

# Same Kind of Different as Me



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RON HALL

Ron Hall grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, in a lower-middle-class family and spent his summers working on his grandfather's cotton farm. He attended college at Texas Christian University, where he met his soon-to-be wife, Deborah. Although Hall started in investment banking, he developed a lucrative career for himself as an art dealer. While volunteering at the Union Gospel Mission, a homeless shelter in Fort Worth, Ron met a homeless man named Denver Moore, and the two men formed an unlikely friendship. Denver Moore was born in rural Louisiana, where he spent the first 30 years of his life. He began sharecropping on a cotton plantation—where he was held in debt-bondage and never paid a wage—at a young age, and thus never received an education or learned how to read, write, or do arithmetic. After spending several years living on the streets in Texas, followed by ten dark years in Angola prison in Louisiana, Moore returned to Fort Worth, where he formed a lasting friendship with Ron and Deborah Hall. After Deborah fell ill with cancer and died some years later, Hall invited Moore to live and work with him, which Moore did until his death in 2012. Together, they co-authored several books, assisted in the homeless shelter's development, went on speaking tours, and continued to sell art. Hall also helped develop the screenplay for the film adaptation of *Same Kind of Different as Me*. Hall has two children and remarried in 2011. Moore is survived by two sons and two daughters. Both Moore and Hall had help in writing their novel from Lynn Vincent. After serving in the US Navy during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Vincent worked as journalist, spending eleven years at Christian news publication *World Magazine*, where she was a senior writer and features editor, and to which she still contributes. She has more than 1,000 articles to her name. After her time with *World*, Vincent authored and co-authored a number of *New York Times* nonfiction best sellers, including *Same Kind of Different as Me*, *Indianapolis*, and Sarah Palin's memoir, *Going Rogue*. Vincent continues to write, speak, and work as a writing instructor. She has two sons and lives with her husband in San Diego, California.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that slavery was henceforth illegal across the United States. However, many Southern plantation owners and farmer were determined to preserve the systems of slavery—although under different names—and so devised a number of practices that effectively

constituted slavery though were still technically legal, even under the Emancipation Proclamation. In the early years of emancipation, most black families in agricultural areas did not own property themselves, and so had to work as laborers on white-owned plantations. Several formerly Confederate states seized on this opportunity and passed the "Black Codes," a series of law that denied black people political or legal rights and threatened to prosecute them for vagrancy unless they signed annual labor contracts, effectively surrendering their freedom. After these laws were struck down by the federal government, sharecropping became the primary means to oppress black workers. Under a sharecropping agreement, a black family would lease a plot of land to farm and buy the housing and equipment necessary for the work on credit, in exchange for giving the landowner a high percentage of their harvest. With white landowners controlling both the land and the debt, many used sharecropping as a way to ensnare poor black families—and even poor whites—into debt-bondage, unable to escape their debts and effectively enslaved once again, though with a slightly more individual autonomy.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The memoir follows in the tradition of Christian memoirs and biographies of faith, specifically from the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Other notably inspirational faith-based biographies include Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken*, which describes the faith journey of Olympic runner and survivor of a World War II Japanese prison camp, Louis Zamperini, and Katie Davis and Beth Clark's *Kisses from Katie*, which depicts a young girls' faith-compelled journey of abandoning her life in America to set up an orphanage and sponsorship program for Ugandan orphans. Another one of Lynn Vincent's co-authored best sellers, *Heaven is for Real*, also hinges on Christian faith. The book tells the story of Colton Burpo, a three-year-old boy who purportedly went to heaven and came back during a near-death experience and described all that he encountered.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Same Kind of Different as Me*
- **When Written:** 2005
- **Where Written:** Dallas, Texas
- **When Published:** June 2006
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** The American South
- **Climax:** Deborah gets cancer and dies, leaving Ron and Denver bereft.

- **Point of View:** First person, alternating between Ron and Denver

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Never as Good as the Book.** Although *Same Kind of Different as Me* was a literary success, selling hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide, the 2017 film adaptation was poorly received. As put by one critic, “[The film]’s so sincere and admirable that it seems churlish to voice objections, but the fact remains that it isn’t very good.”



## PLOT SUMMARY

Born in 1937, Denver Moore grows up in Red River Parish, Louisiana. He and his brother live with various family members throughout their childhood and experience much hardship, including racist violence and the deaths of numerous people, including their grandmother, father, and uncle. As a young child, Denver becomes a sharecropper—meaning that he picks cotton for a wealthy landowner—“**the Man**”—who holds him in debt-bondage, making him effectively a slave. Denver works as a sharecropper until he is nearly thirty years old, at which point he hops a train out of Louisiana.

Ron Hall grows up in a lower-middle-class family in Texas. As children, Ron and his brother spend their summers working on their granddaddy’s cotton farm. Ron spends his first few years of college partying and chasing girls, where he meets Deborah. Sharp and bookish, Deborah is unlike any girls that Ron has previously gone after. They date intermittently until Ron is drafted for a weapons support position in the Vietnam War. Due to his education, the army stations Ron in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for two years, rather than sending him to fight as an infantryman. Ron and Deborah keep in touch throughout his deployment and date when he is released from duty, marrying not long after. Ron works first as a Campbell Soup salesman and then as an investment banker, beginning to sell paintings as an art dealer on the side. In a very short time, Ron’s reputation as an art dealer grows, and he climbs the ranks of the wealthy, prompting him to quit his banking job. Although Ron and Deborah become Christians during the “Jesus wave” of the 1960s, Ron becomes obsessed with his new wealth and everything it can buy. Meanwhile, Deborah and their two children engage more deeply with God. Ron and Deborah grow apart until Ron has an affair with an artist in Beverly Hills. When Deborah finds out, their marriage nearly falls apart, but she commits to forgiving Ron if he will commit to marriage counseling. He does so, spending less time traveling for work and more time with his wife and kids.

Denver rides the train first to Dallas and then to Fort Worth. As a cotton-picker, Denver never learned to read or write and so cannot find a job. Before long, he is homeless. Denver stays in

Fort Worth for a few years before heading to Los Angeles for a time, where he lives until he has trouble with the law and returns to Fort Worth. During his second stint in Fort Worth, Denver starts to isolate himself more and more and becomes violent. On the run from the law in Fort Worth, Denver travels to Louisiana, where he unsuccessfully attempts an armed robbery. Denver turns himself into the police and is sentenced to twenty years in Angola prison, the most violent prison in America. During his time there, Denver is forced to work in cotton fields like a slave. The prison also contributes to his violent demeanor—many inmates are murdered each year in Angola and hundreds are wounded. After ten years, Denver is released and he returns to Fort Worth, sleeping on the streets. After several more years, Denver meets Don Shisler, the manager of the Union Gospel Mission shelter, who gives Denver an occasional bed to sleep in in exchange for cleaning up around the place.

Ron and Deborah move from Dallas to Fort Worth, and within the first week Deborah sees an article about the Union Gospel Mission and wants to visit. She convinces Ron to go with her, even though Ron secretly despises homeless people. The night before they go, Deborah has a dream that the Union Gospel Mission would someday be a place of transformation and healing. Ron and Deborah visit, meeting Don Shisler and Chef Jim, a man who had gone from a prestigious catering career to homelessness, and now works as the mission’s cook. Deborah loves the place, to Ron’s secret chagrin, and promises they will be there to serve every Tuesday. Deborah has another dream, this time about a man who will change the city. Deborah begins memorizing every name and face and praying for each of the homeless people she meets each week. On their third week, a “huge, angry black man,”—Denver—throws a chair across the dining hall. While Ron watches the commotion, unnerved, Deborah excitedly grips his arm and tells him that this is the man from her dream, and that Ron needs to become friends with him. Although Ron and Deborah try to ply Denver’s name from him every time they see him, he is unwilling to interact. Meanwhile, Ron and Deborah’s relationship with the rest of the homeless people begins to grow as they host movie nights, beauty nights, organize an outing to a jazz club, and treat them as regular people they want to spend time with.

Seeing how much Ron and Deborah love the homeless people, Denver begins to soften towards them and finally lets Ron take him out for breakfast to get to know one another. Ron and Deborah are thrilled by this opportunity and pray to God to help them reach Denver. Ron and Denver have breakfast and talk, but when Ron asks if he can be Denver’s friend, Denver tells him he needs time to think it over. A week later, Denver tells Ron very seriously that he will only be friends with Ron if it means they will be friends for life. Ron agrees to this. Ron and Denver continue to meet and spend time together, and both his and Deborah’s commitment to the mission grows, each

spending several days a week there. Through Denver, Ron begins to learn about modern-day slavery and the world of the poor and the homeless, realizing that they face far more struggle than he ever imagined. Denver too, learns from Ron about the world of the wealthy. He is interested, but mostly unimpressed by it. Even so, his heart is warmed by Ron and Deborah's love and his increasing involvement in both the mission and church activities. Denver recognizes that God is doing powerful things through Deborah, and warns Ron that the devil may cause something bad to happen to her soon.

During a yearly physical, a doctor finds a growth in Deborah's abdomen, which turns out to be an aggressive form of liver cancer. After the biopsy, a doctor informs Ron and Deborah that it looks hopeless and she should live out the rest of her days with her family, predicting that she has less than a year. When Denver finds out, he spends his nights praying for Deborah so that she will be covered with prayer at night as well as during the day. Many of the homeless pray together for her constantly. In spite of the doctor's recommendation to let the cancer run its course, Deborah chooses to fight, starting with chemotherapy. After several months of chemotherapy, Deborah's cancer recedes enough to be successfully removed by surgery, and for a brief time she is cancer free. However, within a month, the cancer returns. They do more chemotherapy, more surgery, and once again seem to be victorious over cancer before it rears its head once again. Ron begs God for a miraculous healing, but nothing comes, though Deborah has already lived well past the one year that the first doctor had predicted. After a final run of an experimental chemotherapy, Deborah's health deteriorates so sharply that the family begins to plan for her death.

Denver is as heartbroken as any over Deborah's illness, but he counsels Ron that she will not pass away until she has fulfilled God's purpose for her on Earth. Ron is grieved, but also angry with God. After some weeks, Deborah loses her ability to speak or move. After a doctor tells Ron that she will not live out another day, Deborah suddenly begins speaking and flapping her arms, saying that she sees Jesus and angels. The next morning, though he was not at the house, Denver arrives and tells Ron that he saw a vision from God of angels trying to take Deborah's spirit, but they couldn't because her work still wasn't done. Denver's vision occurred within the same hour as Deborah's. Three more weeks pass, and Denver has another vision that correlates perfectly with Deborah's moment-to-moment health. This time, he hears God telling Denver to pray with Ron to release Deborah and let God take her away. The next day, Deborah dies.

They bury Deborah at the family ranch and hold a large memorial service, where Denver shares his story and the way that Deborah's love impacted him, receiving a standing ovation and prompting many to donate over a total of \$350,000 to the mission. Although Denver fears that Ron will abandon him, he

receives what he believes is a visitation from Deborah's spirit in the night to comfort him. Ron and his children see Denver as family, and Ron and Denver end up living together for the rest of their lives. Denver begins to preach and speak more, and Ron and Denver decide that they want to write down their story. To help Ron fill in Denver's life before he knew him, the two of them take a road trip back to Red River Parish and Ron is overwhelmed by the destitution that exists there, that Denver was raised in. After their trip, Ron and Denver continue living together, Denver takes up painting, works for Ron's art dealership, and continues his work at the mission, as well as making several trips to speak and preach.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Denver Moore** – Denver Moore is one of the two narrators of the story, the other being Ron Hall. Denver, a black man, works as a Louisiana sharecropper for the first three decades of his life, where he experiences extreme poverty, constant loss, racist violence and discrimination, and modern-day slavery, proving that such institutions are alive and well in the twentieth century. As a sharecropper, Denver never receives an education and so has few opportunities for self-betterment, but he escapes the sharecropping life when he hops on a train to Fort Worth, Texas. After many hard years living on the streets and a decade in prison—which develop him into a hardened, violent man—Denver arrives at Fort Worth's Union Gospel Mission, a Christian homeless shelter, where he meets Ron and Deborah. Although Denver keeps his distance for a long time, he eventually befriends both of them, realizing how much they genuinely love and care for the homeless community. As Denver's relationship with Ron and Deborah and his relationship with God grows, Denver begins to transform into loving and loyal friend and immensely compassionate figure. When Deborah is diagnosed with cancer, Denver becomes an enormous emotional support for Ron, buoying Ron's own failing faith with Denver's powerful belief in God's wisdom and control. After Deborah's death, Denver becomes Ron's family, moving in with him, joining Ron in his work, and ultimately telling their story together and becoming an inspirational speaker. Through his transformation from modern slave and homeless man to national speaker and leader, Denver demonstrates the human potential inherent in every person and counters the common idea that homeless people have somehow earned their fate through their poor character, demonstrating that rather, they have most often been victimized by painful circumstances or oppressive systems.

**Ron Hall** – Ron Hall is the story's second narrator, Deborah's husband, and Carson and Regan's father. Ron grows up in a lower-middle-class family in Fort Worth, Texas, but quickly rises to wealth and status through his art-dealing career.

However, as his wealth grows, he becomes arrogant, materialistic, and distant from Deborah, and eventually has a brief affair. Rather than get divorced, Ron and his wife commit to mending their marriage and pursuing their Christian faith, which leads them to volunteer at the local Union Gospel Mission, despite the fact that Ron is secretly quite prejudiced against the homeless. Although Deborah is naturally compassionate and self-sacrificing, Ron's self-superiority constantly interferes with his efforts to love others, forming a thematic conflict between love and ego. At Deborah's urging, Ron slowly develops a friendship with Denver, who teaches him about homelessness, racism, and modern-day slavery, and whom Ron introduces to the world of the privileged. As Ron serves at the Union Gospel Mission and grows closer to Denver, his marriage with Deborah strengthens. However, when they are at their happiest, Deborah is diagnosed with cancer. Although Ron's Christian faith has been growing steadily, Deborah's battle with cancer and her eventual death put it to the test. Ron finds comfort in his faith and God's power to heal his wife, but loses sight of the fact that God may let her die as well. When Deborah finally dies, Ron becomes distant and angry at God, held up only by the wise counsel and emotional support of Denver, who helps Ron to eventually see that Deborah's death, though tragic, ultimately gave birth to many new things. In this way, Ron's faith journey forms a weighty commentary on the power of Christian faith to provide hope, comfort, and compel compassion, as well as its power to be misused or misconstrued.

**Deborah Hall** – Deborah is Ron's wife and Regan and Carson's mother. Deborah meets Ron at Texas Christian University, where they date on and off until she marries him after he finishes his military service for the Vietnam War. As Ron's wealth grows, Deborah is unimpressed by their newfound prosperity and the vanity it inspires in Ron. As Ron grows more materialistic, Deborah invests in her faith in God, volunteering for various ministries and sharing her faith with her children. After Ron has an affair, Deborah phones his mistress to tell her that Deborah forgives her, and doesn't blame her for the fact that it happened, demonstrating her incredible graciousness, which contrasts against her husband's selfishness. Deborah provides the impetus to start volunteering at the Union Gospel Mission and for Ron to form a friendship with Denver, whom she had seen previously in a dream, which she believes is a vision from God. Deborah is filled with compassion for the homeless, inspired by her Christian faith, seeing them as "God's people" even though her husband initially finds them depressing. As Ron and Denver's friendship grows, so does Deborah's presence among the homeless and at the mission, becoming a source of love and compassion for everyone who attends and even extending her reach into other destitute neighborhoods. However, Deborah receives a terminal cancer diagnosis and is given less than a year to live. Although Deborah is frightened of death, she finds courage and hope in

her faith in God and fights the cancer anyway, living long past any doctor's estimation. When Deborah dies, her legacy becomes famous and gives birth to new developments for the ministry of the mission. More than that, the love she's shown Denver helps to free him from his past and all the weights that have held him down, helping him to reach his potential as a gentle, godly leader and speaker.

**Regan Hall** – Regan is Ron and Deborah's daughter and Carson's brother. Regan inherits her mother's faith and practicality, spurning the nice clothes that she is offered by her parents in favor of secondhand clothes from Salvation Army. Although she tries her hand in her father's world of art dealing, Regan finds it dreadful and decides to commit her life to faith and ministry, ultimately working as a cook at a Christian camp in Colorado. Regan is a young adult during the ten years in which most of the narrative takes place, and so plays a comparatively small role in the story, though it is confirmed that she comes to see Denver as much a part of the family as Ron does.

**Carson Hall** – Carson is Ron and Deborah's son and Regan's brother. Also a committed Christian for his whole life, Carson takes after his father—in the positive ways—as much as Regan does her mother. Although Carson visits the Union Gospel Mission numerous times, particularly to pray with homeless for Deborah's healing, his main passion seems to be the world of art-dealing. Like Regan, Carson is a young adult for most of the story and plays a small role, though he, too, seems to accept Denver as a member of the family.

**Granddaddy / Jack Brooks** – Jack Brooks is Ron and John's grandfather and the owner of a Texas cotton farm, where Ron and John spend their childhood summers picking cotton. Jack Brooks is described as a hardworking honorable man who pays a fair wage to his workers, regardless of whether they are black or white, and even makes no-interest loans to poor black families to get them through hard winters. Because of this, Jack Brooks is widely respected in the black community of his town. Even so, as a white man and a farmer, Jack Brooks participates in and complies with the racial segregation and discrimination pervasive in the American South. As a character, Jack Brooks represents the closest corollary Ron has to **the Man**, even though he is not a sharecropper. Through Ron's pain at realizing that his beloved Granddaddy is not so different from the Man who oppressed Denver, the narrative complicates the symbol of the Man, depicting him as a dynamic human being, as complex as any, possessing both noble and ignoble qualities.

**Mr. Ballantine** – Mr. Ballantine is a vile, racist old homeless man whom Denver finds on the street and discreetly begins caring for. If any homeless person ever earned their fate, Mr. Ballantine seems to be it, having been thrown out of his daughter's home for his vile demeanor and alcoholism. Even so, Denver takes pity on the man, especially after Mr. Ballantine is beaten so badly he becomes an invalid and is left in a state

nursing home to waste away. While Denver cleans and cares for him, bringing him food and changing his bed sheets, Mr. Ballantine openly disparages black people and Christians. His state of living is so disgusting and unkempt that the single time Ron comes to meet the man, he cannot stand to be in his room for more than a minute. However, after Scott buys him a pack of cigarettes, Mr. Ballantine begins to soften, apologizing for all the mean things he has said to Denver and even allowing Denver to bring him to church. Within the development of the narrative, Denver's care for Mr. Ballantine demonstrates that all people, no matter how awful, are deserving of compassion and respect.

**Chef Jim / Jim Morgan** – Chef Jim is the cook at the Union Gospel Mission, whom Ron and Deborah meet on their first visit and who becomes a friend and prayer partner to Denver during Deborah's battle with cancer. Chef Jim was once the head of catering at an upscale hotel, but the tragic sudden death of both of his sons left him so bereaved he turned to drugs. He became addicted, losing his marriage, career, and home, finding himself homeless until he managed to clean up and work at the Union Gospel Mission. Gregarious and enthusiastic, Chef Jim's story inspires Deborah and is the first testament in the narrative that homeless people can transform their lives and find new success and fulfillment.

**Sister Bettie** – Sister Bettie is an older woman who works at the Union Gospel Mission and becomes a spiritual mentor to Deborah and Mary Ellen. Sister Bettie is beloved by the homeless community, having sold all of her possessions and committed her life to working with the poor after she became a widow. Sister Bettie inspires Deborah to take her ministry to the homeless beyond the mission and starts bringing her to feed people and conduct church services in Fort Worth's most destitute neighborhood. Within the narrative, Sister Bettie represents the sort of person Deborah seemed destined to become, where she not been taken by cancer at such a young age.

**Mary Ellen Davenport** – Mary Ellen is Allen's wife Deborah's friend who begins volunteering with her at the mission and is present with her throughout her battle with cancer. When Mary Ellen first meets Deborah, she is initially intimidated by her wealth, but quickly disarmed by Deborah's self-sacrificing nature and desire to serve. Mary Ellen is remarkably "plucky" and lends her courage to Deborah often in their work with the mission and their more difficult work alongside Sister Bettie.

**Bobby** – Bobby is the white son of **the Man** who befriends Denver while Denver lives with Aunt Etha and Uncle James. Bobby is the single character completely unfazed by racism and discrimination, boldly approaching Denver one day and asking to be friends. When Bobby realizes that Denver is hungry, he begins saving parts of his own meals to give to Denver, and when Denver is picking extra cotton scraps to buy a new bicycle from the Man, Bobby gives up his own free time to help Denver

gather cotton. Although Bobby and Denver part ways when Bobby begins attending school, Bobby's selfless friendship—despite his privileged status as the Man's son—serves to complicate the Man as a symbol, demonstrating that even someone associated with the Man can be compassionate and self-sacrificing.

**Big Mama** – Big Mama is Denver and Thurman's grandmother who raises them in their early years. Though Big Mama's description is scant, she is Denver's best friend as a young child and he loves doing special favors for her. In return, Big Mama always has little gifts for Denver, such as bottle caps to make toy truck wheels out of. Sadly, big Mama is killed in a house fire when Denver and Thurman are young, so heavily sedated with pain pills that she could not wake in time to escape being burned alive. Big Mama's death is Denver's earliest remembered loss of a family member.

**Uncle James** – Uncle James is Denver and Thurman's uncle and Aunt Etha's husband, who raises the boys after BB's murder. Uncle James is a sharecropper and seems to introduce Denver to the sharecropping life as well. Although Uncle James is a hard worker, he is cheated by **the Man** and unable to make a better life for himself or his family, despite his best efforts. Uncle James dies when Denver is not quite a teenager.

**Aunt Etha** – Aunt Etha is Uncle James's wife and Denver and Thurman's aunt, who raises the brothers after BB's murder. Aunt Etha is a sharp, resourceful woman, able to make a meal out of almost anything and stretch a single animal's meat to last for months. Aunt Etha participates in the sharecropping as well. After Uncle James dies, Aunt Etha moves away, leaving Denver with his sister Hershalee.

**Thurman Moore** – Thurman Moore is Denver's brother; with whom he spends the first ten to twelve year of his life. Despite the fact that Thurman is with Denver as he moves from place to place, Thurman is seldom mentioned in the narrative. After Uncle James dies, he is separated from Denver and assumedly goes to a different plantation.

**BB** – BB is Denver and Thurman's father who takes them in after Big Mama dies. BB seems to be a decent father, but he is also a womanizer who has affairs with multiple married women. Several weeks after Denver and Thurman come to live with him, BB is murdered on the road, presumably by a vengeful husband.

**Don Shisler** – Don Shisler is the manager of the Union Gospel Mission. Although Don plays a minor role in the story, he is the first person to meet Denver and convince him to sleep at the mission and earn his keep by cleaning up around the place. In this way, Don becomes the initial point of contact between Ron, Deborah, and Denver.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**PawPaw** – PawPaw is Big Mama's husband and Denver and

Thurman's grandfather, who also helps to raise them. Although PawPaw is out of the house when Big Mama dies in the fire, after her death, he never appears in the narrative again.

**Hershalee** – Hershalee is Denver's sister with whom he lives as a teenager. Although she is his oldest surviving family member, living until 2000, she is seldom mentioned.

**Auntie** – Auntie is Denver's aunt who occasionally lives with Hershalee. Though she is seldom mentioned, Denver is afraid of her because she is a mystic healer and seems to possess some manner of supernatural power.

**Scott Walker** – A family friend who accompanies Denver to visit Mr. Ballantine. Scott's single role in the narrative is to make the brief point that it is egotistical to assume that one knows what is best for the poor or downtrodden better than they themselves do.

**MawMaw** – Ron and John's grandmother and Jack Brook's wife.

**John Hall** – Ron's brother.

**Alan Davenport** – Mary Ellen's husband.

**Michael** Ron's business partner.

**Man**—and works his cotton fields. In all the years Denver spends there, he is not free to leave nor is he ever paid actual money, making him effectively a slave. Even after Denver escapes the sharecropping life by hopping a train, he lands in Angola prison for ten years. Denver recounts that the prison assigns him and the other inmates to forced labor for white landowners, saying, "I was back in the fields again [...] this time I really was a slave 'cause that's how they ran the prison—like a plantation." This forced labor was legalized by the 13th Amendment, which states that "involuntary servitude" is banned, *unless* it is mandated as punishment for a crime. Denver's combined forty years of outright slavery—under the guise of productive discipline—are proof that, far from being extinct, the institution has managed to persist in various forms and oppress people long after its formal abolition, despite the oft-held belief that America has moved past its sordid history.

*Same Kind of Different as Me* reveals that although slavery still persists, the form is different: rather than owning another human being outright, as was practiced in traditional slavery, twentieth-century slavery maintains control over people by keeping them dependent or ignorant of their opportunities and thus trapped, without freedom. As a sharecropper, Denver's house, food, and clothing are all loaned from the Man on credit, and he must work in the Man's fields to pay off his debt.

However, Denver cannot read, write, or do math, and so cannot verify that the Man is being honest about what he owes. The Man thus perpetually increases Denver's debt to keep him trapped there, never able to escape, move on, or turn a profit for himself. Furthermore, Denver is never even paid a wage, making this a prime example of debt-bondage as a tactic of modern-slavery. Also archetypal of many modern slave masters, the Man purposefully keeps Denver ignorant. For Denver's entire time as a sharecropper, the Man conceals from him the fact that there are numerous opportunities available for him to gain an education and improve his standing, such as schools for black men or places to learn a trade. Worse still, Denver, not knowing that the rest of the country has moved on to a far higher standard of living, feels satisfied with what he has for several years: two pairs of clothes, a windowless, waterless shack, and a little bit of food. Ron later implies that even outside of sharecropping or prison, Denver and people like him are still oppressed by a symbolic version of the Man in the form of drugs, alcohol, or poverty—the things that keep them stuck in their position of dependence and ignorant of opportunities to escape, implying that a figurative form of slavery continues to haunt them.

Through talking with Denver and doing his own research, Ron sees that the racism that enables and encourages such modes of slavery, as well as broad discrimination in general, is still alive and well, hidden amidst traditions and authorities. Denver recalls, "Folks says the bayou in Red River Parish is full to its pea-green brim with the splintery bones of colored folks that



## THEMES

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### SLAVERY AND RACISM

*Same Kind of Different as Me* tells the true story of relationship between a white, wealthy art dealer named Ron, and Denver, a black man who suffers

homelessness, poverty, racism, and even modern-day slavery. Although Ron, like many readers of the novel, assumes that slavery disappeared from America after the Civil War, Denver's story reveals that the practice is alive and well in American society, albeit in different forms. Contrary to the common belief that slavery—and the racism that enabled it—is a relic of a bygone era, *Same Kind of Different as Me* proves that such a wicked institution has survived and exerts new forms of control over the lives of poor black families.

Through the progression of Denver's life story, both Ron and the reader gain a revealing window into multiple avenues of modern-slavery that were established soon after slavery supposedly ended. Born in the 1930s, Denver spends three decades of his life as a sharecropper, which he calls "a new kinda slavery." As a sharecropper, Denver lives on the property of a wealthy white landowner—whom Denver calls "**the**

white men done fed to the gators.” This intense threat of violence hangs as a constant oppressive force over Denver and people in his position. The fear of retribution that this creates discourages sharecroppers and modern slaves from demanding their due. Even the federal government is complicit in such racial violence: Ron discovers that although the FBI knew that people were trying to assassinate Martin Luther King Jr. and wanted to intervene, President Hoover refused to let them and demanded that they let the plans play out as they will. Rather than the government protecting its own citizens from racist violence, this indicates that the government was instead complicit in such acts.

Although many in America would like to believe that the country has left slavery and the racism that compelled it behind, Denver’s experience clearly proves that it still exists even if it is less overt than it once was. As Ron astutely observes, “Denver had lived in an unplumbed, two-room shack with no glass in the windows nearly until the time his country put men on the moon,” suggesting that, despite what many may think, slavery and its endemic poverty are not bygone relics of a past, less-progressive era, but modern issues to be honestly confronted and addressed.



## HOMELESSNESS

Denver lives on the streets for many years and bears witness to the powerful effect such an environment has on people. As he attests, homeless people in America are often swept aside or ignored in the common assumption that they have somehow brought their suffering on themselves and should thus be left to it. Contrary to the oft-held belief that people become homeless because they are lazy, drug addicts, or unintelligent, Denver’s own story suggests the opposite: most often, people become homeless due to life circumstances beyond their control—it is the hardship of life on the streets that makes some people turn hostile or frightening. In this vein, *Same Kind of Different as Me* argues that homeless people are as deserving of the same sympathy and compassion as any other person.

Born into poverty, Denver never has any practical opportunities to escape it for most of his life, which eventually leads to his becoming homeless. This suggests that for many, homelessness is not something they have invited or merited, but a condition that has been thrust upon them. Following the loss of his parents at a young age, Denver enters the slavery of sharecropping as a child. Unlike most young boys, Denver never has the chance to go to school or even learn any skills beyond picking cotton. Thus, he is never given the opportunity to be anything but desperately poor, regardless of how hard he works. When he escapes the sharecropping and arrives in Fort Worth, Denver’s inability to read, write, or calculate cripples his opportunities. Unable to generate a stable income to support himself, Denver lands on the streets. Denver’s homelessness is

virtually unavoidable for him, and thus cannot be attributed to personal failure; he is simply the victim of poverty, exploitation, and misfortune. Denver’s inability to prevent his own homelessness is a testament to the plight of many homeless people: it was not something they asked for or deserved, but rather a condition that was thrust upon them.

Denver is good-natured as a child until the harsh realities of his life require him to develop a mean spirit to survive the plantation, prison, and the streets. This further suggests that Denver and others like him were not cast out of “decent” society because they were naturally vicious, but rather became that way as a consequence of the harrowing experience of homelessness. As a teenager, after Denver’s naturally kind spirit leads him to help a white lady fix a flat tire on the road, he is nearly murdered by three white racists. This event leaves him naturally wary of others and fearful that anyone he meets could threaten violence. Similarly, the deaths of most of his family in the early years of his life make him wary of letting anyone else matter to him again for fear of yet another loss. Together, these events make Denver cold and distant in his interactions with others. Denver’s ten years in Angola prison—one of the nation’s most brutal—turn him hard and mean. He describes the place as “hell, surrounded on three sides by a river,” and in his first few years there, at least forty inmates are murdered and hundreds are wounded. Denver notes that “In those days, a man in Angola without a knife was either gon’ wind up raped or dead,” and he implies he did his own share of fighting just to survive. Even after his release, living on the streets of Fort Worth, Denver maintains his violent demeanor as a way to protect himself, fighting and often threatening to kill people. Denver’s experiences teach him that by keeping others fearful of him, he can protect himself from harm. Although to Ron, Denver initially just seems mean and violent because he is a fundamentally angry person, Denver’s meanness is a defense mechanism established through years of hardship. As Denver puts it, “The streets’ll turn a man nasty.” This too indicates that homeless people are not naturally vile or vicious and deserving of their status, but rather are hardened by their years of struggle. Similar to violence, Denver argues that drug and alcohol addiction are as often a symptom of living on the streets as it is the cause. While many people wrongly assume that homeless people are undisciplined drug addicts who deserve their fate, Denver’s narrative argues that homeless people are often the victim of painful circumstances: “[drugs and alcohol] ain’t to have fun. It’s to have less misery.” This further suggests violence, drunkenness, and drug abuse are often tools for survival and a way to cope with the pain of reality.

Denver’s transformation from a good-natured child, to hardened criminal and vagrant, to a gentle, trustworthy figure who goes on to become a national speaker—even attending a presidential inauguration—is demonstrative of the potential in

every human being, regardless of whether they are homeless or not. Given time and support, Denver manages to shed his hardened demeanor and reclaim the gentle spirit he had as a youth—exemplified by his desire to help a stranded woman change her flat tire on the road—indicating that violence and drunkenness are not who he is at his core, but negative qualities he has taken on to endure the struggle of life on the streets. Denver's story thus argues that homeless people should be extended the same compassion and sympathy as any other person, rather than be ignored and left to their fate in the belief that they have brought it upon themselves.

Understanding that homeless people are people just the same as anyone, the authors imply, is the critical first step in developing compassion and tackling the root causes of homelessness in America.



## RECONCILIATION

Although Ron and Denver come from different worlds and are initially very wary of each other, through their developing friendship, they discover that the various assumptions they held about one another couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, the two men are far more similar than they are different. Ron and Denver's story demonstrates how prejudices against other groups of people—even those formed by actual experiences—do not accurately reflect reality and can often be reconciled by human connection.

Both Ron and Denver carry prejudices towards the demographic that the other comes from. Although they will discover these prejudices are wrong—since they do not apply to every person of that group—they originate from real-life experiences, demonstrating the way in which prejudices are often formed by actual pain. For instance, Denver is extremely distrusting of wealthy white people. Throughout his life, such figures exploit, cheat, and attack him. When Denver is a sharecropper, **the Man** cheats him, holding him in debt-bondage for years. In his teenage years, Denver is attacked and nearly murdered by three white cowboys on horseback who put a noose around his neck for speaking to a white woman. As a homeless man, Denver sees many areas of the city renovated by wealthy white people who seem intent on sweeping away the homeless—seeing them as a blight on the city—forcing them to find new places to sleep and live. As he says, “I always knowed white folks didn't think much of black folks [...] thought we was mainly lazy and not too bright.” Ron's prejudices are shaped by his limited experiences as well. While managing his gallery, Ron often has trouble with homeless people—most of whom are black—wandering into his store, causing trouble, and even robbing the place. Over time, Ron comes to view such people as “a ragtag army of ants bent on ruining decent people's picnics.” The general racism of the American South in the 1950s and 1960s undoubtedly also has an effect on his perception of

people like Denver. Indeed, the first time that Ron sees Denver, his impression is of a “huge, angry black man,” whom he fears. Both Ron and Denver's assumptions and prejudices about each other are wrong, since they obviously do not apply to every wealthy white man or every poor black man and thus do not reflect the complexity of reality. Even so, these prejudices have originated from actual experiences, suggesting that it will take an equally real experience to overcome them, rather than a simple mental adjustment.

As Denver and Ron slowly get to know each other, they both realize that many of the things they had assumed about each other and their respective worlds is false, and that each is a far more substantive and honorable person than each had believed. This demonstrates the way in which actual human connection can begin to break down long-held prejudices and begin to reconcile and unify individuals who come from very different backgrounds. Ron learns from Denver not only about modern-slavery, homelessness, and racism, but also that there is a methodology to surviving poverty and a code of honor among homeless people, much more sophisticated than the “ragtag army of ants” mentality he previously assumed. Furthermore, Ron discovers that Denver's years of hardship and survival on the streets and in prison have given him a “a strong spirit and a deep understanding of what beats in the heart of the downtrodden.” Though uneducated, Denver possesses a practical wisdom greater than anyone Ron has ever known. Rather than merely the “angry black man” Ron once assumed Denver to be, through his friendship he discovers that Denver is wise, insightful into the human condition, and fiercely loyal. Similarly, Denver discovers that not all wealthy white people are greedy and exploitative like the Man. Although Ron is naïve about poverty, he is eager to listen and to learn and is gracious with his time. A pivotal moment for Denver occurs when Ron and Deborah invite him to join them at their vacation ranch home to spend a weekend with them and their cowboy friends. Given his past experience with cowboys, Denver is wary, telling Ron, “I heard cowboys don't like black folks.” Ron persists and Denver joins them, having a great time and learning what it feels like to be “accepted and loved by a group of white guys on horseback with ropes in their hands. Exactly the kind of people he had feared all his life.” Ron and Denver's shifting perception of each other and the world that each of them comes from indicates how relationships and human connection can begin to reconcile individuals who've spent most of their lives fearing each other.

Denver and Ron accept each other as family and live together after Ron's wife Deborah's death, an act that would have seemed unthinkable to either one of them a decade before. However, having built a strong and loving friendship, they each realize that, as human beings, there is more that unites them than sets them apart. Ron and Denver feel the same fear and pain of Debbie's loss and the same gratitude for the life she has

lived. As Denver puts it, “After I met Miss Debbie and Mr. Ron, I worried that I was so different from them that we wadn’t ever gon’ have no kind a’ future. But I found out everybody’s different—the same kind of different as me. We’re all just regular folks walkin down the road God done set in front of us.” Denver and Ron’s relationship transcends race and class, revealing to each of them another part of the human experience they never thought they would see, making them the stronger for it. Their story serves as a powerful testament to potential of reconciliation between wildly different people, built on human connection.



## CHRISTIAN FAITH

Christianity plays a central role in the memoir and has a transformational impact on the lives of Denver, Ron, and Ron’s wife, Deborah. For each of

them, as they engage more deeply with Christianity and with God, they are compelled to look beyond themselves and strive to love others. Just as significant, when tragedy strikes, their faith becomes a potent source of hope and a vessel through which to find meaning in the midst of pain. In its depiction of Christianity, the memoir thus argues that one’s Christian faith can be a powerful motivator to look beyond oneself and serve others, and that it can also serve as a comfort in times of sorrow and a means to find meaning in tragedy.

For many of the characters, their Christian faith compels them to follow Jesus’s example and find ways to love and care for the downtrodden, demonstrating the motivation that Christianity can provide to love and serve others. As Deborah commits herself to her Christian faith, she feels led by God to reach beyond her own sphere of the world and look for ways to help those less fortunate, leading to her involvement in Union Gospel Mission, the homeless shelter where she and her husband meet Denver. Deborah sees the homeless as “God’s people” and feels compelled to love them in any way she can, illustrating how the tenets of Christianity can compel an individual to see the value of other people regardless of their status in life. As Deborah’s burgeoning faith rubs off on Ron, he becomes less preoccupied with his career and making money and shifts his focus to his wife, his family, and the Christian calling to serve others. Although Ron will still have to wrestle with his own ego, the influence of his Christian faith prompts him to reorient his life towards other people. Even Denver, who for decades keeps himself hardened and isolated and holds everyone at a distance, is softened by the witness of God’s love that he sees in Deborah and Ron at the Union Gospel Mission. Denver is inspired to consider how he can help the homeless people around him, such as secretly caring for a disabled homeless man. Like Deborah and Ron, Denver finds that his own Christian faith compels him to look outside himself and serve those around him.

For Ron, Deborah, and Denver, their Christian faith becomes

both a vital hope in the face of tragedy as well as a way to ascribe meaning to it, offering the reassurance that all of the pain they experience is not in vain. This further demonstrates that Christianity can help people cope with and make sense of terrible tragedy and overwhelming pain. When Deborah is diagnosed with severe liver cancer, her faith in God provides hope that despite how grim the doctors’ prognosis is, there is still the chance that she could be miraculously healed. This hope compels her to defy the doctors’ advice. Emboldened by her faith, Deborah battles cancer and survives much longer than even the most optimistic forecasts. Even when her death is in sight, Deborah, Denver, and Ron’s confidence that God is in control and that Deborah will have a new life in heaven sustains them and helps them to face the future. Although their faith does not negate the pain of loss, it does them to hold onto hope and to cope with the fear and anxiety of death. Both before and after Deborah’s death, Denver hears God telling him that though tragic, her passing will give birth to something new. This is a critical support for both himself and Ron, who struggles to understand why God should allow Deborah to die at such a young age. Denver’s belief comes true: as he and Ron share their story and they speak publicly about Deborah’s life, many people are inspired to donate hundreds of thousands of dollars to combat homelessness in their city and the work of the Union Gospel Mission greatly expands. Denver’s ability to find meaning in the tragedy of losing Deborah, spurred by his faith, does not take away the pain of her departure, but it does help all who knew her to find some comfort in the fact that God used her death to give life elsewhere. This powerfully illustrates the capacity of Christian faith to help its proponents make sense of sadness of the world around them.

Despite the characters’ powerful testimonies, the memoir presents a nuanced picture of religion, as it is careful to recognize the occasionally manipulative elements of Christian faith, ultimately suggesting that although it can be a powerful force for good, it can also be misused. In the early years of Ron and Deborah’s budding faith, they meet many people who try to manipulate them into believing in God in the particular way that they do. Ron looks back on these interactions with disdain, gently condemning the aggressive and manipulative nature of it. In the same vein, faith-based homeless shelters sometimes force the attendees to listen to a sermon before they are allowed to eat a meal. Ron finds this similarly manipulative, condemning it as a way to bait people into hearing a message when really they are just hungry and deserve to be fed. Ron’s observations help to temper the story’s depiction of Christianity. Though it is a force for good, he also recognizes that it can be just as well misused or misconstrued. Indirectly, Ron’s narrative suggests that Christian faith should not be manipulative or concerned with being right, but should instead focus on simply loving people.

By sharing both the good and bad that they see in Christianity,

the authors seek to provide a testimony that is powerful without seeming unrealistically optimistic. Ultimately, they argue that although Christian faith will not prevent one from pain, it can be critical aid in enduring it and, when used rightly, compels people to love each other rather than just themselves.



### CHARITY, LOVE, AND EGO

Although Ron and Deborah are compelled to love and serve the downcast by their Christian faith, Ron discovers that his own ego often interferes and taints that noble desire. Through Ron's journey of learning to relinquish his own self-superiority and view the homeless people he serves as friends and equals—rather than as lesser individuals whom he is graciously helping—the memoir argues that to truly serve someone and have the greatest impact, one must learn to set aside their own ego and treat the people they are serving as equally valuable as themselves.

Ron's initial charity work and even his first months serving at Union Gospel Mission are tainted by ego, illustrating how one's ego can be tied up in their efforts to be charitable and compassionate. As millionaires, Ron and Deborah attend black-tie charity galas and donate thousands of dollars to various organizations, often being celebrated for their generosity and having their pictures published in the paper. Ron takes pride in this work, but Deborah sees through it and recognizes such charity strokes their own egos as do-gooders as much as it helps anyone else. During their first months at Union Gospel Mission, Deborah is quick to accept the homeless people as they are and loves them regardless of how she is treated, but Ron is secretly repulsed by them and assumes that they must in some way deserve to be homeless. As a wealthy, successful man, he cannot help but see himself as above them, a higher quality of person, demonstrating how one's ego can quietly and subconsciously affect the way they view the people they are seeking to serve. Even though Ron's charitable acts are acts of compassion and admirable to some degree, he does not truly love the people he is giving money or time to and, in his own mind, considers them below him. Ron's own retrospective narrative suggests that this sort of charity cannot have any lasting impact on the lives of those who supposedly benefit—they have been given one more meal, perhaps, but they have not been valued or loved as people.

Once Ron begins to see the homeless people as equal to himself, he starts developing meaningful relationships with them and having a noticeable impact, demonstrating the way in which one must set aside their ego and any beliefs in their own superiority to love and serve others in a truly effective way. After a homeless man angrily confronts Ron for thinking that he is better than the people he is serving food to, Ron begins to consider that “maybe my mission wasn't to analyze them, like some sort of exotic specimens, but just to get to know them.” In this critical moment, Ron realizes he has not been treating the

homeless as people who are equally valuable as himself, but as subjects who have something wrong with them. This simply continues the condescension that the homeless already receive from society. Therefore, the greatest thing he, or anyone can offer, is to treat the people he meets like an equal, as opposed to looking down on them, as “decent” society already does.

Ron and Deborah's relationship with the homeless community blossoms when they additionally begin hosting movie nights and birthday celebrations simply as ways to spend time with those affected by homelessness, sparking joy and offering a brief reprieve from the difficulties of life on the streets. The more consistently they do this, the more that people in the homeless community begin opening up emotionally and sharing what brought them to this point in their lives and what they hope for the future. This again suggests that the simple act of getting to know someone can be a powerful way to love them, but can only be achieved once ego has been set aside and the people one is trying to help are treated as equals and as friends. Ron's relationship with Denver is also similarly held back until Ron realizes that he has been egotistically seeing himself as an “indulgent benefactor,” which Denver can sense and prevents from trusting him or opening up to him. As Ron learns to set his ego aside, Denver begins to trust him and their relationship grows. As long as Ron maintained his internal ideas about self-superiority—even though they were never spoken—this could not happen, and Ron would never discover how much Denver had to offer.

Ultimately, Ron and Deborah discover that as much love and friendship they give to the homeless community, they also receive back, suggesting that the love they have given has in turn given birth to more love from and between those individuals. When Deborah is diagnosed with cancer, many of the homeless people they have developed relationships with rally together to pray for her and offer their emotional support. Not only have Ron and Deborah impacted the lives of others, their own have been impacted as well. This mutual exchange of love and friendship reinforces and highlights the equal standing of Ron and Deborah and the people they set out to serve and love. The story thus suggests that learning to love others and view them as equals—rather than pitiable people in need of “indulgent benefactors”—not only provides the greatest impact on those one wishes to help, but also on one's own life as well.

Although Ron and Deborah cannot simply eradicate homelessness from the city, they discover that by forming simple, equal relationships—where ego plays no part—with the people in the homeless community, they are able to bring joy and slightly lessen the burden of those who suffer. At the same time, those same people reflect that love and touch their own lives as well.



## SYMBOLS

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



## THE MAN

The Man symbolizes any form of oppression or discrimination that holds back poor people like Denver. Although “the Man” is primarily Denver’s term for any wealthy landowner who leases his property to sharecroppers—and is thus their master—it also becomes the embodiment of systems of racism, slavery, and even poverty that exploit poor individuals and keep them from succeeding. In contrast with traditional slave owners, the Man does not ensnare individuals through legal ownership of their bodies, but through keeping them dependent on his provision for survival, beholden to their debts, too poor to move on and ignorant of other opportunities to succeed or develop themselves.

Although it would be easy to merely demonize the Man, both Ron and Denver are careful to provide a balanced perspective and recognize that, as oppressive as the Man is, he is ultimately human, with the same mixture of good and bad qualities as any human being. In Denver’s experience, the Man holds him in dependent, subjugated condition and keeps him utterly ignorant of the world around him, and yet lets him earn a new bicycle as a child and gives him a place to stay on his property as an adult. As a child, Denver’s best friend, Bobby, is the Man’s son and is a loving and self-sacrificing companion to Denver. In the same way, although Ron initially hates the Man as an oppressive figure of Denver’s past, he realizes that his granddaddy, himself a cotton farmer though not a sharecropper, was rather similar to the Man—even though he paid a fair wage to his black workers, he was still deeply racist. In this depiction, the story casts the Man not as an utterly villainous figure, but a human being who inherits and participates in an exploitative, oppressive system.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Thomas Nelson edition of *Same Kind of Different as Me* published in 2006.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

☞☞ Folks say the bayou in Red River Parish is full to its pea-green brim with the splintery bones of colored folks that white men done fed to the gators for covetin their women, or maybe just lookin cross-eyed. Wadn’t like it happened ever day. But the chance of it, the threat of it, hung over the cotton fields like a ghost.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 3

## Explanation and Analysis

In the opening chapter, Denver briefly speaks about the racism and violence that pervades rural Louisiana, where he grew up. Although the story takes place in the mid-twentieth-century, when many in America consider slavery and racist violence to be fading relics of a bygone era, Denver’s life is a testament to their continuous presence and the pressure they exert on poor black families. The threat of violence hanging “over the cotton fields like a ghost” nods to the pervasive presence and power of the Man in the minds of black laborers. Although they are technically free—thanks to the Emancipation Proclamation, passed one hundred years prior—that freedom is suppressed by the fear of retribution should they do anything that may be perceived as disobeying the Man or marginally offensive to white people. The book highlights how with such a looming threat, black people still are not free.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ The incident firmly fixed my image of homeless people as a ragtag army of ants bent in ruining decent people’s picnics.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Denver Moore

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 10

## Explanation and Analysis

Ron recalls the time that his art gallery was robbed by two homeless men, costing him thousands of dollars. As a self-made millionaire and successful entrepreneur, Ron harbors heavy prejudice against homeless people and finds them

repulsive and slovenly. Although Ron himself came from a lower-middle-class upbringing, he possesses very little sympathy for poor people, assuming that if he was able to climb the ladder of wealth and success, everyone else ought to be able to as well. This sets the stage for Ron's eventual character development from a pitiless, self-absorbed businessman to a compassionate person, devoted to helping the poor and the homeless. Ron's established prejudice will also feature heavily in his relationship with Denver, through which Ron will begin to see the error of his assumptions about homelessness and be forced to reckon with his own ego in believing that he, as a wealthy man, is somehow better than the "ragtag army of ants."

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☛☛ As far as I knew, their first names were "Nigger" and their last names were like our first names: Bill, Charlie, Jim, and so forth [...] none of them were ever called by a proper first and last name like mine, Ronnie Ray Hall, or my granddaddy's, Jack Brooks.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Granddaddy / Jack Brooks

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout his childhood, Ron spends his summers working on his granddaddy's cotton farm alongside the hired black laborers. Although Jack Brooks pays a fair wage and does not run a sharecropping outfit, the racial discrimination is still glaringly evident. Ron's childhood naivety of not realizing that the black workers have full names demonstrates the pervasive quality of racial discrimination across the South, even throughout the 1960s. As a young man, Ron never considers the racism he sees or the prejudices he forms within himself as a result; he simply absorbs them. Although Ron never sets out to be a racist, he was raised in a racist environment and so adopted its traditions and its viewpoints. In light of this, while Ron's personal prejudices must be dealt with on an individual level as well, they can also be traced back to systemic problems and the pervasive culture that defines the American South.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ A lotta folks called [sharecropping] a new kinda slavery. Lotta croppers (even white ones, what few there was in Louisiana) didn't have just one massa, thye had two. The first massa was the Man that owned the land you was workin. The second massa was whoever owned the store where you got your goods on credit. Someimes both a' them was the same Man; sometimes it was a different Man.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis

Denver spends nearly thirty years as a sharecropper in Louisiana, reflecting how, even though many laborers see it for what it is, it maintains a dominant presence in the rural South. This passage develops the symbol of the Man as more than just a single, landowning master, but a representation of the oppression of modern-day slavery and racial discrimination. Throughout his life, Denver is caught under many different iterations of the Man, who assuredly bear their own differences as individuals. Even so, from Denver's perspective, they all represent the same subjugating force as a figure who keeps him—and others like him—under their thumb. Symbolically, the Man embodies every racist system, law, and person who holds back poor black families from gaining financial independence, their own property, and their right to self-governance.

Notably, the Man differs from traditional slave masters in the way that he exerts control over the lives of others. Rather than legally owning a person's body, the Man controls through debt-bondage and enforced ignorance, keeping individuals and families dependent on the Man's credit to purchase their goods and keeping them ignorant of opportunities to grow their skill sets or pursue a better living.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ Purty soon [Bobby's] people figured out we was friends, but they didn't really try to keep us from associatin, 'specially since I was the only boy on the place right around his age and he needed somebody to play with and keep outta trouble. They detected he was givin me food, so they put a little wood table outside the back door for met to eat on. After a while, once Bobby'd get his food, he'd come right on out and me and him'd sit at that little table and eat together.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker), Bobby

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 39-40

**Explanation and Analysis**

As a boy, Denver befriends Bobby, the son of the Man who owned Denver's family's sharecropping land. Denver's relationship to Bobby and Bobby's family's response complicates the symbol of the Man. While it would be easy—and perhaps justified—to simply demonize the Man as an oppressor, Denver's recollection demonstrates that the Man is a complex figure, one who both profits from oppression but also occasionally extends kindness. The Man's provision of a table for Denver to eat at behind the house implies that not only do they not mind their white son playing with a black boy, but the Man even has some concern for Denver's comfort and wellbeing. At the same time, the fact Bobby routinely brings food for Denver to eat at all implies that Denver is not well-fed in the first place, a symptom of his enforced poverty by the Man. Thus, the Man is a paradoxical figure, a mixture of racist oppression and surprising, if minor, acts of compassion. Ultimately, as both a symbol and an individual, the Man is depicted as human rather than demon, compelled by conflicting desires.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Things was a-changin. Uncle James took sick and died, and Aunt Etha moved away. Last time I seen her, she was cryin. I couldn't figure out why God kept takin all the folks I loved the most.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker), BB, Big Mama, Aunt Etha, Uncle James

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 47

**Explanation and Analysis**

Denver's childhood years are defined by loss, pain, and trauma. After Big Mama dies tragically in a house fire, Denver goes to live with his father, BB. Not long after, BB is murdered, and Denver lives with his Aunt Etha and Uncle James and until his uncle dies as well. This constant loss of the people he loves eventually makes him emotionally distant and callous, unwilling to hold others too dearly or let them close, seemingly out of fear that he will lost them as well. Denver's emotionally distant nature features heavily in his relationship with Ron and Deborah, becoming a major obstacle that he overcomes over the course of his life. As the story progresses, Denver's callous nature will be overcome by Deborah's persistent love for him and he will learn to love her as well, although he is still fearful of loving another person he may someday lose.

Although it is not directly stated, Denver's constant loss of loved ones seems to play a role in the distance that he puts between himself and God for decades. In this manner, Denver's own bitterness towards God foreshadows Ron's own bitterness that he will experience after Deborah's death, and thus makes Denver a strong support for Ron in that time, since he knows that sort of pain and anger from personal experience.

☝☝ Lookin back, I figure what them boys done caused me to get a little throwed off in life. And for sure I wadn't gon' be offerin to help no white ladies no more.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker), Ron Hall, Deborah Hall

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 50

**Explanation and Analysis**

As a teenager, while helping a stranded white woman fix a flat tire, Denver is attacked by three white boys on horseback. They put a noose around his neck and drag him down the road, nearly murdering him, leaving him blind and bedridden for a week. By the time Denver meets Ron and Deborah, he is a hardened, mean-spirited man known on the streets for attacking anyone who gets too close. However, Denver's meanness is not inherent to his character—the fact that he stops to help change a stranger's tire indicates that he is initially gentle and chivalrous—but

something that has developed from years of racist violence and abuse, furthering the argument that homeless stems from painful circumstances, rather than an inherently poor character.

This formative instance also factors heavily into Denver's initial impression of Deborah, of which she is completely unaware. Denver develops a lifelong, prejudicial fear of interacting with white women, since his last interaction nearly got him killed. Thus, in Denver's mind, Deborah's aggressive friendliness seems not only intrusive to a man who has spent decades retreating inward into himself, but also threatening. Although Deborah merely wants to love him, her identity as a white woman and her assertiveness seem to Denver like an attack, a potential threat to his physical safety.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☛☛ [Deborah and I] had actually been labeled “lost,” “nonbelieving,” and “unsaved,” possibly because we had no fish stickers on our cars. (Which reminds me of one friend who, though newly “born again,” retained the bad habit of flipping off other drivers while barreling down the road in her Suburban. [...] The Holy Ghost prompted her to scrape the fish off her bumper until her finger got saved.)

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Deborah Hall

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

In the early days of their Christian faith, Ron and Deborah are accosted by Evangelical friends of theirs who attempt to manipulate them into a new commitment with God. Despite the story's uplifting and inspirational view of Christianity, Ron sometimes speaks of Christians with a snide, half-mocking tone. Rather than being unflinchingly optimistic, Ron often disparages Christianity and even his own practice of it at times as being manipulative, condescending, or shallow. In showing both sides of the coin, Ron's narrative demonstrates that Christian faith, like slavery, homelessness, or compassion, is complex. Christianity is capable of compelling people to love others and providing hope, but also capable of being misused and misconstrued. This passage suggests that while Ron's friend isn't being particularly godly while flipping people off on the road, it's also possible that Christians are overly focused on issues as banal as controlling one's middle finger while driving. Especially in light of the story's multiple miraculous events,

such a dynamic depiction of religion keeps the story's religious elements feeling grounded and nuanced.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ It got to be the 1960s. All them years I worked for them plantations, the Man didn't tell me there was colored schools I coulda gone to, or that I coulda learned a trade [...] I didn't know about World War II, the war in Korea, or the one in Vietnam. And I didn't know colored folks had been risin up all around Louisiana for years, demandin better treatment. I didn't know I was different.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 64

### Explanation and Analysis

Denver works as a sharecropper until he is almost thirty years old, living in a windowless, waterless, shack, unaware that the rest of the world has moved on without him. Denver's entire life seems to belong to a different century, from the primitive conditions he lives in to the slavery he endures. This highlights one of the Man's greatest measures of control: enforced ignorance. By keeping Denver and other sharecroppers isolated, working long hard hours, and just content enough with their situation to endure its hardship, the Man is able to prevent them from realizing that rest of the country has moved into a new age of progress and that black men and women around the country are fighting for a better life. Not only is Denver unaware of opportunities to make more of himself, he is kept unaware of the world at large, oblivious to the major events happening all around him throughout his lifetime. In this way, not only is he denied the chance to rise from his poverty, he is also denied the chance to participate in global events and the progression of human society. This lack of participation in the world seems yet another form of slavery and oppression—the inability to take part in the growth and development of one's own community and country.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☞☞ In those days, a man in Angola without a knife was either gon' wind up raped or dead. For the first few years I was there, at least forty men got stabbed to death and another bunch, hundreds of em, got cut up bad. I did what I had to do to protect myself.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 79

### Explanation and Analysis

After attempting an armed robbery, Denver is sentenced to twenty years in Angola prison, of which he serves ten. Once again, this demonstrates the way in which Denver's life is marked by violence. His time in Angola prison—in which he is forced to work on a plantation, another example of twentieth-century slavery—forces him to adopt a violent demeanor as way to survive, leading to the later perception of him as a dangerous man, unfit for society. Through this, the book again argues that homeless people more often become dangerous, drug-addicted, or hardened due to circumstances thrust upon them, rather than as symptom of an inherently flawed character.

Denver describes his decade in Angola prison within a couple of paragraphs. In addition, even though it is a full ten years of his life, it is absent of any real milestones or defining features others than its violence. This effective loss of life, the passage of ten years without any point or purpose, seems as great a tragedy as the violence Denver endures.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☞☞ It seemed manipulative to me to make the hungry sit like good dogs for their supper. And it did not surprise me that even when Brother Bill split the air with one of his more rousing sermons, not a single soul ever burst through the chapel doors waving their hands and praising Jesus. At least not while we were there.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Deborah Hall

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 86

### Explanation and Analysis

At the Union Gospel Mission, the homeless are not allowed to receive their meal until they listen to a sermon about heaven, hell, and Jesus. Once again, even in the mission, which he and Deborah loves, Ron recognizes the underhanded ways in which Christianity is sometimes propagated and practiced. This paradoxical mixture of manipulation with genuine compassion for the downtrodden seems to be a mirrored image of the Man. Although the mission's exercise of Christianity is more compassionate than the Man's exploitation, it bears a similarly paternalistic quality in the assumption that it knows what is best for the homeless and the poor. Such practice of Christian faith is not treating the homeless as intelligent individuals, but as poor "unsaved" heathens in need of Christianity's benevolence.

Instead, the book seems to encourage Christianity practiced through simply loving people as they are and offering help and friendship without any preconditions. Arguably, such a practice is the only way one can show compassion without viewing the subjects of their compassion as somehow less intelligent or valuable than themselves.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☞☞ Another thought nagged at me, though. Could it possibly be something he saw in me—something he didn't like? Maybe he felt like the target of a blow-dried white hunter searching for a trophy to show off to friends, one he bagged after a grueling four-month safari in the inner city. Meanwhile, if I caught him, what would I do with him?

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Denver Moore

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

As Ron, at Deborah's encouragement, attempts to establish a relationship with Denver, he ponders why Denver is so determined to keep his distance and resist any demonstrations of friendship. Ron's moment of self-awareness nods to the difficulty of any sort of charity work: the contamination of compassion with one's own ego. Although Ron's desire to do something good seems mostly genuine, his own ego and self-perception as a benevolent figure does not compel him to see Denver as an equal human being, but as a "target," a subject of compassion. The comparison of Denver to a trophy animal is incredibly

poignant—such a perception of charity, compassion, or “doing good” seems ultimately dehumanizing rather than uplifting. Rather than affirming the downtrodden as valuable, intelligent individuals, they are specimens to be examined and fixed, or worse yet, trophies to be paraded as evidence of one’s own egoistic benevolence.

Unfortunately, Ron’s moment of clarity does not stop him from infecting his later friendship with Denver with his own ego, as he unconsciously views himself as an “indulgent benefactor.” Ron’s long battle to free his compassion from his ego suggests how difficult truly selfless service actually is, and how easily it can be tainted.

## Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ It was at Starbucks that I learned about twentieth-century slavery. Not the slavery of auction blocks, of young blacks led away in ropes and chains. Instead, it was a slavery of debt-bondage, poverty, ignorance, and exploitation. A slavery in which the Man, of whom Denver’s “Man” was only one among many, held all the cards and dealt them mostly from the bottom of the deck, the way his daddy had taught him, and his granddaddy before that.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Granddaddy / Jack Brooks, Denver Moore

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 110

### Explanation and Analysis

As Ron and Denver begin to form a relationship, Denver tells Ron his life story, revealing to him the various methods of slavery in modern America. Aside from being one of the most significant moments of the story—explicitly naming slavery as a modern burden, rather than an institution solved and abandoned a century before—Ron’s narrative also recognizes a critical but oft overlooked aspect of racism and slavery: it is an inherited tradition. As heinous as modern slavery and the practices of the Man are, they are practices that are absorbed like family traditions, in the same way that Ron absorbed the racial discrimination of the South throughout his childhood. Once again, rather than utterly demonizing the Man, which the narrative could have done, both Ron and Denver’s account of the Man recognize that his exploitative practices are not his alone, but the result of broader systems and a culture that has not

progressed as far as many believe.

For Ron, this realization becomes painfully personal when he realizes his own granddaddy, though not explicitly like the Man—since he paid a fair wage—certainly resembled him in his his discriminatory practices.

## Chapter 31 Quotes

☝ Our prayers for healing at Rocky Top had not beaten back the lethal invader the doctors discovered inside my wife.

Wounded and nearly blind with fear, I clung to the scriptures:

“Ask and you shall receive...”

“Pray without ceasing...”

“I will do whatever you ask in My name...”

Grimly, I shut another verse, this one from the book of Job:

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.”

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Deborah Hall

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 135

### Explanation and Analysis

After Deborah is diagnosed with cancer, the family and the Union Gospel Mission pray desperately for healing.

The shelter that Ron takes in scriptures promising protection and provision demonstrates the hope that Christian faith may offer in the midst of strife, tragedy, and fear, which is an obvious boon. However, in his own pleading with God and hope for healing, Ron also suggests the limits of such faith. Christianity offers comfort, but it doesn’t necessarily guarantee a reprieve from suffering. Ron’s own avoidance of the scripturally backed possibility that, rather than healing Deborah, God may choose to take her life, thus seems to demonstrate a misuse of his faith. More than just hope, Ron is demanding a protection from pain and loss. After Deborah’s death, Ron’s unrealistic expectations of God play a significant role in the anger and bitterness he feels, once again creating a negative argument for the best practice of Christianity: one can find hope in faith in the possibility of healing, but they cannot expect that their devotion to God will safeguard them from all pain and loss.

## Chapter 33 Quotes

☝☝ [...] Sometimes we just have to accept the things we don't understand. So I just tried to accept that Miss Debbie was sick and kept on prayin out there by that dumpster. I felt like it was the most important job I ever had, and I wadn't gon' quit.

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker), Ron Hall, Deborah Hall

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 140

### Explanation and Analysis

After Denver learns of Deborah's illness, he begins holding all-night prayer vigils alone, next to the dumpster, where he knows he will not be disturbed. Denver's acceptance of Deborah's illness and the possibility that she may die creates a foil to Ron's own struggle to accept such a possibility. Between the two characters' approaches, Denver's seems far healthier and productive, marking a turning point in their relationship where Denver becomes the wise counsel and the mentor, giving Ron far more than Ron is able to give to him. Contrary to Ron's breakdown and bitterness at God after Deborah dies, Denver's early acceptance that such loss is a possibility—despite his hope that God will heal her—makes it possible for him to continue trusting in God and finding solace in his faith after her passing.

It is worth noting that Denver's prayer vigils depict yet another benefit of faith. Despite the fact that Denver has little to no possessions or anything to offer, through prayer, he is able to give of himself in a way that he truly believes will matter, even when he is not present with Ron or Deborah, demonstrating the way in which Christian faith offers a resource that even the destitute can give to others.

## Chapter 34 Quotes

☝☝ "Let's forget about only living one year, and let's just trust God," she told me. "Dr. Goldstein is just a doctor. We serve the living God, who knows our number of days. I intend to fulfill each one of mine."

**Related Characters:** Deborah Hall (speaker), Ron Hall

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 143

### Explanation and Analysis

Following her first biopsy, Deborah and Ron receive a dire prognosis from their doctor, who tells them that Deborah's cancer is so aggressive that they should not try to fight it. In his estimate, Deborah has less than a year to live. Deborah's optimism in the face of a terminal diagnosis is typical of her own unshakeable faith, demonstrating yet again the hope that Christian faith and belief in God's power can offer. Deborah's faith-inspired willpower and numerous rounds of chemotherapy do not ultimately save her from her cancer, but they do extend her lifetime far beyond the one year initially predicted. The simple hope of healing provided by Ron and Deborah's faith is a powerful asset that prolongs her life and provides a much-needed source of comfort and light in the face of death.

## Chapter 40 Quotes

☝☝ The campfires and camaraderie worked magic on Denver as he began to know what it was like to be accepted and loved by a group of white guys on horseback with ropes in their hands. Exactly the kind of people he had feared all his life.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Denver Moore

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 156

### Explanation and Analysis

Ron and Deborah invite Denver to join them at Rocky Top, where they attend the Cowboy Spring Gathering. Denver is initially wary about attending, particularly due to his near murder at the hands of three cowboys as a teenager. In Denver's mind, the association between white cowboys, ropes, and racial violence are strong, rooted in his negative experiences. Because of this, it seems that the only thing that could possibly counteract those associations—and the prejudice they've created—is to replace them with positive experiences. Although the memory of his attackers is by no means eliminated, Denver's positive experience camping with cowboys helps him to see that, despite his earlier assumptions, not all white, horseback-riding cowboys are members of the Ku Klux Klan or hate black people. The slow unwinding of Denver's fears and prejudices about white people demonstrate the manner in which actual human contact and friendship with people who are different can help reconcile relationships and replace prejudice—which is a set of assumptions made about an entire group of people, rather than recognizing each member's individuality—with a nuanced understanding that each person in a group is unique, composed of various positive and negative qualities.

## Chapter 41 Quotes

☞ “You asked the man how you could bless him, and he told you he wanted two things—cigarettes and Ensure. Now you trying to judge him instead of blessing him by blessing him with only half the things he asked for. [...] Cigarettes is the only pleasure he got left.”

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker), Mr. Ballantine, Scott Walker

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 161

### Explanation and Analysis

Scott has accompanied Denver on a visit to check on Mr. Ballantine, who is now an invalid in a state nursing home. Although he wants to bless Mr. Ballantine, Scott feels conflicted about buying the man cigarettes because he sees it as an unhealthy habit. Scott’s hesitancy, understandable though it may be, nonetheless is a perfect demonstration of the tainting of compassion with ego. Although Scott wants to show love to Mr. Ballantine, he is still possessed by the idea that he, as the giver, knows what Mr. Ballantine wants and needs better than Mr. Ballantine himself does. Rather than loving Mr. Ballantine as a friend and fellow, equal human being, Scott unwittingly sees him as a subject of compassion, a lesser figure. Denver’s reproach of Scott is stern, since he understands that, despite Mr. Ballantine’s pitiable condition, being treated as anything less than an equal will not feel like love, but condescension.

Scott ultimately buys the cigarettes as well, and in doing so leaves such an impression on Mr. Ballantine that the old man begins to soften his hatred towards Christians. This strongly suggests, once again, that the most effective practice of Christianity is to simply love people as they are, for who they are, rather than egotistically proselytizing or manipulating.

## Chapter 50 Quotes

☞ Pulling out a picture of Jack, [Michael] moved to the edge of the bed and placed it in Deborah’s palm, gently folding her fingers around it.

“Will you watch over him from heaven?” he said. “Be his guardian angel?” The moment later became a mystery. No one ever saw that picture of Jack again.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Deborah Hall

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 187

### Explanation and Analysis

While Deborah is on her deathbed, days after she has lost the ability to speak or move, Ron’s business partner Michael visits to say goodbye and witnesses what is apparently a supernatural event.

The story contains a number of miracles or supernatural events, mostly experienced by Deborah and Denver, such as visions, visitations, and this particular disappearance of a photo, ostensibly whisked away to heaven. Since this is a nonfiction account that the authors hold to be entirely true, this does raise a level of skepticism for many readers who do not believe such things are possible, calling into question how dependable their narrative is as a whole. However, especially in Ron’s narrative, such events tend to be downplayed, minor elements in the greater story. Pointedly, Ron rarely makes an effort to interpret such miraculous events; he simply observes them and recognizes that they were emotionally affecting and meaningful for the people present. In the reading of the story, mirroring Ron’s attitude seems to be the best approach. Although it is impossible to know if such miraculous events truly happen, the fact remains that even the perception of miracles are affecting to the characters and impact their lives. More importantly, however, the core of the story and Ron and Denver’s relationship remains the same, with or without the presence of miracles. The arguments that the story makes about the value of Christian faith remain fundamentally unchanged.

## Chapter 51 Quotes

☞ Quietly, I asked the nurse to remove the tubes and IVs that had bound her for a month. Then I asked the nurse to give us a few minutes alone, during which I held my dead wife and wept, begging God to raise her as Christ had raised Lazarus.

When He didn’t—and I truly believed he could—my heart exploded.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Denver Moore, Deborah Hall

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 188

### Explanation and Analysis

Deborah dies late in the evening, only minutes after Ron has

left the room to try to sleep. Understandable though it is, Ron's grief that God will not raise his wife back from the dead once again demonstrates the potentially negative effect of placing one's hope in God's healing power without accepting the reality that God may have other plans. Rather than holding onto hope for miraculous healing while still accepting that death may come as Denver and Deborah both did, Ron's hope and faith were infantile, unwilling to entertain the possibility that God might not heal his wife. More than simply hope, Ron's faith gave him unrealistic expectations that his wife would not die, in spite of the fact that many godly people have died of cancer before her. Though Deborah's death is a tragedy either way, Ron's delusional expectations actually cause him to suffer even more—not only is he bereaved of his wife, he is also bereaved of his faith. While Denver is heartbroken but able to find solace in his faith, Ron's disappointment that God did not save his wife turns to anger and bitterness and nearly causes him to abandon his faith altogether. Despite the story's uplifting portrayal of Christian faith, Ron's increased suffering offers a dire warning against hoping in God's healing power without tempering one's expectations and accepting that death is a part of life.

## Chapter 57 Quotes

☝☝ And now that Deborah was gone, I had begun to suspect [Denver] felt like a hanger-on. I didn't feel that way about him at all. In fact, during her illness and since her death, I had come to consider him my brother.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Deborah Hall, Denver Moore

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 206

### Explanation and Analysis

On the first Thanksgiving after Deborah's death, Ron and Denver spend the holiday at Rocky Top, alone save for Ron's parents. Although Denver has been there multiple times, he seems uncomfortable. Despite all the time that Denver has spent with Ron's family, all that they've enjoyed and suffered through together over a decade, Denver's uncertainty about how welcome he truly is indicates how difficult establishing equity within a relationship between two people can be. Although Ron has long-since forsaken his ego and sees Denver is a member of the family with as much right to be there as his own children, Denver still carries the suspicion that Ron's relationship with him was

motivated only by desire to make Deborah happy, rather than Ron's love for who Denver is as a person. Though not often discussed within the narrative, this reveals a tragic but significant aspect of Denver's character: Throughout his years as a homeless man, Denver is more accustomed to rejection than to loving relationships, causing him to fear that any love he receives has an ulterior motive. Just as, in the early days, Denver could not understand why Deborah should want to love the homeless if she was not gaining from it in some way, he still carries that suspicion that Ron's investment in him is not based in love but some type of utility. Although Denver eventually overcomes this natural suspicion, it suggests yet another aspect of homeless people's suffering: after being rejected by society for so long, any form of acceptance or love seems suspect. To a degree, Denver struggles not to view himself as unlovable.

## Chapter 63 Quotes

☝☝ What kind of man was the Man? For decades, one Man kept sharecroppers barefoot and poor, but let a little colored boy earn a brand-new red Schwinn. Another Man let an old black woman live on his place rent-free long after she'd stopped working in the fields. A third Man kept Denver ignorant and dependent, but provided for him well beyond the time he probably could have done without his labor.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Denver Moore

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 218

### Explanation and Analysis

After Ron and Denver begin discussing the idea of writing their story down, Ron decides that he needs to see Red River Parish in Louisiana for himself, to gain a better idea of what Denver's early life was like. As they drive away from Denver's old shack, Ron reflects on the paradox of the man.

Once again, the nuanced depiction of the Man defies any archetypal villain or cartoon image of slavery and oppression, but rather depicts the various iterations of the Man as people, exploitative yet generous, flawed and occasionally good. In describing the Man as such, rather than demonizing him, the reader is allowed to consider their own proximity to the Man and their participation in or benefit from the various systems of slavery and racism that are woven throughout American history. In the same way,

Ron hates the Man until he realizes his own grandfather bears a close resemblance, at which point he begins to see him more as a person; a wicked person who enslaved and oppressed others, but a person nonetheless. The narrative thus argues that most white people, in some way, bear some connection to the Man and thus the burden of the slavery's legacy and the oppression of black people.

## Chapter 65 Quotes

☝☝ “Mr. Ron, they’re livin better than I ever did when I was livin here. Now you know it was the truth when I told you that bein homeless in Fort Worth was a step up in life for me.”

**Related Characters:** Denver Moore (speaker), Ron Hall

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 225

### Explanation and Analysis

During Ron and Denver’s time in Red River Parish, they visit an old couple in their home. Ron is aghast at the poverty and squalor. Denver’s claim that homelessness was still better than what he grew up with—which, at that time, seemed fine to him—yet again helps to widen both Ron and the reader’s perception of the depths of poverty and the effects of racial oppression in America. While to most onlookers, homelessness seems the worst fate imaginable, Denver’s own account argues that that, too, is a prejudicial assumption and is often untrue (though certainly, for some homeless people, that is the worst thing they have experienced). Although the majority of the narrative casts Denver’s life before the Union Gospel Mission as unsuccessful, it is worth pointing out that Denver, in his own

way, was climbing the economic ladder as much as he was able to without an education, trade skills, or any form of support.

## Chapter 66 Quotes

☝☝ Still, I can’t deny the fruit of Deborah’s death—Denver, the new man, and the hundreds of men, women, and children who will be helped because of the new mission. And so, I release her back to God.

**Related Characters:** Ron Hall (speaker), Deborah Hall, Denver Moore

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 231

### Explanation and Analysis

Despite his anger at God, Ron sees the new life brought about by his wife’s death through Denver’s transformation and the donations given to the mission after her story was told. For Ron, this recognition brings closure to Deborah’s passing and gives meaning to her loss, effectively resolving his character arc and journey of faith, returning him from bitterness and rage at God to trust. Now that Ron accepts her death as having some purpose in God’s plans, he is able to find the meaning amidst the tragedy. Although this does not lessen the pain of Deborah’s suffering and death, Ron’s faith offers significance to the event and keeps the misery of her passing from feeling pointless. This once again demonstrates the powerful capacity of Christianity to create meaning in the midst of tragedy, helping an individual to remain grounded rather than be utterly overwhelmed by pain.



## 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.

## CHAPTER 1

Denver explains that prior to meeting Deborah, he had never had a real conversation with a white woman. The last time he even spoke a word to a white woman, he “wound up half-dead and nearly blind.” The story went like this: as a teenager in Red River Parish, Louisiana, Denver comes upon a white woman whose car has a flat tire. Denver offers to fix it for her, and she gratefully accepts. However, as he is replacing the tire, three white boys on horseback arrive, none of them much older than himself. They call Denver “nigger” and throw a rope noose around his neck and pull it tight. The white woman doesn’t say anything to defend him. Back in the present, Denver states that he doesn’t like to speak of what happens next, since he doesn’t want anyone else’s pity.

“That’s just how things was in Louisiana in those days,” Denver explains. Such racist violence happened in Mississippi too—a few years later, Emmett Till would be beaten until one of his eyes fell out of his skull, then thrown into a river with a weight tied around his neck. Although these things don’t happen all the time, says Denver, the threat of them always lingers, hanging over the cotton fields where he works “like a slave” for thirty years, starting when he is a small child, even though slavery had supposedly ended decades ago.

During all the years that Denver works the fields in Red River Parish, he can hear a freight train passing through town every day. One day, when Denver is “tired a’ being poor,” he hitches on the train and lands in Fort Worth, Texas. However, as a black man who can’t read, write, or do math, he immediately finds himself homeless. For decades before he meets Deborah, Denver is homeless, in and out of prison, and becomes mean and distant. However, Deborah is the “nosiest, pushiest woman I had ever met” and gets Denver to talk about all the things he has buried with the past, including the three boys and their noose. Denver says that he’s going to tell those things to the reader now.

*This introduction establishes two critical parts of Denver’s character: that his experiences of racism and violence in life have made him resentful and fearful of white people; and that he is a proud man. Throughout the story, whether enslaved, homeless, or heartbroken, Denver never asks for anyone’s pity or sympathy and demonstrates a remarkably high level of self-reliance and durability. This speaks to his high quality of character.*



*This also introduces the theme of racism and modern-day slavery. Although the murder of Emmett Till sounds barbaric, like a story from a bygone era, it famously happened in 1955, when much of the country believed that such acts were behind them. As Denver’s life story illustrates, the racism that fuels slavery and the institutions that support it are still very present in the mid-twentieth century.*



*This flash-forward introduces the character of Deborah as a determined woman who is ruthlessly persistent in pursuing Denver and learning about who he is. The passage also establishes Denver’s homelessness, a major theme in the story, connecting it directly to his escape from slavery and his lack of education or trade skills, leading instantly to further poverty.*



## CHAPTER 2

Ron recalls a day from his childhood in 1952, when a spiteful teacher called him stupid and forced him to stand tiptoed against a wall until his legs cramped and tears ran down his face. He hated that teacher for a long time after that, but now, in 1978, he wishes she could see him driving a Mercedes convertible onto an airstrip, where a private jet has been sent to take himself and three paintings worth \$1 million from Texas to New York to attend a socialite's luncheon.

As the jet takes off, Ron looks at Fort Worth stretching out below, noting the massive amounts of renovation occurring in the city, secretly glad that such work will push the homeless population further away.

Ron keeps such elitist feelings secret from his wife, Deborah. He is still new to the world of the wealthy—only nine years before, Ron sold Campbell's soup for a living, making \$450 a month. After secretly buying his first painting with his wife's stock investments—a graduation gift from her parents—Ron rocketed into wealth and success. He credits God for giving him “two good eyes: one for art and the other for a bargain.” Ron and Deborah started living in the world of the wealthy, traveling around Europe, staying at island resorts, and wearing Armani suits. Ron loves this lifestyle, but Deborah is unimpressed. When Ron trades a painting for a lavish Rolls Royce, Deborah shoots down his excitement over the new luxury, saying she'd be embarrassed even to be seen with it in their driveway.

In the same year that Ron trades a painting for the Rolls Royce, he opens an art gallery in an expensive Fort Worth neighborhood. Each day, several homeless vagrants wander in to warm up or “case the place.” Ron notes that most are black people, and assumes that all of them are addicts or alcoholics. One day, a pair of them robs the gallery, running down the street with a bag full of “cash and artisan jewelry” and spilling it all across ten blocks as they flee. This experience cements the image in Ron's mind of homeless people as a “ragtag army of ants bent on ruining decent people's picnics.”

## CHAPTER 3

Denver explains that he never knew his mama and was raised by his grandparents PawPaw and Big Mama. Due to poverty, black families often have unusual arrangements, with children being raised by siblings, grandparents, uncles, friends, or whoever is available.

*This characterizes Ron as a wealthy man running in elite circles. It is significant that Ron is a rags-to-riches type of person, someone who earned his wealth rather than being born to it, since it both informs Ron's personal prejudices and foreshadows Denver's own development from a poor homeless man with seemingly nothing to offer to a wealthy, sought-after speaker and preacher.*



*Ron's own humble beginnings likely contribute to his disdain for the poor; they represent a fate that he could have found himself in, and which many of his peers expected of him.*



*The contrast between Ron and Deborah's moral character is immediately apparent. Ron is dishonest, conniving, and materialistic; Deborah is simple and honest, unimpressed by Ron's success or his material possessions. Again, Ron's rise from lower-middle-class to wealth both informs his disdain for the poor as well as making it seem more abhorrent. Although Ron was never homeless, he knows what it is like to struggle and to labor. Now that he has risen through the social ranks, it seems he has turned his back on those who haven't been as fortunate. This suggests Ron is egotistical and lacking in empathy for others.*



*This scene depicts Ron as a prejudiced man, though, notably, his prejudice is born from real experience. By describing where his prejudice originates from, Ron demonstrates that, although those prejudices are bad and inaccurate—as the rest of the book will prove—such prejudice is often formed by real experiences, and thus can only be counteracted by real experiences as well.*



*In the same way that Denver explains many aspects of poverty to Ron later in the book, he also explains them to the reader in the telling of his life story, inviting the reader into the same process of reconsidering one's prejudices and assumptions.*



Denver explains the concept of sharecropping: **the Man** owns the farm land and sells the clothing, seeds, equipment, and everything else a sharecropper needs to survive the year and harvest a cotton crop on credit. Although the Man says that both parties will split the profit from the cotton harvest, he increases the debt or cheats the sharecropper so that the sharecropper always owes more money than he or she makes. Since sharecroppers often cannot read, there is no way to know if the Man is being honest, though most assume not. A common saying among black sharecroppers is, "An ought's an ought, a figger's a figger, all for the white man, none for the nigger."

Denver and his brother Thurman live with Big Mama and PawPaw in a three-room shack with a cracked floor showing open earth below it. Big Mama is Denver's closest companion, and he likes to do special favors for her: get her pills (some form of sedative), feed the pigs, and catch chickens for her to fry. Big Mama often has little gifts for Denver as well, such as bottles caps to nail to a block of wood and make a toy truck out of. Denver isn't much of a "playin child," though.

When Denver is around five or six years old, he wakes in the middle of the night to find the house on fire. Big Mama had taken her pills before going to sleep, and it seems no else has woken. Although the house is filled with smoke, Denver cannot find the fire. Denver wakes Thurman and they jump out the window, since PawPaw has already left for work and locked the door behind him. However, Denver realizes he needs to wake up Big Mama and his cousin Chook, who's been staying with them. Chook is sitting in front of the fireplace with glazed eyes, unresponsive, where a large fire is burning.

Denver hears the fire spreading up the chimney and to the roof. Ducking below the smoke, coughing and sputtering, he finds Big Mama in her room, still lying in bed. Denver screams in her ear and shakes her but she is completely unresponsive, as if dead. With a broken heart, Denver decides the smoke must have already killed her. With the roof threatening to cave in, he flees the house once more. As he and Thurman stand outside together, crying, the shack buckles and collapses in flame, and Big Mama finally wakes. Her grandsons watch, horrified, as she burns to death, rolling and screaming, pinned under the fallen roof.

*Sharecropping, as a method of modern slavery, plays a dominant role in Denver's life and typifies the racial discrimination used to oppress black families and keep them mired in poverty. It is worth noting that, rather than owning a person outright, the Man maintains control over his workers through inflated debts and ignorance, knowing that he has little to fear in the way of legal retribution or justice.*



*Although, to a modern reader, Denver's poverty seems apparent, Denver does not make a large issue out of it, choosing instead to simply describe what he remembers. Denver's neutral recollection of his own abject poverty suggests that human beings can adapt to nearly any environment or standard of living and consider it to be normal.*



*This early tragedy sets the tone of Denver's first thirty years of life in Red River Parish, contrasting strongly with Ron's own comparatively safe and stable childhood.*



*This is the first death of a close family member that Denver describes. Throughout Denver's life, he will lose many family members through death or separation, causing much trauma, pain, and grief.*



## CHAPTER 4

Ron grows up in a lower-middle-class area of Fort Worth. His granddaddy Mr. Jack Brooks owns a Texas “blackland” farm, where he grows cotton. Like his mama, Ron and his brother John spend their summers farming cotton on Granddaddy’s farm, which they prefer to the alternative: following their daddy around as he disappears into bars. Honest and harder-working than anyone Ron has ever met, Granddaddy survived World War II and supported a wife and four kids through the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression with his cotton farm, working all day every day to produce enough cotton to survive.

Ron and John inherit Granddaddy’s penchant for pranks, which often earns them beatings with a switch from their grandmother MawMaw’s peach tree. Granddaddy once gave both boys a pair of boxing gloves for Christmas and called all the other fathers in town to meet him at the gas station with their sons. The adults formed a ring and Ron and John fought every other kid in town before breakfast was served, noses bleeding and the boys loving every minute of it.

Granddaddy slightly resembles the black shoeshine who lives in town, an old man whom everyone loves, the only black man buried in Rose Hill cemetery with all of the white families. Ron realizes that a black man buried in a white cemetery might not be such a surprise elsewhere in the country, but the Civil Rights Movement and its impact seemed to miss their part of the South.

The social hierarchy of the South is obvious in the 1950s and seems to young Ron “as much a topic for considered thought as breathing in and out.” The white families live in painted houses and the black families live across the railroad tracks in shacks. To Ron, this doesn’t seem particularly good or bad; many of the black people from across the tracks work for Granddaddy. He recalls, “As far as I knew, all their first names were ‘Nigger’ and their last names were like our first names: Bill, Charlie, Jim, and so forth.” The black workers on Mr. Jack Brooks’ farm are never called by a proper first and last name.

*Like Denver, Ron’s early life is defined by hard work and difficult family situations. During Ron’s childhood, when he is unaware of sharecropping or slavery, the cotton farm is a minor symbol of sustenance, the thing that allows Jack Brooks and his family to survive many hard years. This symbol will develop in the future as Ron learns about modern slavery, when the cotton farm will come to represent oppression and the Man.*



*Ron’s memories of his childhood help to anchor his narrative in a certain historical period of America, one defined by hard work and tough love. In the absence of a strong father figure, Jack Brooks makes sure to teach his grandsons to be tough and durable, demonstrating his care for them.*



*This scene, like much of the memoir, depicts a more nuanced version of racism than many expect—where affection and discrimination are mixed together—while also demonstrating that the racism that undergirded modern slavery was still very present throughout the twentieth century.*



*Ron’s description of racism and racial hierarchy echoes Denver’s statement: “That’s just the way things were.” While in retrospect, such hierarchy is obviously oppressive, to Ron, a young white boy, it simply forms the backdrop of daily life. This demonstrates once again the way in which prejudices are formed by one’s experiences and one’s environment. It would be a surprise for Ron to do anything but accept and uphold the racist hierarchy he is raised in.*



Each morning, Granddaddy drives his truck across the railroad tracks and whoever wants to work that day climbs in the back. After a few hours' work, Granddaddy takes the black workers to the gas station to buy them a piece of bread and slice of baloney, which they eat sitting on the ground behind the station. All the white workers eat a homecooked meal prepared for them by MawMaw. Granddaddy pays each worker the same fair wage and even offers no-interest loans to many black families to get them through hard winters. Although he never keeps books to track his loans, the black community respects Granddaddy so much that even after his death, many families come to repay their debts to Ron's widowed grandmother.

Ron works alongside the black workers and the white workers starting when he is six or seven years old. When he is fourteen, two black men he has been working with convince him to sneak out that evening and come to their juke joint—an informal bar and music club—to get “a beer and a woman.” Ron goes with them and spends the whole night sitting at a corner table alone, pretending to drink a beer, though the smell of the drink makes him nauseous.

## CHAPTER 5

Denver continues the story of his childhood. After Big Mama's house burns down, someone takes Thurman and Denver to live with their daddy, BB. BB is a lady's man and has several affairs with married women, which prevents him from being able to sit in the local church on Sundays for fear that he'd be spotted by an angry husband. Instead, BB, Denver, and Thurman sit in BB's car beneath the church window each week. The preacher opens the glass pane so they can listen to him preach about God and sin and listen to the choir sing. A few weeks after Denver and Thurman move in with BB, a man attacks BB on the road and stabs him to death. Denver wonders if the man who killed BB is one of the irate husbands sitting in church each week.

After BB dies, Denver and Thurman go to live with Uncle James and Aunt Etha, who are sharecroppers. Although Denver knows that white people think black people are lazy and stupid, the four of them work hard, harvesting more and more cotton each year. Even so, **the Man** keeps extending Uncle James's debt. After a few years of no pay, Uncle James moves the family to a bigger plantation. Surprisingly, the Man never comes after him to call in his debt. At the new plantation, the family still sharecrops, this time for another Man. Denver works hard and plays with his brother, but the loss of Big Mama still pains him.

*Although Granddaddy's farm is not a sharecropping operation—since the workers are paid an actual wage—the discrimination is still obvious. Even so, Jack Brooks often extends kindness and generosity to his black laborers and becomes well-respected within their community. This nuanced depiction of racism rejects any easy categorization of all white people as racist and evil, or even all wealthy landowners as utterly oppressing poor families, though that certainly did happen in many cases. Racism and prejudice is thus suggested to be a complex and many-faceted issue.*



*It is notable that Ron remembers having positive relationships with poor black men in his youth, since as an adult he demonstrates a strong prejudice against such men. This again suggests that Ron's financial success causes him to turn his back on the people he grew up around, seeing them as lesser than himself now that he has risen through the ranks.*



*Religion, and especially church, is often depicted right alongside sin. Both BB and his mistresses attend church each week, albeit separately, and Denver suspects that his father's murderer is also there. Despite the memoir's strong portrayal of religion as a powerful force for good, it also often points at its hypocrisy—churchgoers are often manipulative, sinful, greedy, or prideful. The author's recognition that religious people commit the same sins as anyone suggests the moral difference between the people in the church pews and the people on the streets is rather negligible.*



*The belief that black people are lazy or stupid is directly contradicted by Denver and his family's own work ethic. The fact that they work hard and produce more cotton each year but still cannot turn a profit demonstrates the way in which modern-slavery keeps many people poor, despite their striving for a better life. They are not poor because they are lazy; they are poor because the Man holds them hostage.*



In those days, everyone moonshines, both black people and white people, hiding their stills out in the woods. Aunt Etha manages to cook anything that can be killed: possums, raccoons, rabbits. She also grows her own garden, and the family receives milk in exchange for taking care of **the Man's** cows, and two hogs a year that they raise and kill at Christmas time, eating the meat throughout the next year. When anyone gets sick, Aunt Etha gives them a gross tea made from ground cow patty and toadstools. As she puts it, "All good medicine tastes bad!" But it cures everything.

*Once again, despite their poverty, Denver's family demonstrates an exceptional resourcefulness. This once again illustrates that poor people are as dynamic and hard-working as anyone, but the circumstances they were born into or that were thrust upon them impede their progress and stop them from breaking free of their poverty.*



## CHAPTER 6

Ron spends summers working on his Granddaddy's farm until 1963, when he goes to college at East Texas State. His whole world revolves around chasing girls. However, being poor and owning only handmade clothes made from feed sacks, Ron is humiliated on his first date with a rich girl, who is mortified at his outfit and openly mocks his appearance, explaining that the boys she dates must wear penny loafers.

*For Ron, this is the first time that his poor beginnings truly make an impact on him. In the development of his character, this recognition that a lack of money is holding him back from what he desires fuels his future materialism and preoccupation with money, status, and possessions. This humiliation drives Ron to "make something of himself."*



## CHAPTER 7

When Denver is seven or eight, he gets his first cotton sack. Every day, when he brings in the cotton he has picked, **the Man** says it's about twenty pounds, no matter how long or hard Denver has worked or how much heavier it is than normal.

*Denver's childhood memories are not of going to school and learning, but of working in cotton fields. Such an early experience of being cheated by the Man must certainly have a demotivating effect as well, since no matter how hard he works, he can never get ahead.*



One day, as Denver is walking home, a white boy named Bobby approaches him and asks him to ride bicycles with him. Denver doesn't have a bicycle, but he agrees to go shoot Bobby's BB gun with him instead. Denver and Bobby become fast friends, playing together whenever Denver isn't working the fields. Bobby shares his food with Denver, and even helps Denver pick extra cotton scraps in the evenings for three years to trade **the Man** for a new Schwinn bicycle for Denver to ride. Denver recalls, "That Schwinn was the first new thing I ever had. I was eleven years old."

*Once again, the depiction of racism is more nuanced than what one might expect. Although, looking back, Denver recognizes that he was a slave and oppressed by white men, he also has incredibly fond memories of Bobby. The Man, who cheats him for decades, also gives him the first new thing he has ever owned. Rather than depicting the Man or white people in general as simply evil, Denver's narration recognizes complexity, the mix of good and bad qualities in all people.*



## CHAPTER 8

Ron continues to narrate his life story. On November 22, 1963, Ron and his friends are driving their car to pick up their homecoming dates. This time, Ron is wearing store-bought clothes and penny loafers. As they are trying to pull onto the freeway, traffic shuts down. President Kennedy and his entourage roll through, passing in front of them close enough that Ron can see the details of the president's and the first lady's faces. After the procession moves on down the road, all the gathered onlookers suddenly scatter. The radio announces that the president has been assassinated, and a city-wide manhunt is underway.

*While not directly related to any of the story's major themes, the assassination of JFK anchors Ron's young adulthood into a specific period of American history. It is also notable that Ron has replaced all of his handmade clothing, signaling that he is taking his first steps down the path of materialism and preoccupation with money and status.*



## CHAPTER 9

Every Sunday, Denver and his family ride a wagon to church—which also functions as a social center—to hear the black preacher, who teaches the same sermon for months at a time before moving onto the next. Though he can't read, Denver learns the Bible from listening to the preacher repeat his sermons over and over again. When Denver is twelve years old, Aunt Etha dresses him in all white and takes him to the river to be baptized by the preacher, with a picnic to follow. When the preacher dunks him underwater, his grip slips, and Denver sinks straight to the bottom, lying flat on his back. Not knowing that he is supposed to come back up right away, Denver floats down the river for a while until he pops up for air, “a few shades paler and fulla the Holy Ghost!” The congregation is so relieved to see him alive that he gets two pieces of pie during the picnic.

*Denver's learning of the Bible through listening to the preacher demonstrates that, though he is uneducated and never learns to read, Denver certainly isn't unintelligent. Rather, disadvantaged as he is by his illiteracy, he learns through different methods. This furthers the argument that poor people or homeless people like Denver are as intelligent and capable of learning as anyone, but they have been faced with far more obstacles and disadvantages. Importantly, Denver interjects innocence, naivety, and humor into his description of a childhood filled with tragedy and hardship. This helps the reader to remember that though he is effectively a slave, Denver is also still just a kid.*



## CHAPTER 10

Time passes and life changes for Denver. Uncle James dies, Aunt Etha moves away, and Denver and Thurman are separated and sent to different sharecropping plantations. Now thirteen or fourteen—Denver doesn't keep track of time, since there seems to be no reason to—he goes to live with his sister Hershalee. Denver misses Bobby, and without him has very limited interaction with any white people besides the Man.

*Denver's limited interaction with white people other than the Man, who cheats him, begins to reinforce and strengthen his prejudices against white people in general. Without any real contact or relationship, Denver's perception of white people is overwhelmed by the racism he sees, and he projects that onto the group at large.*



Denver remarks that the separation between white people and black people isn't enforced just by the adults; white kids harass and bully black kids as well. When Denver is fifteen or sixteen, walking home from the plantation, he meets a white woman with a flat tire. Denver asks if she needs help and she accepts. As Denver is finishing the job, however, three white boys ride out of the woods on horses and throw a rope around his neck to punish him for "botherin white ladies." The boy who threw the rope ties it to his saddle and takes off, dragging Denver by the neck behind him. Denver nearly blacks out and thinks he will die until Bobby and his aunt happen to pull up in a vehicle and point a shotgun at the boys on horses, ordering them to cut Denver loose. Denver's skin is raw and bleeding, and he can hardly see.

Bobby and his aunt drive Denver to his Auntie's house, where he spends the next week in bed. The bruising goes down, his skin scabs over, and his eyesight returns. Denver knows who the boys are, but figures their fathers are in the Ku Klux Klan and knows its better just to keep silent. "Lookin back, I figure what them boys done caused me to get a little thrown off in life. And for sure I wadn't gon' be offerin to help no white ladies no more."

## CHAPTER 11

Ron meets Deborah after transferring to Texas Christian University as a sophomore. Deborah is bookish and "neat as a preacher's wife on Sunday." When Ron's friend tells her that Ron wants to date her, Deborah promptly declares that will only happen if Ron has the nerve to call her and walks off. Ron is intrigued by her pride and intelligence and calls her the next day. They date on and off—Deborah is in another relationship that she constantly falls in and out of—until Ron's senior year, when he is drafted into the Vietnam War and posted to a nuclear support unit in Albuquerque, narrowly missing combat duty.

Ron and Deborah keep in touch over his two years in the army and begin dating exclusively after he is discharged. To make a living, Ron sells Campbell Soup to grocery store managers. Ron and Deborah marry in October 1969. Deborah works as a school teacher; Ron earns an MBA through night classes and becomes an investment banker, slowly selling paintings on the side in 1971. Their daughter Regan is born two years later and their son Carson two years after that. By 1975, Ron makes twice as much from his painting sales as he does from his banking career, but has yet to step out on his own.

*These events continue to reinforce Denver's growing prejudice towards white people. Although Denver is merely trying to be a helpful person, he is nearly killed for his act of charity. The fact that the white woman he was helping does not even speak to his defense is demonstrative of the social power of racism in that era, silencing even well-meaning people and making them complicit in the racist acts. However, it is also notable that although he is nearly murdered by white people, Denver is also rescued by white people, once again illustrating the nuance and variation between people of the same group.*



*This passage proves that Denver's mean-spiritedness as an adult is not inherent to his person, but is the result of many painful and traumatic experiences throughout his life. This ties into the book's overarching idea that many of the negative qualities people associate with homelessness, such as violence, drunkenness, or unapproachability, are not inherent to those people, but brought on by experiences they have had.*



*From the start, Deborah is characterized as a proud woman, though her pride differs greatly from Ron's. Whereas Ron's pride manifests as arrogance and self-superiority, Deborah is dignified in that she expects Ron to act with maturity and confidence. Deborah's pride will become a vital quality to their development in the future, as she will constantly push Ron to become better than he is, helping him to grow.*



*Ron's financial success is self-made; he works hard and climbs the social ladder. This likely contributes to his disdain for the poor as well. If he was able to pull himself up and rise from his lower-middle-class beginnings, why can't the homeless? However, Ron's early life contrasts sharply with Denver's—that Ron was never heavily disadvantaged, never cheated or exploited by anyone else for years on end, which explains why one becomes a millionaire and the others spends his life in poverty.*



Ron's first art sale that nets him a five-figure profit puts him in contact with an eccentric Beverly Hills cowboy who calls Ron "Poopsie" and insists that Ron call him "Snookems." The profit from this single sale is nearly equal to Ron's yearly salary from the bank. He promptly quits his job and begins lining up more sales through Snookems, and within months is making massive profits.

*Though Ron may consider himself a completely self-made man, it is notable that even here, much of his success comes through a fortuitous connection. Such a resource is something that Denver never has access to, and so never rises through the economic ranks despite his hard work.*



## CHAPTER 12

Ron continues his narration. Early in their marriage, Ron and Deborah are "basic Sunday-go-to-meeting Methodists." In 1973, attendants from a Bible church invite them to a discussion group in their home, where Ron and Deborah discover that the hosts believe them to be "unsaved." Deborah is deeply offended by this, since she has always considered herself a Christian, but after weeks of pestering, Ron and Deborah both decide to pray the "sinner's prayer" and become evangelistic Christians, swept up in the "Jesus wave" of the 1960s.

*Though it describes where they started, Ron's description of this period their Christian faith is largely negative, pointing out the manipulative elements of Christianity while notably absent of any of the positive changes their faith will later have in their lives. In doing so, the book again rejects a simple, optimistic portrayal of faith and instead gives a more nuanced picture.*



Looking back, Ron recognizes that in their newfound evangelistic zeal, he and Deborah alienated many of their old college friends by assuming they knew what was in the hearts of other people and aggressively trying to convert them. Ron regrets this, stating that, "All I can do is tell the jagged tale of my own spiritual journey and declare that my life has been the better for having followed Christ."

*Ron and Deborah's initial approach to evangelism, assuming that they understand the hearts of others, reflects his later view of the homeless as well. In the same way that Ron makes assumptions about the "unsaved," he will also make those same assumptions about the homeless, rather than first getting to know them as people.*



## CHAPTER 13

Denver continues his narration. When Denver is eighteen or nineteen, a plantation owner gives Denver a small shack to live in exchange for sharecropping his land. At the time, Denver feels pretty good about this, but in retrospect he sees that he was even worse off than first-generation sharecroppers—no education, working for shelter and food, and a slave by all counts. To Denver, the worst thing about sharecropping is that **the Man** purposefully keeps his workers ignorant and unskilled, unable to do anything but pick cotton. Before the abolition of slavery, slaves had been taught to do all manner of work: carpentry, sewing, shoemaking, barbering, painting. Now, those jobs are only for white people, and all that black people know how to do is farm cotton. As tractors start reducing the need for cotton pickers, even sharecropping jobs start to fall away, leaving many black families destitute with no housing, food, jobs, or skills.

*This is one of the first major developments of the Man as a symbol, rather than just a person. The Man functions as a symbol of oppression and control, representing any force, system, or individual that holds people in ignorance and bondage. It is notable that there is an inverse relationship between the Man's amount of legal control over his laborer's bodies and the level of independence and self-sufficiency he allows them. When the Man has full legal control over slaves, it is more advantageous to have slaves who are self-sufficient and well-skilled. However, now that it is illegal to outright own another person, the Man must keep his laborers unskilled and dependent on his provision to maintain control over them.*



Denver works **the Man's** land for almost thirty years, never receiving a paycheck. He never realizes that there are schools he can go to, other trades he can apprentice in, or that he can join the army and work through life that way. He doesn't know what else is happening in the world, that his country is fighting World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War; He doesn't know that the Civil Right Movement is occurring all around the country or that his life differs so greatly from anyone else's.

*Denver's debt-bondage and enforced ignorance separate him from the rest of the world, preventing him from participating in it or even being aware of what else is occurring. It could be argued that this ignorance and inability to participate in the goings-on of the outside world forms a second form of oppression—Denver is never given the chance to exercise autonomy and leave his mark on the world.*



Denver catches word that Thurman is somewhere in California, making lots of money. One day, he walks to the railroad tracks, meets a man who shows him how to hop a train, and leaves Louisiana, intending to join his brother. He doesn't tell anyone he's leaving.

*That Denver does not tell anyone he is leaving the state indicates how devoid of real relationships or meaningful human contact his life has become. This contributes to the development of his anti-social demeanor.*



## CHAPTER 14

Ron continues his life story. In 1977, at the age of thirty-two, Ron buys a \$275,000 mansion. His business continues to grow and, as it does, Ron often donates thousands of dollars to charity. With Deborah, Ron attends black-tie charity galas, but Deborah sees such events as foolish—since so much of the donated money is spent on decoration, press coverage, and attire—and thinks they should just send a check and stay home. Ron establishes a partnership in New York with another art dealer, and spends much of his year traveling between New York, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Italy, while his family stays home in Texas. Ron commits himself to his work, buying new cars and fancy toys along the way.

*This is the greatest indicator of Ron's tainting of compassion with ego, which is one of the major themes of the story. Although Ron is giving thousands of dollars away, he seems as interested in the praise it earns him as whatever good it actually does for someone else. Deborah, however, works as a foil to Ron's ego-boosting generosity. She is uninterested in praise or press coverage and sees the vanity in Ron's new wealth, success, and philanthropy.*



Meanwhile, Deborah and the kids are committed Christians. Deborah begins working with different ministries and putting all her time and energy into "know[ing] God." As Ron and Deborah pursue their separate passions, their love for each other dwindles. In 1988, Ron has an affair with a young artist in Beverly Hills. Though he only sees her twice, some friends find out and pressure Ron into confessing the affair to Deborah. Enraged, Deborah throws vases, shoes, art, anything she can find at Ron, before finally demanding that he give her his mistress's phone number.

*Ron and Deborah's characters develop in opposite directions. While Ron is becoming more and more preoccupied with wealth, possessions, and recognition, Deborah commits herself to service and selflessness, again acting as a foil to Ron's vanity.*



Deborah immediately calls the young artist and forgives her, telling her that it was not her fault but Deborah's own for not being a good enough wife. She hangs up and tells Ron, "You and I are now going to rewrite the future history of our marriage." If Ron will commit to a few months of marriage counseling, Deborah will stay with him and never bring up the affair again. Ron agrees.

*Again, compared to Ron's selfishness, Deborah exhibits an extraordinary amount of grace in her ability to forgive. Ron and Deborah's differing dispositions create a value statement, comparing a life in pursuit of money to a life in pursuit of Christian faith, arguing that pursuing Christian faith as Deborah does creates a better quality of character.*



## CHAPTER 15

Denver and the other man ride their train to Dallas and catch another to Fort Worth, where Denver stays for a couple of years. He moves on to Los Angeles, lives with a woman for a while, gets in trouble with the law, and moves back to Fort Worth. Denver finds small jobs occasionally, but quickly realizes there isn't much work for cotton farmers to do in the city. However, Fort Worth is known among the homeless for having a lot of shelters for people like him to have a meal and a place to spend in the night.

Living on the streets in Fort Worth, Denver learns the methods of hustling to make one dollar into a few dollars, bathing in public fountains, and picking up odd day jobs. Unable to read or write and without a birth certificate or social security card, Denver can't find a stable job, though he wishes he could. Like the others on the streets, he takes to "drinkin [and] druggin" to help him forget his misery and that he is very much alone.

*Denver's quick summations of large spans of his life indicate just how little those years seem to hold for him. There are no milestones such as marriage, children, retirement or so on. He is simply surviving from one day to the next. This suggests a life that was not rich with good experiences, but one which simply passed. Despite the story's comparatively positive portrayal of homelessness and poverty, it still paints it as a tragic state to be in.*



*Despite the common conception—from people such as Ron—that homeless people are lazy and should find a job, Denver's life demonstrates that often, homeless people are working as hard as anyone else; they are simply working with less. This continues the portrayal of homelessness not as something that one earns, but something that is created by external circumstances.*



## CHAPTER 16

Now living in Dallas, Ron and Deborah slowly begin to fall in love with each other again. Their family buys a 350-acre ranch home retreat with 28 cattle called Rocky Top. In 1998, they decide to move back to Fort Worth—they keep the ranch, though—and build another house. Within days of being in Fort Worth, Deborah reads a newspaper article about homelessness in the city and a homeless shelter called the Union Gospel Mission. She is enamored and convinces Ron to go. He concedes, but secretly hopes she will be put off by the homeless and give up on the idea.

*Although Ron is beginning to let go of his self-absorption and materialism, much of his ego still obviously remains. Ron does not have any interest in serving the homeless; he only wants to please his wife, which creates a potentially harmful situation where one serves the downtrodden for ulterior motives, rather than any real love or compassion they feel for them. Once again, Ron's personality still heavily contrasts with Deborah's own, despite their mending marriage.*



## CHAPTER 17

Denver explains that despite what many think, there is a code of honor in the "hobo jungle": friends share what they have. When one of Denver's friends leaves town, he leaves his old beat-up car for Denver to watch. Denver rents out the backseats to sleep in for a few dollars a night to other street people and for a little while makes a consistent little profit, until the police impound the vehicle. For reasons unknown to him, Denver begins to mentally withdraw from the people around him, becoming meaner and more defensive and even buying a small handgun for protection.

*Once again, Denver's story demonstrates that often, homeless people are working as hard as anyone but with little resources to utilize. The moment in which Denver begins to withdraw and buys himself a weapon marks another critical juncture in his development into a mean and distant figure.*



When three gang members try to rob Denver, he scares them off with a metal pipe, hops into his friend's car (which had recently been reclaimed from the police) and follows them back to their neighborhood, yelling that he'll kill them when he finds them. After a few minutes, Denver realizes the police will be there soon and flees, traveling all the way back to Louisiana with his handgun. After running out of money in Shreveport, he unsuccessfully attempts to rob a bus and finally turns himself in, now that he has police looking for him in two different cities.

In May 1968, Denver is sentenced to twenty years in Angola prison, the "darkest, most vicious prison in America. A few days in, another prisoner gives him a knife and tells him to keep it under his pillow to protect himself from the other inmates. Within Denver's first few years, at least forty inmates are murdered, and hundreds are wounded. He admits, "I did what I had to do to protect myself." The inmates are also put to forced labor working in the fields on plantations.

Denver is released from prison after ten years and returns to Fort Worth, where he winds up sleeping on the streets in the business district next to a church. A woman who works in one of the offices starts bringing Denver a sandwich every morning, but the church people never pay him any heed. After a few years, Denver is pushed out of that district by "revitalizin" happening in the city. Denver takes up residence in a different part of the city, across from the Union Gospel Mission. After a few years, the mission's manager, Don Shisler, finally manages convince Denver to sleep on one of his beds rather than outside, in exchange for cleaning up around the building every now and then.

## CHAPTER 18

Ron continues his life story. In 1998, Deborah and Ron make their first visit to the Union Gospel Mission, driving through the tunnel that segregates the east side of Fort Worth from the rest of the city and the "haves from the [...] have-nots." As they are let in through a security gate, Ron wants to bolt, but Deborah tells him that she had a dream about the place, except that rather than its current dirty, worn-out appearance, it was brightly painted and covered with flowers. She believes it is a vision of its future.

*Denver continues to devolve into a dark and violent figure. His own depiction of himself greatly contrasts with the gentle, kind-hearted boy he once was, as well as the gentle man he will again become. This stark change demeanor suggests that one's experiences and environment both play a formative role on their personality.*



*This, too, demonstrates the power of one's environment to make them mean or violent, often just for the sake of survival. Denver's enforced labor in Angola prison also demonstrates another method of modern slavery, legalized by the 13th amendment soon after the abolition of slavery so that plantation owners could continue to use cheap or free labor to farm cotton.*



*In this passage, a large group of Christians are depicted as disinterested in the struggle and trials of others, while a random businesswoman is the one who shows Denver selfless compassion. This nuanced portrait of religion indicates that such acts of compassion may be compelled by Christianity, but certainly are not exclusive to Christians.*



*This is the first of many visions, miracles, and supernatural events that take place throughout the story. Though the truth of any of these is impossible to verify—and Ron himself is initially skeptical—their occurrence obviously has a great impact on the people involved and the development of their characters throughout their story.*



Inside, Ron and Deborah meet the director, Don Shisler, as well as Chef Jim, an enthusiastic older man who went from a prestigious catering career to drug addiction and homelessness following a series of family tragedies. Now, he lives and works at the mission. Jim invites the Ron and Deborah to come every week to serve food to the homeless and to “Infect em with love!” Deborah is enthusiastic about the proposition, but for Ron, it is just a means to please his wife. Deborah promises that they will be there every Tuesday. That night, she dreams again about the Union Gospel Mission, this time about a man she believes will change the city.

Initially, contact with such bedraggled people depresses Ron, but Deborah immediately insists that they refer to the homeless as “God’s people.” Each day, the homeless people are only allowed to eat after listening to a roaring sermon from Brother Bill, an old preacher who is nearly blind. Unsurprisingly to Ron, none of the homeless ever seem at all affected by Brother Bill’s sermonizing.

A thin black man in a clean suit warns Ron that, although Ron must think he’s doing them a favor, he could just as easily wind up homeless like the rest of them. Although Ron is not yet as invested as Deborah, the encounter causes him to consider that maybe his purpose is not to analyze or make judgments, but just to hear these people out and spend time with them. Deborah, meanwhile, “[falls] in love with everyone of them,” memorizing their faces and praying for them by name each night. After a couple weeks, noticing that the people at the back of the line receive less food, Ron and Deborah encourage Chef Jim to make a little extra. Despite how small of a gesture it is, Ron realizes it is the first time he himself has actually done anything to try and improve the lives of the homeless.

On their third week, a “huge, angry black man” throws a chair through the dining hall and swings his fists at whoever is near, shouting that he will kill whomever stole his shoes. The man frightens Ron, but Deborah excitedly grabs him by the arm and tells him that that is the man she saw in her dream, and that Ron needs to become friends with him. Ron is skeptical.

Ron and Deborah start watching for the man, who tends to be alone. While the others do not ignore him, they do keep a “respectful distance from him.” Often, he comes in as the mission is about to close its kitchen and asks for two plates of food, one for him and another supposedly for an old man he knows, though everyone assumes this is a lie. After a few months, Ron and Deborah finally learn his name is Denver, but he is “about as approachable as an electric cattle fence.”

*Chef Jim exemplifies the argument that homelessness isn’t due to laziness or stupidity, but rather brought on by difficult and painful circumstances, often completely beyond one’s own control. Deborah’s second dream is prophetic, foreshadowing the transformation of Denver from violent homeless man to leader, speaker, and national influencer.*



*Once again, Ron and Deborah’s characters exist in contrast to each other. Ron represents a typical response to homelessness by seeing the people on the street only for their present circumstances. Deborah, uniquely inspired by her faith, sees the homeless for the potential inside each of them, demonstrating the more loving, Christian response.*



*The man in the suit’s bitter warning to Ron further reinforces the argument that the homeless are people just the same as anyone else, and even someone like Ron could find himself in their position. Starting with this encounter, Ron’s character is slowly beginning to soften. Rather than considering only himself, Ron’s request that Chef Jim make a little extra food is the first notable time that he has done something that does not in any way benefit himself. This suggests that Ron is beginning to develop a real sense of compassion, though he has a long way to go in fostering it.*



*Since Ron did not know Denver as a child, before he became a hardened, mean man, Ron only sees him as a “huge, angry black man.” This exemplifies the manner in which one’s prejudices and assumptions about someone else are generally inaccurate, based upon limited knowledge of the other person.*



*The workers at the mission make the assumption that Denver is merely greedy, taking both plates of food for himself, though it will be later revealed that the second plate truly is for an old man. By doing this, the narration draws the reader into making the same assumptions and thus later inviting them into reflecting on their own prejudices as well.*



## CHAPTER 19

Denver continues his narration. Ron and Deborah interfere with what was otherwise a controlled life. Despite Denver telling her off every week, “[Deborah]’d smile at me real big and ask my name and how I was doin—you know: attackin me for not particular reason.” To Denver, Deborah seems the only person he’s met in a long time who isn’t scared of him. This bothers him, since keeping people afraid of him is how he survives. Denver starts arriving early and eating quickly to try to avoid Ron and Deborah, but keeps observing them nonetheless.

*It is telling that Denver interprets Deborah’s kindness as an “attack.” This indicates that Denver’s meanness and the distance he keeps from people has become his defense, his way of protecting himself from the world. Thus, Deborah’s attempt to penetrate that meanness seems a direct affront.*



## CHAPTER 20

Slowly, Ron begins to feel a change within himself, a warmth within his heart. Waking on Tuesdays, he feels the thrill of anticipation of spending time at the Union Gospel Mission. Ron continues to see Denver, but even using Denver’s name seems to irritate him and he keeps his distance.

*Ron’s development into a compassionate figure who cares for others, rather than just himself, suggests that a sense of fulfillment was missing from his former, materialist lifestyle, further suggesting that such self-absorbed living is inherently empty.*



The other homeless people at the mission take to Deborah, calling her “Mrs. Tuesday.” Deborah appreciates this, but still wants to gain their trust, so she begins organizing events midweek for the people on the street—movie nights, beauty shop nights, monthly birthday celebrations for anyone who claims to be born in that month. As Ron and Deborah do this, many of the homeless people begin confiding in them, telling them things they had never told anyone else—“It was just the simple act of caring.”

*Ron and Deborah’s relationship with the homeless people at the mission grows when they simply find ways to spend time with them. This is a critical realization for both of them, suggesting that the most powerful way to love and serve someone is not to just give them things, but to invest time in them and value them.*



Ron and Deborah find out that a friend of theirs is hosting an outreach night at the Caravan of Dreams, a hip jazz lounge in a nicer part of town. Ron and Deborah tell their friends at the mission, and on the night of the event, pick up two carloads of homeless people, each dressed in the best things they could find. Denver is there too, wearing a suit. On the drive, Ron tries to make conversation but is unable to get him to talk. When they arrive, everyone enters the lounge except for Denver, who stands alone outside for a long time. When he finally does sit down, Ron sits next to him and pats him on the knee. Wordlessly, Denver stands and moves to a different row by himself.

*Like Deborah’s kindness, Ron’s physical affection contradicts Denver’s mean demeanor and the physical and emotional distance he has put between himself and anyone else. Although Ron’s intentions were good and physical affection is a powerful gift to give someone, it seems an affront to Denver. This demonstrates not only the complexity of people, but especially the difficulty of developing a relationship with someone who has spent several decades simply trying to survive.*



After the evening has ended and everyone is loading back into the cars, Denver approaches Ron and apologizes for avoiding him after he and Deborah had just been trying to be nice to him. Denver offers to have a cup of coffee with Ron some time and chat. Ron is so excited, he asks if Denver will have breakfast with him the following morning.

*Denver's apology and offer to meet are a surprising breach of character for a man who is usually so unapproachable. This again demonstrates, to both Ron and the reader, that despite Denver's rough appearance, he is a complex and dynamic person who is indeed aware of the feelings of others.*



## CHAPTER 21

Denver picks up his narration. After watching Ron and Deborah all those months, Denver is convinced that they are different from most of the volunteers who occasionally show up at the Union Gospel Mission. They seem to actually care about the homeless and don't talk down to them, but treat them as equals. When Denver hears about the trip to the Caravan, he decides that if others see him going, maybe they'll have the courage to go to, and he thinks it would do them good. Denver is annoyed by Ron and how often he talks, so he resists him, but eventually feels guilty about it and offers to have coffee with Ron to make up for it.

*Despite what Ron and Deborah see as simply a cold, distant person, Denver is appreciative of others and even brave, trying to encourage other homeless people to join the excursion because he thinks it would do them good. This suggests that appearances are deceiving, and the initial prejudices and assumption that people make from them are most often false. This is true particularly in the case of the poor or homeless.*



## CHAPTER 22

Ron continues his narration. When he tells Deborah about his breakfast date with Denver, she is ecstatic, and they both pray together that God would "show [them] how to reach Denver." The next morning, Ron picks Denver up and they have breakfast together at a little café, where, painstakingly slowly and without much detail, Denver starts to tell Ron about his life. After a while, Denver looks very seriously at Ron and asks him what his and his wife's names are. Ron insists that Denver just call them Ron and Deborah, but Denver is firm that he will call them Mr. Ron and Miss Debbie, "translating plantation-style."

*Denver's insistence on calling them Mr. Ron and Mrs. Debbie seem to be a mark of his time as a slave and his interactions with the Man. Although throughout the story, Ron learns to treat others as truly equal to himself and will someday see Denver as a brother, it is curious that Denver never loses his deferential tone. This seems to suggest that the racial hierarchy of slavery in the South remains with him to some degree for the rest of his life.*



Denver finally asks Ron what he wants from him, and Ron tells him that he only wants to be Denver's friend. With utmost sincerity, Denver responds that he'll need to give it some thought. As they are driving back to the mission, Denver starts laughing and reveals to Ron that all the homeless honestly believe that Ron and Deborah work for the CIA, which is why they ask so many questions.

*In the same way that Ron has made prejudiced assumptions about the homeless—which prove to be untrue—so too do the homeless make such assumptions about Ron and Deborah. This demonstrates that such prejudices are not unique to any one class of people, and can only be overcome and reconciled by real relationships between those who are different from one another.*



Ron doesn't see Denver for another week, but when he spots him on the sidewalk he invites him for a cup of coffee. As they sip their drinks, Denver remarks that he has been thinking about Ron's request to be his friend. Denver is nervous that Ron will "catch and release him," abandon him after a time. Denver considers friendship a lifelong commitment, so he will only commit to being Ron's if it means being friends forever.

*Although Ron asked to be Denver's friend in a comparatively flippant way, Denver considers the notion with great gravity and ponders the implications. This thoughtfulness demonstrates a notable difference between the two characters and turns out to be one of Denver's greatest character traits.*



## CHAPTER 23

Denver admits that at first, he doesn't like the idea of being Ron's friend. For Denver, being friends means taking care of each other, fighting for each other, and he doesn't believe that either of them is ready for that. However, Denver decides that he can look at this friendship with Ron in a different way: as an exchange. Denver can help Ron reach the homeless and give him access to places he wouldn't otherwise be able to reach, and Ron can help him see a different part of the world as well, the domain of the wealthy.

*Although Ron cannot meet Denver's expectations of friendship, the exchange that he envisions between them demonstrates how a relationship between people of different backgrounds can help both of them gain a better, broader understanding of each other and the world.*



## CHAPTER 24

Ron continues his narration. Denver's sincerity and seriousness with which he treats friendship makes a deep impression on Ron. Ron agrees not to "catch and release," and the two of them shake on it, becoming the new "odd couple." Ron and Deborah start going to the mission several times a week, Deborah to spend time working with women and children, Ron to spend time with Denver. Whenever they go to a museum or café, Denver puts on his "preppie disguise" of nice enough clean clothes. But when they are in his own neighborhood or only going to Starbucks, Denver dresses as he prefers to, "conspicuously poor."

*Denver's use of a "preppie disguise" and return to "conspicuously poor" clothing reveals that he is more comfortable in his own environment. The streets have become his home, feeling safer to him than whatever new place Ron may take him to.*



During their coffee meetings, Ron learns about "twentieth-century slavery" and the way that Denver and people like him have been controlled through ignorance, debt bondage, and slavery by **the Man**, "of whom Denver's 'Man' was only one among many." After the Emancipation Proclamation was passed, legal "Black Codes" were enacted to use a number of tricks to keep people enslaved. When those were disbanded, sharecropping developed, creating new levels of poverty for both white and black families, but especially for black families.

*This is a critical moment both for Ron's development as well as the development of the Man as a symbol of oppression and modern slavery. Through Denver's willingness to share his story, Ron begins to see a whole new side of America and recognizes that slavery did not end with the abolition. The Man does not represent solely the slave masters of old, but any person or system who oppresses people like Denver, benefiting from their exploitation and preventing them from escaping poverty and bondage.*



As Ron learns, he becomes enraged about **the Man** and hates him, telling Denver's story to "anyone who would listen." However, after some weeks, Ron realizes with shame that his granddaddy Jack Brooks had not been so different from the Man. He did pay an actual wage, but he still discriminated against his black workers. Despite the oppression Denver received from the Man, he does not hate him but recognizes his right to make money from his farm, saying, "If everbody was rich, who gon' do the work?"

Denver proves to be a wealth of such practical insights. Ron gives Denver his phone number and address, and they keep spending time together. Looking back, Ron realizes with shame that he viewed himself as an "indulgent benefactor" who gave Denver time he could have been using instead to make more money. Ron also worries that Denver will be saddened to see all of the luxuries that Ron has that he will never own. However, Denver is unimpressed by most of the luxuries of the wealthy and maintains that neither Ron's nor Denver's lifestyle is any better than the other's, only different. When Denver sees how many keys—and thus how many possessions that must be locked away—are on Ron's key ring, he suggests that perhaps those things own Ron, rather than the other way around.

## CHAPTER 25

Denver picks up his narration. He and Ron continue spending time together, with Denver showing Ron the ins and outs of "the hood" and Ron showing Denver things like the difference between a taco and an enchilada. Denver also starts talking with Deborah rather than brushing her off as he used to, and helping her, Sister Bettie, and Mary Ellen around the mission.

Denver first met Sister Bettie before Ron and Deborah came to the Union Gospel Mission. After the death of her husband, Sister Bettie moved from her normal house into the mission and committed her life to the homeless, selling everything she'd once owned. Constantly, she'd ask for food and blankets from businesses in the city and then wander the worst neighborhoods distributing to anyone who looked like they could use them. Sister Bettie believes she is protected by God's angels, but Denver knows that she is so loved by the homeless that "even the meanest man on the street wouldn't dare lay a hand on her, 'cause he'd get beat down if he did."

*Ron's realization that his granddaddy resembled the Man suggests that all white people, even if they hate the concept of slavery, have in some way participated in or been adjacent to its continued practice.*



*Although Ron takes time out of his week and spends his own money on Denver, internally he still views himself as superior. Even if it is only in Ron's head, this perceived inequality between himself and Denver reflects the inequality between people that racism and slavery were built upon. That Ron could hate an idea such as slavery, yet still unknowingly reflect it in his own psyche demonstrates just how deeply such ideas penetrate American society, which is how they manage to persist centuries after the Abolition.*



*Although both friends certainly benefit from the relationship, there seems to be a qualitative difference in what they are learning from each other. Although Ron thought he would be the "indulgent benefactor," it seems that Denver has more to offer, indicating once more how appearances and prejudices often do not reflect reality.*



*Sister Bettie, though a relatively minor character, represents what Deborah aspires to be. Unlike most people, Sister Bettie represents absolutely selfless compassion, giving to any who have need without asking anything of them or even making them sit through a Christian message. Thus, Sister Bettie seems to epitomize Christian compassion, a goal for Ron and Deborah to aspire to.*



Denver starts helping Sister Bettie feed other homeless people at the Lot—“one a’ the worst neighborhoods in the city”—every Wednesday. Although he still drinks, Denver tries not to drink heavily on Tuesday nights so he can still help Sister Bettie in the morning.

*In cutting back his drinking, Denver benefits from helping Sister Bettie feed others, which parallels Ron’s own benefit—through growth of character and sense of fulfillment—that comes through helping others.*



## CHAPTER 26

Deborah convinces Mary Ellen, a “plucky” friend of hers, to join them at the mission. Ron and Deborah met Mary Ellen and her husband, Alan, through mutual friends and invited them to their house so their children could play in the pool. Mary Ellen is initially mortified by Ron and Deborah’s massive home and apparent wealth, but Deborah sets her at ease by offering to babysit her children so Alan and Mary Ellen could have some time free of children. Mary Ellen’s boldness rubs off on Deborah, and soon they are helping not only at the mission but also at the Lot with Sister Bettie.

*In the same way that Deborah disarms the skepticism of the homeless by simply spending time with them, Deborah disarms Mary Ellen’s wariness of their wealth by offering to babysit. Both of these instances demonstrate the power of human relationships and simple acts of service or friendship to bridge divides between people, especially those imposed by apparent inequality of status or wealth.*



Ron and Denver’s friendship continues, but Denver feels guilty facing the people on the street he’s hurt or threatened, and he “often disappear[s] when asked to do ‘Christian’ things.” Even so, Deborah is happier than ever and her marriage with Ron grows continually stronger. That joy persists in the Lot as well, and she often returns with small bits of wisdom she has heard from the people there. After she meets a man who seems joyful simply to have woken up, “We woke up!” becomes a daily refrain between Deborah and Ron.

*As Denver begins to soften, his street persona, which he has worn for decades, comes into conflict with his newer, gentler one. The shame that Denver feels when seeing the people he used to threaten again indicates that the version of himself that threatened violence was not his true self, but merely a mask he adopted to survive. Without that mask, such violence and threats seem shameful to him.*



## CHAPTER 27

Denver picks up his narration. Deborah invites Denver to a Christian wilderness retreat and constantly encourages him to go, but Denver is resistant. However, Deborah insists, saying, “Denver, you are going with me to the retreat, and I don’t want to hear you say anything else about it.” On the day of the retreat, Deborah drives her car to the mission and spots Denver, telling him he must come with. There are four other white women in the car and Denver is fearful, but he finally relents.

*Deborah’s forcefulness would normally drive Denver away or cause him to fight, had she not shown him love and kindness at every other step. Denver’s willingness to at least hear Deborah out suggests that the love she shows him has a powerful effect on him, giving him more patience for her than he would show for any other human being.*



## CHAPTER 28

As Ron's relationship with Denver grows, his art business also continues to expand. One day, Ron gets "the kind of call of which art dealer's fantasies are made" to sell a valuable sculpture by Alexander Calder that is currently mounted in the middle of Fort Worth. The sculpture is a local treasure, so the arrangements for removing it and shipping it to Canada must be kept secret. As the months pass and Ron works out the details of the sale, he also tries to convince Denver to go to the retreat but does not expect he will go.

Ron receives a call from Deborah, who is ecstatic, claiming that it has been an excellent weekend at the retreat, reporting that Denver played piano and sang to God in front of a crowd of people. Ron looks forward to hearing Denver's take on the retreat, but nobody hears from him or can find him for days afterward and they begin to worry.

Finally, Denver calls from the hospital and Ron goes to see him. It turns out that Denver had been nervous about "using **the Man's** bathroom" at the retreat, and had held in his bowels for so long that he became severely constipated, so now he's in the hospital trying to "get unplugged." Speaking with Ron, Denver says the retreat was important to him, a way for him to reset his mind. But he also warns Ron that something bad will soon happen, saying of Deborah, "When you is precious to God, you become important to Satan. Watch your back, Mr. Ron. Something bad getting ready to happen to Miss Debbie."

*Ron's eagerness to sell a "local treasure" simply for profit seems to contradict his character journey away from materialism and towards compassion for others. Even so, this seems to be the peak of Ron's career, which will soon contrast with the onset of the worst tragedy his family has ever faced.*



*Now that Ron and Deborah have enjoyed a decade of healthy, loving marriage, their relationship with Denver is blossoming, and Ron is at the peak of his art dealing career, the entrance of a new form of suffering and trial to face seems nearly perfect.*



*Like Deborah, Denver begins to demonstrate a prophetic vein, foretelling the quickly-approaching tragedy that will befall her. Whether or not Denver truly knows that Deborah would soon fall ill or he just has an intuition, the effect on the narrative development is the same. In the narrative, Denver's proclamation announces the oncoming storm, the descent into hardship yet again.*



## CHAPTER 29

Ron narrates: on April 1, 1999, Ron is having lunch with Regan, who has just returned from New York City after discovering that she does not care for the art-dealing world. That same morning, Deborah is at her doctor's office for her yearly physical. While Ron and Regan are eating, Deborah calls, sounding worried, and tells Ron that the doctor felt a growth in her stomach. Ron goes to the hospital, where he and Deborah see x-rays of Deborah's liver—it is covered in dark spots. The doctor schedules a radiology appointment for the next morning.

The next morning, Ron and Deborah are surprised to see twenty of their friends gathered in the waiting room, praying. Deborah goes in for the surgery. Ron waits anxiously. An hour later, when a nurse wheels her out, their fears of cancer are confirmed.

*The entrance of Deborah's cancer into the story breaks the exultant tone that has been building, disrupting transformation. This is the first of several times that Denver, like Deborah, will exhibit a similarly prophetic capacity. The fact that Ron makes no attempt to explain or interpret such a miracle—he simply observes it—invites the reader to take a similar approach, despite whatever skepticism they may have.*



*Deborah's cancer raises the timeless question of why God allows bad things to happen to good people. Deborah is easily the most righteous and loving figure in the story, and yet the worst fate befalls her. This sets the stage Ron's struggle with God, despite his growing faith.*



## CHAPTER 30

Denver continues his narration. When Deborah does not show up for Bible Study that week, Mary Ellen tells Denver about Deborah's cancer. Denver's first thought is that God will heal her, but then he realizes that God might not. Fear takes over Denver's heart, and he thinks about all the other people he has loved and lost—finally he has opened up and loved someone again, and now they might be taken from him as well. The homeless people at the mission begin praying constantly for Deborah, and Denver and Chef Jim grow close in the midst of the fear and sadness.

*The anguish that Denver experiences is twofold, since Deborah and Ron have finally convinced him to relinquish his hard outer shell and risk loving someone again, and once again it seems Denver may lose someone he loves. Denver's tragedy underscores the risk that comes with loving another person, though it is a risk that Deborah first accepted in her willingness to love Denver.*



## CHAPTER 31

Ron picks up his narration. Deborah's surgery is scheduled for three days later, and the family goes to their ranch at Rocky Top to wait, pray, and be together. Deborah tells Ron that if the cancer has already spread, she does not want to fight it, but Ron tells her that isn't a decision they need to make yet. Secretly, Ron is convinced a cure is out there.

*The family's immediate move to prayer reflects the consolation that their Christian faith offers to them, even in times of uncertainty and duress. As Deborah's struggle with cancer continues, prayer and faith will continually be depicted as a bastion amidst fear and uncertainty.*



Deborah goes in for her biopsy, and the surgeon meets Ron after it is over. It doesn't look good—the cancer has spread all across her abdomen, “wrapping itself around her liver like a shroud.” The doctor insists that she needs additional surgery, but does not seem hopeful about the outcome. Ron's mind runs through the list of promises for protection and provision in the Bible, while trying to block out a line from the Book of Job: “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.” When Deborah wakes, Ron tells her that there is still hope.

*Ron's future struggle with faith and reckoning with God are foreshadowed by his focusing only on the biblical promises of protection and provision while willfully ignoring Job's reminder that God begins life and ends it. Ron's unwillingness to accept the full scope of God's role, as both giver and taker, seems to indicate why he will struggle more than any to forgive God for Deborah's illness.*



## CHAPTER 32

Friends deliver flowers to Deborah's room and offer support. Ron and Carson go to the mission and meet with the homeless people, who are already gathered to pray for Deborah. When Ron notices that Denver is not there, Chef Jim tells him that he is sleeping. When Ron assumes that this is due to laziness, since it is midday, Chef Jim corrects him: Denver has been praying straight through the entire night for Deborah. Ron is ashamed at his own prejudice.

*Even after all the time spent with Denver, Ron's prejudice about homeless people remains intact—if it had been anyone else, it seems just as likely that Ron would have assumed there was a good reason to be sleeping at midday. This demonstrates how deeply prejudices can root themselves in one's mind and thus how difficult they are to get rid of.*



## CHAPTER 33

Denver continues his narration. Denver spends all night praying for Deborah next to the dumpster, where he knows he will be undisturbed. He asks God to heal her and asks him why this is happening. After several hours, Denver feels some comfort knowing that even if he doesn't know where Deborah is going, God does.

*Denver's all-night prayer vigil demonstrates his own growing faith, undoubtedly spurred on by Ron and Deborah's example. Significantly, Denver also demonstrates one of the benefits of Christian faith: although he has no material possessions, he can still be generous and give his prayers to Deborah as an act of love.*



## CHAPTER 34

Ron explains that within a month, Deborah starts experiencing severe pain related to the cancer. Ron and Deborah meet with a world-renowned cancer specialist to hear his recommendation. The specialist announces that, with the cancer as extensive as it is, there is no hope, no cure, and Deborah should spend what remaining time she has with her family. He predicts that Deborah has less than a year to live, and Deborah momentarily faints, falling out of her chair. After the doctor leaves, Deborah tells Ron to forget about the one year the specialist predicted; they serve God, and God can sustain her life however long he sees fit.

*Deborah once again powerfully illustrates the hope that Christian faith and belief in God's power can be in facing fear, tragedy, even death. Although given a dire prediction, Deborah's faith maintains her will to live and to keep on fighting. This will to live and commitment to living as long as she can seems to play a significant role in extending her life far beyond the doctor's predictions, as will be seen.*



Ron and Deborah move in with Mary Ellen and Alan for a time, and they undertake an aggressive regimen of chemotherapy, determined to fight as long as possible. The therapy takes a heavy toll; Deborah loses weight and strength, but she continues to fight.

*Deborah's choice to fight her cancer and undergo chemotherapy directly defies the doctor's recommendation, suggesting that she has much more faith in God than in a single medical authority.*



## CHAPTER 35

Ron continues his narration. as Deborah is battling cancer, she tells Ron that she wants to see Denver get a driver's license, since she feels bad she cannot see him as often at the mission anymore. Due to several decades-old outstanding misdemeanors on Denver's record, the process takes ten months and several phone calls, but Denver finally gets his license.

*The act of getting a driver's license seems particularly significant for Denver, since it is the first time he is described as receiving any sort of validation of who he is from the government. Being recognized as a legal driver seems a great contrast to his earlier life, when he was not even recognized as a free and autonomous person by the Man.*



Regan decides to move to Colorado to work at a Christian camp, but needs her belongings driven down there. When Ron jokes that Denver could do it, Denver takes him seriously and Ron realizes that he must follow through. Ron sets Denver up with \$700 in cash, a \$30,000 truck full of his daughter's belongings, and a map with directions drawn out, and sends him on his way. As he watches Denver leave, he wonders if this is a mistake.

*Ron's growing trust in Denver is apparent, demonstrated by the fact that he sent Denver with so much money and expensive possessions at all, even if Ron does have his doubts. This act of trust on Ron's part is a large risk, and thus represents a powerful gesture to Denver. Rather than thinking of Denver as a homeless vagrant, Ron treats him as a trusted friend.*



## CHAPTER 36

Denver knows he's an honest man, but he is still surprised that Ron trusts him with so much. He makes most of the 1,000 mile trip to Colorado just fine, but when he asks a woman how to get to Winter Park—where Regan lives—she tells him that he'll have to drive straight up a mountain. Denver is terrified, and drives painfully slowly the whole way up and down.

*Ron's trust in Denver and belief in his independent ability to make it to and from Colorado—in spite of never having been there and being unable to read—starkly contrasts with the Man's practice of keeping Denver dependent and unable to support himself. Once again, Ron learns to trust Denver as friend and equal.*



## CHAPTER 37

Ron picks up his narration. When Denver does not arrive on schedule, Ron begins to panic, wondering if the temptation to run with the money was too great. However, Deborah is unworried and says they should simply pray. Soon after, Regan calls, announcing that Denver has arrived.

*Again, Deborah proves herself to be the most faithful and most trusting character in the story. Though now that Ron's character has improved, she is less of a foil, she still serves to highlight his own weaknesses and inability to fully trust.*



## CHAPTER 38

Ron continues his narration. Denver arrives back on Ron's doorstep, with a huge smile, truck in perfect condition. He hands Ron \$400, since he slept in the truck and ate at gas stations, rather than in motels and restaurants. Ron tries to get Denver to keep the extra money, but Denver refuses, saying it was a blessing, not a job, and he can't be paid. The trip teaches both of them to trust each other, and two weeks later, Ron sends Denver to Baton Rouge with a truck containing one million dollars' worth of paintings.

*Denver once again demonstrates his quality of character and love for Ron and Deborah when he refuses to accept the \$400, even when freely given. Such a sum would easily be the largest windfall he's ever received, and yet he chooses to refuse it so that the trip is a gift and a blessing, rather than a paid task. This event cements the trust between Denver and Ron, helping them both to see and treat each other as equals.*



## CHAPTER 39

Ron explains that after months of chemotherapy, Deborah's tumors are reduced enough to allow for surgery. A surgeon burns off what is left of the cancerous growths in her abdomen, and she is pronounced cancer-free by Christmas. Everyone is elated.

*Deborah's faith in God over modern medicine proves to be well-founded at least for a time, continuing the subtheme of miraculous events.*



## CHAPTER 40

Ron continues his narration. By the end of January, the cancer returns “with a vengeance.” As spring comes, the family goes to their ranch at Rocky Top, taking Denver with them this year. While they are there, Ron invites him to a cowboy camping event that draws about two hundred people. Denver is nervous, because in the past he’s “heard cowboys don’t like black folks,” but goes at Ron’s encouragement. Denver enjoys the camaraderie, and Ron notes that Denver begins to “know what it [is] like to be accepted and loved by a group of white guys on horseback with ropes in their hands. Exactly the kind of people he had feared all his life.”

The family goes back to Fort Worth, and Deborah’s health continues to decline, as does her spirit. After church one day, Ron, Deborah, and Denver are visiting with Scott and Janina, friends of theirs. Denver announces that he needs to go take care of Mr. Ballantine, and Scott asks to join him.

Years before, Denver met Mr. Ballantine on the street, a sour old drunk whose family had rejected him. Mr. Ballantine hated black people and Christians and so refused to sit through the sermon at Union Gospel Mission to eat a meal. Denver, even before his relationship with Ron had taken root, took pity on Mr. Ballantine and started getting an extra plate of food from the mission each day to feed him. When Mr. Ballantine was put in a state nursing home, now an invalid, Denver made a habit of regularly checking on him. Ron once went with Denver to see Mr. Ballantine in his room, but was overwhelmed by the rotten food, bodily fluids, and pitiful state that the man lived. Ron left, but Denver stayed to clean Mr. Ballantine up and take care of his room. Mr. Ballantine never thanks him and refers to Denver as “nigger.”

## CHAPTER 41

Denver continues his narration. Denver brings Scott with him to see Mr. Ballantine, but he worries that Scott will not be able to handle it since Ron couldn’t. While they are there, Scott chats with the man and asks if there is anything he can get for him. Mr. Ballantine states that he wants cigarettes and Ensure (a drink mix). When they leave to buy the products, Scott feels conflicted about buying the man cigarettes, protesting that, “It feels like I’m helping him kill himself.” After Denver points out that Scott is judging Mr. Ballantine rather than blessing him, and that cigarettes are one of his few joys in the world, Scott relents and buys the cigarettes as well.

*Denver’s reconciliation with white people and with cowboys come full circle as he realizes, through his relationship with Ron and his camaraderie with the other men there, that not all cowboys are as evil as the three boys that put a noose around his neck and nearly killed him. Denver’s extremely negative experiences and perceptions of white men are replaced by positive experiences and a more accurate perception, demonstrating the way in which relationships with those who are different can bring reconciliation.*



*Denver’s care for Mr. Ballantine is compelled by his Christian faith, demonstrating Christianity’s power to motivate individuals to care for look beyond themselves and watch over others.*



*Although Ron’s ego once compelled him to see himself as an “indulgent benefactor,” Denver’s own compassion for Mr. Ballantine puts Ron to shame. Denver is capable of a level of compassion, despite Mr. Ballantine’s grotesque state, that Ron simply cannot stomach. Both Ron and the reader’s prejudice towards the homeless lead them to assume that Denver has been stealing the second plate of food for himself, when in reality he has telling the truth and caring for a man who hated him. This once again pointedly demonstrates how false and misconstrued prejudices often are.*



*Scott’s hesitation to buy Mr. Ballantine cigarettes—which Scott perceives as “bad”—is a perfect example of the conflict between love and ego. Although Scott wants to love and bless Mr. Ballantine, he approaches it with the mentality that he knows what is best for the man. Denver aptly points out that Scott asked a question and then judges Mr. Ballantine with his answer, suggesting that Scott’s own ego is dominating his desire to be a blessing.*



Mr. Ballantine, surprised that Scott paid for the cigarettes, asks Denver why someone would do something like that. Denver tells Mr. Ballantine it is because both he and Scott are Christians. Touched, Mr. Ballantine apologizes for his meanness, stops calling Denver “nigger,” and even lets Denver take him to church a few weeks later.

*Scott's willingness to follow Denver's lead, release his ego, and buy the cigarettes leaves a deep impression on Mr. Ballantine. The book implies that this act ultimately does him more good than any harm a pack of cigarettes could cause. This demonstrates the power of love and service, shorn of ego, to change someone's heart.*



## CHAPTER 42

Ron picks up his narration. More than a year passes since the first discovery of Deborah's cancer. Rather than talk about dying, she and Ron talk about living and their plans for the future. A second round of surgery once again leaves her cancer-free, but the pain suddenly returns as they are dining and celebrating with Ron's business partner and his wife. More CAT scans reveal more cancer. Ron clings to his faith and begs God for a miracle.

*Once again, even in the face of returning cancer, Deborah and Ron's faith is a source of hope and comfort, even allowing them to look forward to living in the face of death, illustrating that Christian faith can be a tremendous source of comfort in the face of tragedy.*



## CHAPTER 43

Ron continues his narration. With dozens of friends searching for news of any new cancer treatments, Ron and Deborah discover an experimental chemotherapy called CPT-11. They drive to San Antonio together to undergo the treatment, but as soon as it begins, it proves too painful for Deborah to endure. Shortly after Deborah's 55th birthday, Ron, Deborah, and Carson attempt to visit Regan in Colorado, but the altitude of the mountains and Deborah's chemo-depleted red blood cell count causes her to literally suffocate, forcing them to evacuate back down to a lower altitude. After returning to Texas, Deborah calls a minister to discuss her funeral.

*Despite Ron's begging God for a miracle, Deborah's death seems to rapidly approach. While their faith is a source of comfort amidst tragedy, it does not take away the tragedy or the pain itself, despite Ron's pleading. Even though religious faith provides a source of hope and comfort, it is not necessarily a cure-all or fixative, and it does not provide easy answers to life's questions.*



Everyone senses that Deborah's time is near. Carson and Regan both fly back to Texas to be with her. Confiding to Ron, Deborah admits that she is afraid of dying, and that she wants to live. After a doctor tells Ron that Deborah likely only has a few days left, he sits in his car and weeps and screams.

*Even armed with their Christian faith, Ron and Deborah both finally feel the fear of death and the full pain of life lost. Again, this tempers the depiction of faith in the story, preventing the reader from forming an unrealistically optimistic view.*



## CHAPTER 44

Denver picks up his narration. Carson informs Denver that Deborah is near death, so Denver goes to visit. Though Denver is in great pain as well, he can see that Ron is angry at God, which unsettles him. Taking Ron aside, Denver sternly tells Ron to take life as it comes and trust that God will sustain Deborah for as long as he needs her to fulfill his purposes on Earth.

*For Denver, faith provides not only a hope but a way to find meaning in the midst of great tragedy, demonstrating how Christianity can help its adherents make sense of the world, particularly in the face of great pain and loss.*



## CHAPTER 45

Ron continues his narration. Ron is enveloped with grief, and so cannot remember everything that Denver told him, but is comforted by Denver's assertion that Deborah won't die until the right time. As he sits next to his wife's bed, Deborah again whispers that she does not want to die, and Ron tells her that he feels the same. Another doctor arrives and Deborah tells him that she is hungry, but the doctor explains that the cancer has virtually overtaken her stomach—her body no longer has the ability to digest food. All she can consume are ice chips and sips of water. As Deborah realizes that she cannot last more than a few days, she asks, "How do you live the rest of your life in just a few days?"

*At this point in the story, Ron and Denver's roles begin to shift within their relationship. Where initially, Ron was the mentoring figure who introduced stability into Denver's life, now Denver becomes the supporting figure, seeking Ron out to stabilize him with his faith and offer comfort and meaning. Such a role reversal demonstrates the manner in which a relationship between equals can become a benefit to both, testifying to the potential in each human being to help and bless others.*



## CHAPTER 46

Home with Deborah, Ron helps her flip through old photo albums and memorabilia and decide who she will leave some of her prized antiques to. One day, she asks Ron to call the children into her room and join them. When he does, Deborah asks her children to allow Ron to fall in love and remarry again after she dies. Ron doesn't want to hear this, but Deborah insists. After the children leave, Deborah tells Ron he can even go back to the Beverly Hills artist he had an affair with all those years ago, if it will make him happy. Ron doesn't want to return to that period of his life, but Deborah affirms that ultimately, that affair was a good thing, since it led to the strengthening of their marriage and such a happy, fulfilling life over the last decade.

*Deborah's affirmation of Ron's affair is surprising to both him and the reader, but ultimately demonstrates Christian faith's potential for creating meaning out of tragedy. While most would see Ron's affair as nothing more than a terrible thing and the lowest period of their marriage, Deborah recognizes that out of that darkness, their marriage was given a new life, leading to the happiest years either of them ever experienced.*



## CHAPTER 47

Deborah loses her ability to speak and even to move, though she is still alive. After nearly a week of silence, a doctor tells Ron that she will not live through another day. While Ron, Mary Ellen, Carson, and Regan are sitting with her, Deborah suddenly cries, "Ron! Get me some wings!" and moves her arms up and down, as if climbing a ladder. In the late hours of the night, Deborah says that she can see angels in the room and begins pointing to them; minutes later she begins talking to Jesus. Ron and Regan wonder if they have just seen a "visitation," and Ron tells his wife that it is okay to go with Jesus.

*Ron, Denver, and Deborah experience many miraculous things in the final days of Deborah's life. While the reader could argue that the events are simply random occurrences reinterpreted through the filter of Ron's faith and thus not miraculous, in either case, the events have tremendous meaning for Ron. Once again, this showcases the ability of one's faith to create meaning in the midst of tragedy.*



Denver come to their house the next morning and tells Ron that the night before, God told him that the angels were coming to take Deborah, "but the saints on earth was holdin on to her body 'cause her work here ain't finished yet." With the message, Denver saw visions of angels and lightning. When Denver tells Ron the time that he heard and saw his vision, Ron is floored—it is the exact same time that Deborah saw angels and spoke to Jesus.

*Once again, Denver exhibits a prophetic capacity in the same way as Deborah did with her dreams about the mission. Denver seems to surpass Ron in the depth of his own faith, indicating again that their roles are reversed, and that Denver, though still homeless, is becoming the mentor in the relationship.*



Three weeks pass and Deborah continues to live, despite all of the doctors' constant predictions, and Ron realizes that Denver's visions have been more accurate so far than any of the medical experts. Denver visits again; as he and Ron are drinking coffee, Denver collects his thoughts, and explains that although he had been living in the "devil's prison," Deborah's God-given love and devotion set him free and changed his life.

*While the story does not refute medical science—Deborah underwent chemotherapy, after all—it does present faith and the power of God to sustain as greater than any scientific knowledge or the capabilities of any of Deborah's doctors. Denver's declaration that Deborah as freed him once again demonstrates the power of Christian faith to compel love for others and create positive impact in the world.*



## CHAPTER 48

Ron continues his narration. On November 1, Deborah still survives and all of the doctors stop offering any predictions on when she might pass. In the morning, Deborah begins to convulse and continues for four hours, until a doctor gives her a sedative. Ron shakes his fist at God and begs him to stop her suffering.

*Deborah's suffering, though it has prompted Ron to cling to his faith, also tests it. This scene marks the beginnings of Ron's greatest struggle with faith and his bitterness towards God.*



The next morning, Denver arrives at the house again, stating that he is there to deliver a message from God. Denver tells Ron that God wants to take Deborah home but everyone is still holding onto her and praying for healing. According to Denver, God told him to carry on Deborah's work, and now it is time to pray for Deborah's passing. Together, Denver, Ron, and Carson pray and ask God to take Deborah from them. As they finish, Denver weeps and Ron realizes the full depth of Denver's love for her.

*The transition from everyone praying for Deborah's healing to their praying for her passing is once again affirmed by their faith and belief that God is in control. Even their acceptance of Deborah's death is framed and given meaning by faith, again demonstrating the capacity of Christian faith to form meaning out of pain and in the midst of tragedy.*



## CHAPTER 49

Denver picks up his narration. After his meeting with Ron and Carson, Denver goes to Deborah's room to visit her. When he says her name, she opens her eyes wide and Denver puts his hand under her head to help her look at him. Denver tells her, "God has put it on my heart to tell you that if you lay down the torch, I'll pick it up and keep your ministry to the homeless goin." Debbie does not speak or move but her eyes well up with tears. Denver continues, "So you can go home now, Miss Debbie. Go on home in peace."

*In this moment, Denver's character development comes full circle—he has gone from a slave, a wanderer, and an angry homeless man to someone who loves and ministers not only to the homeless, but the wealthy. Denver's transformation is evidence of the potential in all people for growth, change, and powerful impact, whether they be wealthy, homeless, or somewhere in the middle.*



## CHAPTER 50

Ron continues his narration. Another day passes. Ron stops sleeping, instead laying awake each night next to his wife. Ron's business partner Michael comes to visit and say goodbye to Deborah. Although Michael is not religious, he is overcome by the sense of some sort of presence in the room and falls to his knees, weeping, and says, "We are on holy ground." He rises, thanks Deborah for praying for him throughout the years, and places a picture of his son in her palm, asking Deborah to watch over him from heaven. "The moment later became a mystery. No one ever saw that picture [...] again." As Ron walks Michael out, Michael tells Ron that he believes he just had an encounter with God and he'll never be the same. As he leaves, Ron wonders if his wife's work is finally done.

*Ron's narrative heavily implies that a miracle has taken place, in which God apparently whisks the picture away to heaven so Deborah can keep it while she is there. While some readers will certainly be skeptical of this, Ron's own treatment of the event suggests that it is not a critical element of the story and does not heavily affect its development. Ron simply observes that the picture is there one moment and gone the next, choosing to forego any attempt at interpreting the event's significance.*



## CHAPTER 51

Ron recounts Deborah's passing. That evening, Deborah's sister informs Ron—whose children insisted that he try to sleep for a few hours—that Deborah has stopped breathing. A nurse removes the IV lines and breathing tubes and leaves Ron alone with his wife to mourn. Ron asks God to raise her from the dead and grieves the fact that she will never meet their grandchildren.

*Ron's grieved petition to God raises a difficult point: is it more painful to believe in God's power to heal and then be disappointed when he does not? The story lets the question linger, and even by the end of the memoir Ron still wrestles with it.*



## CHAPTER 52

They bury Deborah three days later on Rocky Top. In his heart, Ron feels nothing but bitterness towards God. The memorial service ends and Ron leaves, but Denver stays behind with the pallbearers to lower the casket into the ground.

*Ron's struggle with faith and anger towards God are cemented by his wife's death. This will become a primary conflict throughout the remainder of the book.*



## CHAPTER 53

Denver picks up his narration. After lowering Deborah's casket into the ground, Denver sits on a bale of hay next to Deborah's grave and talks to God for the entire day. Denver tells God that even if he is in control, Denver still doesn't understand why Deborah died. After a while, Denver talks to Deborah as well, thanking her for loving him when he refused to be loved and seeing through his mean exterior. Even though losing Deborah hurts, he does not regret loving her.

*Although Denver is similarly pained by Deborah's loss and confused by why God allowed it to happen, his posture is notably different than Ron's. Denver does not rage at God, but submits to his control and expresses gratitude for the life that she led. His faith suffers much less than Ron's, suggesting that such an approach is a healthier way to interact with faith and with God.*



## CHAPTER 54

The following day, the family holds a larger memorial service at the church. Denver speaks, sharing his own life story, the love that Deborah showed him, and the powerful impact she had on the lives of the homeless in Fort Worth. When he is finished, Denver receives a standing ovation. Ron recalls, "The entire congregation stood and applause thundered through the church. For nineteen months we had prayed for and expected a miracle. Suddenly I realized I was staring one right in the face."

*Ron's realization that they have received their miracle in Denver's transformation does not negate the pain of Deborah's loss, but once again offers meaning and significance in its midst, demonstrating the function of Christian faith to offer meaning in the midst of tragedy and make sense of loss.*



## CHAPTER 55

Before she died, Deborah had told Ron and her kids that they needed to take a trip together after the memorial service to just be together. Following her instructions, Ron, Carson, and Regan are on their way to Big Bend National Park for a week when Ron receives an urgent phone call from Don Shisler. Don explains to Ron that a wealthy couple heard Denver's story at the memorial service and were so inspired that they made a major donation to the Union Gospel Mission and are raising donations from others as well to build the Deborah Hall Memorial Chapel. Ron and the kids continue on to their remote vacation, overwhelmed by the generosity and spend their time in Big Bend reflecting and processing. When Ron returns, he finds another message from Don Shisler waiting for him.

*Deborah's death becomes the seed of new beginnings and a new period of growth for the Union Gospel Mission. This offers not only meaning to her passing but an avenue for the spirit of her work and her love for the homeless to carry on. In the same way that Ron, Denver, and their community believe that Deborah's spirit lives on in heaven after death, so too does the spirit of her ministry carry on as well. This seems a continuation of the miracle Ron saw in Denver during the memorial service. While this miracle does not ease the pain, it does offer it some level of meaning.*



## CHAPTER 56

Denver picks up his narration. Don Shisler invites Denver to a National Philanthropy Day ceremony at an upscale hotel ballroom, which he attends with Ron after Ron returns from Big Bend. While they are there, so many wealthy strangers approach Denver and express their thanks and congratulations for sharing his story at Deborah's memorial that Ron jokes that he should become Denver's agent.

*Denver's transformation is starkly apparent: in the last decade, Denver has gone from homeless and rejected by society, to now being celebrated by society and welcomed into an upper-class banquet as an honored guest. This again demonstrates the potential of even the most unlikely person to change and impact lives.*



## CHAPTER 57

Ron continues his narration. Denver receives another standing ovation at the National Philanthropy Day ceremony when he receives a philanthropy award on Deborah's behalf. The day after, Ron meets with the board of Union Gospel Mission where he discovers that \$350,000 dollars were donated, and the Deborah Hall Memorial Chapel will be built.

*Once again, Deborah's death, while tragic, provides the impetus for new growth and development in Union Gospel Mission's work with the homeless, demonstrating the meaning that Christian faith can contribute to tragedy.*



After these events, Ron collapses, mired in agony and depression. He wanders around their home, looking through old memories, smelling Deborah's clothes, reading the notes she had written in her Bible. He drops so much weight that Mary Ellen asks Ron if he has a "death wish," which seems fitting to him. In the midst of his anguish, Ron also becomes angry—angry at the doctors, the cancer researchers, but especially at God. In his own words, "I had trusted [God], and He failed me. How do you forgive that?"

That Thanksgiving, Ron and Denver sit at Rocky Top and reminisce as Ron tries to endure the pain of a holiday without Deborah. Even though Denver has been to Rocky Top before, he never seems comfortable sleeping there. Though Ron sees him as a brother, he fears that Denver feels like a "hanger-on" after Deborah's death.

## CHAPTER 58

Denver continues his narration. Although he was happy to go to Rocky Top with Ron, Denver starts to feel uncomfortable around him now that Deborah is gone. When Ron shows him to his room, Denver can't get comfortable in the bed and winds up laying awake on the floor for hours. As Denver is lying awake, he hears footsteps approach and then soft hands tuck the blanket around him. At first he is terrified, but his terror shortly gives way to a strange peace. He hears Deborah's voice say clearly, "Denver, you are welcome in our home," and when he opens his eyes, sees Deborah standing there "healed and beautiful." She vanishes after a few seconds. Denver has been awake the whole time, so he believes it is a visitation. Comforted, he falls asleep.

## CHAPTER 59

Ron picks up his narration. Ron and Denver set to work building a stone wall around Deborah's grave, large enough to hold a family cemetery. To Ron, Denver seems "lighter" in some way, more at ease. Eventually, Denver recounts the visitation of the night before. Though it seems miraculous, Ron realizes that all of Denver's visions have come true, so he believes him. As Ron and Denver speak and Ron realizes that Denver worried Ron might abandon him, Ron reaffirms that Denver is a part of the family now, and will be so forever.

*Although Ron was temporarily buoyed through his grief and his anger with God by the swirl of events, once the pace of life subsides he feels the full weight of his grief. Ron's collapse into misery and bitterness demonstrate that, despite the miracles and the faith of others, and despite the Christianity's ability to make meaning out of tragedy, pain and grief still must be felt and endured.*



*Despite having known each other for years and endured Deborah's cancer together, Denver still fears that Ron will abandon him. This demonstrates just how deeply ingrained Denver's fear of those who are different from him truly is, even in spite of their mutual trust.*



*This is the second miraculous visitation in the story. Like the other miracles, the reader may or may not believe that such things actually occurred. Regardless of what truly happened, however, the effect on Denver is the same. Deborah's spirit or memory comforts Denver and reassures him that both she and Ron love him and want him to be there with them, helping Denver to understand that he is not an accessory to the family, but an equal member of it.*



*For both Ron and Denver, this is an important moment. Ron formally declares that Denver is his equal in every way, shape, and form. Denver is no longer a guest, but family, and Ron is no longer the "indulgent benefactor," but a brother. This entirely equal standing between them allows their relationship and love for each other to grow, demonstrating the importance of total equity within a relationship.*



## CHAPTER 60

Denver narrates that the following May, they dedicate the cemetery with a small ceremony. Denver stands to speak a few words and shares that even though most people don't feel like thanking God in the midst of loss, "sometimes God does things that hurts us but they help somebody else." He continues to share that every ending is a new beginning, just as Deborah's body died but her spirit lives on. Ron nods in affirmation.

*Once again, Denver demonstrates a practical, spiritual wisdom that is beyond Ron's level and even becomes an important resource to him. This again suggests that there is redemptive potential in every human being to be a benefit to others and society, whether they were enslaved, poor, homeless, drunk, or wealthy.*



## CHAPTER 61

Ron continues his narration. Ron and Denver begin discussing the idea of writing down their story together, but Ron feels as if he needs to see Denver's homeland for himself to truly understand. Together, they drive back to Red River Parish, seeing many of the cotton fields still standing but without black workers in them. Denver almost seems to have a fondness for the fields, despite the oppression he felt and witnessed in them. Ron takes a picture of Denver kneeling in the soil of a field in designer sunglasses, "looking about as much like a former cotton-picker as Sidney Poitier."

*Although Denver understands that he was oppressed by the Man, in his retrospective narrative, he never hates the Man, instead viewing him as yet another human being trying to make a living. Denver's own compassion for his former oppressors is both surprising and inspiring, proof of the tremendous depths of his own compassion and the caliber of his character.*



## CHAPTER 62

Denver explains that he is anxious about returning to Red River Parish and the memories that linger there. As they are driving, they find Denver's old shack, the one he'd once been proud to live in. Now, it looks like nothing more than a tool shed to Denver: "When Mr. Ron asked could he take some pictures of me in front of that shack, I let him. But I only smiled on the outside."

*Denver's ignorance of the way that the rest of the world worked and lived during his sharecropping years made his little shack seem perfectly fine to him at the time. This exemplifies the way in which the Man kept Denver subdued through ignorance, by keeping him from realizing that the world was different elsewhere.*



## CHAPTER 63

Ron picks up his narration. The contrast between **the Man's** large, elegant house and Denver's tiny shack "disgust[s]" Ron. As they drive to Denver's sister Hershalee's old house, Ron considers what kind of paradox the Man had to be—someone who both oppressed poor black families but also occasionally extended mercy as well, such as when Denver was given a Schwinn bicycle or given a place to stay and work to do, even though the Man likely could have just used a tractor instead.

*Once again, the perceived paradox of the Man—that he could be both oppressive and kind—typifies the story's complex depiction of modern slavery and the people who upheld it. While slavery is never depicted as anything less than morally wrong, the authors refrain from completely demonizing the Man.*



When Ron and Denver reach Hershalee's shack, they enter, but immediately find that the small house has an eerie quality. As they are exploring, they both hear heavy, booted footsteps approaching them, coming from a room that is boarded up on all sides. They both flee the house, resting for a moment when they are a safe distance away. After a minute passes and nothing emerges from the house, both men are struck by a simultaneous feeling of terror once more and they bolt for the car. However, the car—which is nearly brand-new—will barely start and slowly sputters down the road for a quarter mile. Ron and Denver are gripped with terror—“I had never before felt such fear. It was visceral, palpable.” After a time, having put a considerable distance between them and the house and whatever was inside it, the car's engine comes back to life, operating perfectly once again.

*This vignette seems oddly out of place, other than being a thing that Ron and Denver reportedly experienced together. However, it does provide a contrasting parallel to the Godly supernatural events that Ron, Denver, and Deborah experience. The presence in Hershalee's cabin sounds rather like a haunting of some sort, an evil visitation. Within this parallel, the difference between Denver's old life and new life are apparent: his old life was rooted in pain and suffering, while his new life is righteous and blessed by God.*



## CHAPTER 64

Denver picks up his narration. At first, Denver thinks the noise is just an animal or maybe a vagrant living in the house. But the subsequent terror he experiences convinces Denver that whatever it was, it was not a person. It was monstrous. Denver recalls that he used to see strange things like that on the plantation, and believes it might be related to Auntie, who Denver now thinks was some sort of mystic. Once, on a cloudless day when he was a boy, Auntie told him she could create rain and had performed a ritual that caused a single raincloud to appear above their house briefly downpour, frightening Denver.

*While the supernatural occurrences in Denver's current life bring him joy, peace, and comfort, the occurrences from his old life only brought him fear, thus marking a stark transition between the world he once belonged to and the world he now inhabits.*



## CHAPTER 65

Ron picks up his narration. After their car returns to normal, Ron and Denver keep driving to look for another of Denver's relatives, Aunt Pearl May. They find her and her husband living in a tiny destitute shack. Pearl May tells them about her indoor toilet that she'd bought with years' worth of bootlegging beer, only the toilet doesn't actually work yet, so she still uses the outhouse. As they are driving away, Ron, shocked that such places exist in America, has the “images of poverty and squalor burned [into his] brain like hated tattoos.” Ron thanks Denver for showing him and Denver tells Ron that being homeless in Fort Worth was a “step up” from growing up in Red River Parish.

*Denver's declaration—that being homeless in Fort Worth was still better than the poverty he had known in Louisiana—once again points to the inaccuracy of people's assumptions about each other. Although both Ron and perhaps the reader see Denver's homelessness as the greatest burden, the lowest state of existence for a human being, for Denver, it was better than living out his days as a sharecropper.*



## CHAPTER 66

Ron continues his narration. In mid-September, two days after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the Union Gospel Mission breaks ground on the Deborah Hall Memorial Chapel, built with over \$500,000 given by donors and friends. Even seeing what Deborah's life and death have produced, Ron is still bitterly disappointed that God did not heal her. However, in retrospect, he recognizes that that is the beauty of God's love and relationship to the faithful: Ron can be angry at God and still accepted by him.

The following Sunday, Ron and Denver visit a church in a depressed part of Fort Worth, whose pastor heard of Denver's testimony and begged Ron to convince him to come preach. Although Denver begins nervously, as he speaks his confidence grows and the passion of his sermon brings passersby in from the street. The pastor and the church are overjoyed, calling for Denver to return again to preach and lead a revival. As Ron watches, he recalls Deborah's dream that Denver would change the city. "Again, something new had begun. Something I was certain had my wife dancing for joy on streets of gold."

*Ron's faith provides both a benefit and a point of frustration. On the one hand, Ron is angry with God, but on the other, his faith gives him the space to be angry about Deborah's death, and a target to direct that anger at freely. This again suggests the benefits of Christian faith in handling grief and loss.*



*Denver's ability to inspire and energize others—even motivating them to donate and build ministries for the homeless—harkens back to Deborah's dream of a man who would change the city. Once again, Deborah's faith seems to be prophetic, and certainly helps Ron to find meaning in the midst of pain. Although Ron lost his wife, he is able to bear witness to the birth of new things.*



## CHAPTER 67

Denver picks up his narration. Although Denver once feared Ron might abandon him, Ron asks Denver to move in with him and hires him to be the night watchman of a wealthy estate that Ron and Carson are liquidating. Denver takes to painting and Ron sets a studio up for him. When not painting or working, Denver helps at the mission, preaches, and travels with Ron, even attending the 2005 presidential inauguration.

Denver recalls how he used to worry about being different from others until he met Deborah and Ron. Now, he realizes that everyone is different and everyone is the same, living the life that God gave them and waiting to be taken home.

*Denver's transition out of homelessness is officially complete—he is employed, housed, and even sought after as a speaker and wise figure. Denver's transformation testifies to the human potential in every person, homeless, slave, or free, to be a successful, loving, impacting figure.*



*Denver's greatest piece of wisdom is that everyone is human and shares a common humanity that transcends race and class, allowing for reconciliation, recovery, and love.*





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