitudes upon first arriving in the East End. Yet the incident also increases his respect for Mars Bar—unlike Giant John McNab, Mars Bar is no mere bully.



CHAPTER 43

Maniac sleeps where he can, often at the zoo, and scrounges food where he can find it. It seems to him that Mrs. Pickwell’s dinner whistle carries to wherever he happens to be. Maniac loves rising early in the morning, before anyone is awake, jogging through the streets and thinking about the people who occupy the houses and yards. At this time of day, there are just people, no divisions. Sometimes he sneaks into a backyard to sleep, or even into an unlocked kitchen.

Not at home at the McNabs’, Maniac ekes out an existence as best he can in Two Mills. In a way, the town as a whole has become his home. His early morning jogs show him a town where people are united by much more than what divides them—seeing the town’s potential much as he sees that of individuals.



CHAPTER 44

As summer wears on, Maniac sometimes thinks he hears a second set of footsteps during his early morning runs. And one day, he turns a corner and runs into Mars Bar. From then on, they encounter each other often—sometimes running in the same direction, but on opposite sides of the street. Eventually, without a word, they start meeting along their route and silently running together, matching their pace.

It seems as if Mars Bar is seeking something, too. In their shared search through their town, Maniac and Mars Bar gradually begin finding an unspoken harmony with one another.



One day, Maniac and Mars Bar are running down Main Street when they're stopped by a sobbing Piper McNab, who is covered in mud. They follow him to the platform for the P & W trolley. Gradually, they piece together what's happened. Piper had been sailing his raft down the river, and Russell was supposed to "bomb" him with rocks from above. But, high on the trolley trestle, Russell got scared and froze—and now a trolley is coming. Piper begs Maniac to save his brother. But Maniac stares unblinkingly at the trestle and walks away.

Russell and Piper's emergency looks like a prime opportunity for Maniac to rise to the occasion and be the hero once again. Yet this expectation is completely subverted by Maniac's traumatized response. It's not completely unexpected, given Maniac's avoidance of the trestle earlier in the story. It's an expression of his deep-seated grief over his losses.



CHAPTER 45

Curled up in the buffalo pen, Maniac hears someone calling, "Magee!" over and over. It's two days later. Maniac responds and soon sees Mars Bar on the other side of the fence. Mars Bar is incredulous that Maniac actually sleeps at the zoo—Amanda Beale told him, but he didn't believe it. They're silent for a while, but finally Mars Bar asks Maniac why he didn't help Russell the other day. Maniac asks if Russell is okay, but Mars Bar wants an answer first, and he makes Maniac get out of the buffalo pen.

Maniac responds to grief in the way he usually does—by running. Only this time, people come searching for him—and, thanks to Amanda, who truly knows Maniac, Mars Bar knows just where to look.



Maniac tells Mars Bar about his parents' death. Maniac explains that he'd never stood on the trolley's level before, and that seeing it up close had made his vision of their death more nightmarish than ever. Mars Bar says he knew Maniac couldn't have been scared.

Maniac opens up to Mars Bar, showing that a genuine trust has developed between the two of them in recent weeks. And Mars Bar shows that he's developed a genuine respect for Maniac.



As they walk through the zoo, Mars Bar tells Maniac what happened on the trestle. He did rescue Russell, who couldn't let go of Mars Bar afterward. Mars Bar didn't know what to do, so he took Russell and Piper home. As soon as they got there, Russell jumped into Mars Bar's mom's arms, and his mom proceeded to "baby" the little boys and make Mars Bar play with them. Finally, when he took the McNabs home, they begged Mars Bar to stay and play Rebels with them—they'd let him be "white," they promised.

In Maniac's absence, Mars Bar had a chance to be the hero—something it seems that Maniac subconsciously expected would be the case. Mars Bar's mom seems to recognize how badly the neglected McNabs needed a mother. And the little boys' newfound affection for Mars Bar seems to be genuine, despite their clumsy and deeply ignorant expression of it.



Mars Bar invites Maniac to come and stay at his house. His mom wants Maniac to come, he explains. After circling the entire zoo, Maniac finally says he can't. It's not that he doesn't want to, but when he's around, things just happen. Mars Bar tries to convince him that it isn't a big deal, but Maniac hurries away before he can change his mind.

Scarred by his losses, Maniac can't get himself to accept Mars Bar's invitation—he believes he only brings pain to those who offer him a home—though he clearly wants to and seems to recognize what a big step this is for his new friend.



CHAPTER 46

Maniac is awakened by someone wrenching his ear. It's Amanda, angrily flinging straw at him. She yells at Maniac that he has a lot to be sorry for. He rejected Snickers's invitation to his house (she's renamed Mars Bar so he doesn't sound so "bad"), and Snickers woke her up and made her sneak out of her house. Maniac laughs for the first time in a long time.

When Maniac refuses to come to Amanda's house, either, she rants at him—she's not *asking* him, she's *telling* him. Maniac is going to sleep at her house tonight and all the nights after that, she says firmly—the zoo is *not* his home.

Maniac finally gets up and follows Amanda, boosting her out of the buffalo pen and walking along with her and Snickers/Mars Bar. Amanda continues to rant about how much trouble Maniac causes, and he just lets her talk. He knows that "at long last, someone [is] calling him home."

A short time later, Amanda—probably the only person who can talk sense into Maniac—interrupts his self-pity by reminding him how much he's loved.



Amanda's rant shows Maniac that maybe it's not entirely up to him where his home is. Even if he tries to hold himself back from the risks of love, in other words, real love demands that he give in.



Maniac finally relents, hearing in Amanda's rant the love of a sister and the promise of a home where he really belongs. The simplicity of the story's ending confirms Maniac's instinct that friendship finally overcomes division, even if it only happens one friend, one home, and one community at a time.





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