

The Perks of Being a Wallflower



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN CHBOSKY

Born in Pennsylvania, Stephen Chbosky grew up in a Catholic household in the Pittsburgh suburbs until he left to study film writing at University of Southern California. In his early college years, Chbosky met the well-known screenwriter Stewart Stern, who became a lifelong friend and mentor. After graduating from college, Chbosky wrote several screenplays and also directed and acted in *The Four Corners of Nowhere*, which was accepted to the Sundance Film Festival in 1995. Chbosky's best known work, the semi-autobiographical *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, was published in 1999, and he later wrote and directed the film adaptation in 2012. Chbosky currently lives in Los Angeles, California with his wife Liz and continues working as a screenwriter, producer, and director.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This story is set in the early 1990s, a time of revived interest in punk and alternative rock. Music like that of the Smiths and Smashing Pumpkins became a popular counter-culture movement in the late 1970s and again in the early 1990s. Charlie and his friends are a collection of misfits, and the music they listen to reflects their eclectic individual styles and tastes. They have a nostalgia for older music and film like The Beatles and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, perhaps because of the freedom and creative expression that those cultural pieces represent in contrast with the cultural conservatism of the 1980s and early 1990s. The rising AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s bolstered American homophobia, the effects of which can be seen in Charlie's dad and brother's behavior, as well as in Brad's dad's violent reaction after finding him together with Patrick. Additionally, multiple characters in the novel discuss the "democratic candidates," which makes reference to the presidential election of 1992 in which Bill Clinton defeated the incumbent president George W. Bush.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Thanks to Charlie's bookishness, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* discusses many classic works of literature, including [On the Road](#), [Hamlet](#), [This Side of Paradise](#), [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), and [The Catcher in the Rye](#). All of these books are included regularly in junior high and high school curricula because of their literary merit and because they chronicle coming-of-age stories like Charlie's. These coming-of-age novels, also called bildungsroman, often feature themes of nostalgia, the growing pains of adolescence, coming to terms with adult realities,

developing one's identity, and exploring relationships. Chbosky has referenced [The Catcher in the Rye](#) as a particularly influential work for him, and one literary reviewer criticized Chbosky for drawing too strong a parallel between Charlie and *The Catcher in the Rye's* protagonist, Holden Caulfield (though other critics argue that their voices and characters are distinct). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* also harkens back, perhaps unintentionally, to one of the first works of young adult literature called *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly. Also written as an epistolary novel, *Seventeenth Summer* tells the story of a young woman who, like Charlie, navigates her first romantic relationship while developing her identity as a young adult. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* also shares themes and content with Laurie Halse Anderson's young adult novel *Speak*, which is (like *Perks*) the story of a high school freshman coming to terms with her experience of sexual assault.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*
- **When Written:** 1996-1998
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult fiction, epistolary
- **Setting:** Pittsburgh suburbs
- **Climax:** Charlie experiences a mental health crisis during which he realizes that his favorite aunt molested him as a child.
- **Antagonist:** Childhood trauma
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Muse. Chbosky has directed films starring Emma Watson twice: once for the film adaptation of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in 2012 and for the most recent *Beauty and the Beast* adaptation in 2017.

Mentors. Chbosky based the character of Bill, Charlie's English teacher, on Stewart Stern, who was the screenwriter for *Rebel Without a Cause* and Chbosky's friend and mentor.



PLOT SUMMARY

Writing a letter to an anonymous "Friend," Charlie confesses that he needs someone to talk to. His best friend Michael committed suicide at the end of the previous school year, and

Charlie feels lonely and afraid starting high school without any friends. Thinking about the reasons behind Michael's suicide, Charlie wonders if Michael had "problems at home," and then wonders if he, too, has problems at home. Charlie then describes his family and explains that his Aunt Helen was his favorite person, and she came to live with his family before she died.

In the first few weeks of school, Charlie gets into a fight when a bully starts hitting him. He explains that his brother taught him how to fight, so he ended up hurting the bully pretty badly and immediately started crying afterwards. He admits that he's pretty emotional. He feels isolated at school, but one day in his Advanced English class, Charlie's teacher asks Charlie to call him "Bill" outside of class, praises his literary abilities, and gives him extra **books** to read. Charlie's sister is a senior at his school, and he feels bad for the boys who like her, claiming that she's mean to them. His sister receives mix tapes from one boy in particular, but she gives them to Charlie, and he loves the **music**. One night, when Charlie's sister criticizes her boyfriend for not standing up for himself, he hits her in front of Charlie. She continues seeing this boy and makes Charlie promise not to tell anyone about the abuse. During class the next week, Charlie ends up telling Bill about Charlie's sister's boyfriend hitting her, and Bill calls Charlie's parents to inform them.

At a football game, Charlie befriends Patrick (whose nickname is "Nothing") and Sam, two seniors who invite him to Big Boy with them. Charlie assumes that Patrick and Sam are a couple, but they explain that they're stepsiblings, and Charlie admits to developing a crush on Sam. After the homecoming dance, Charlie rides with Patrick and Sam to a party, and as he sits between them listening to music on the radio, Charlie says that he feels "infinite." Charlie is warmly welcomed at the party where he eats a cannabis brownie for the first time. After using the bathroom, Charlie accidentally walks in on Patrick and the football quarterback, Brad, kissing, and Patrick asks Charlie to keep this secret because Brad is afraid of people finding out. Later in the evening, Patrick appreciatively calls Charlie a wallflower, and everyone at the party toasts to him. After the party, Patrick, Sam, and Charlie drive through **the tunnel** towards downtown listening to music. Sam stands in the back of the truck flying through the tunnel with the wind in her dress.

Charlie continues making progress on his extra reading assignments for Bill and decides he wants to be a writer when he grows up. He starts writing for a fanzine called *Punk Rocky* (inspired by **The Rocky Horror Picture Show**) that his friend Mary Elizabeth runs. Charlie's friends perform alongside the regular screenings of the film. When Sam starts dating an older guy named Craig who plays Rocky in the show, Charlie realizes that he is in love with her. As the holidays approach, Charlie and his friends participate in a Secret Santa exchange. Charlie draws Patrick's name and makes him a mix tape with carefully-selected music for his first gift. His last gift to Patrick,

presented at their Christmas party, is a poem that he reads aloud to the group. Patrick reveals himself as Charlie's Secret Santa and gives Charlie a complete suit because "all the great writers" have suits. Charlie presents everyone at the party with a carefully chosen gift, the most special of which is a record with the song "Something" by the Beatles that he gives to Sam. It was a gift from his Aunt Helen. Later that evening, Sam kisses Charlie because she wants his first kiss to be from someone who loves him.

On the ride home from his family's Christmas party, Charlie's family visits Aunt Helen's grave and Charlie thinks about her experiences. He writes that she was molested as a child and had drinking and drug problems as an adult, as well as a string of abusive relationships. She was the only one outside of his immediate family to buy him both a birthday and a Christmas present (since his birthday is Christmas Eve), and she died in a car accident while driving to get Charlie's gift. Charlie feels responsible for his aunt's death, and as he thinks about her, his mental health declines.

During his friends' New Year's Eve party, Charlie takes LSD and falls asleep outside in the snow where policemen find him and bring him to the hospital. He has a history of wandering off when his mental health worsens, and his family worries. Several days later, Charlie is still experiencing some hallucinations from the LSD and he worries that they'll never stop. Sam gives him a cigarette to calm his nerves, and Charlie starts smoking more regularly.

One evening, when Craig doesn't show up to a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* performance, Charlie agrees to play Rocky. He and Sam (playing Janet) playfully touch each other to Charlie's delight, and everyone applauds him at the end of the show. Afterwards, Mary Elizabeth asks Charlie to the Sadie Hawkins dance. He writes about his experience at the dance with Mary Elizabeth: she did all of the talking. After the dance, Charlie finds his sister crying in the basement. She tells him that she's pregnant, and her boyfriend dumped her at the dance when she told him. Charlie promises to keep that secret forever and drive her to the clinic next Saturday.

When Charlie's sister comes out of the clinic, she scolds him for smoking, which makes him laugh, and he makes her comfortable in the back seat. After they return home, they tell their parents that they went to McDonald's and a movie. Charlie and his sister agree to keep her abortion a secret, and she tells him she really does love him.

After Charlie's parents find out he's dating Mary Elizabeth, Charlie's dad has a conversation with him about safe sex and consent. Charlie goes on another date with Mary Elizabeth to see a foreign film and then back to her house to listen to music. They end up kissing and Mary Elizabeth lets Charlie remove her bra and touch her. As their relationship continues, however, Charlie starts feeling more resentful of Mary Elizabeth. After

Rocky Horror Picture Show, Charlie and his friends go to an apartment to play truth or dare, and Patrick dares Charlie to “kiss the prettiest girl in the room on the lips.” Charlie kisses Sam instead of Mary Elizabeth. This makes both Sam and Mary Elizabeth angry, and Patrick drives Charlie home. Patrick advises Charlie to stay clear of their friends for a while. The separation from his friends makes Charlie feel extremely lonely, and he begins smoking pot regularly.

Without his friends, he spends time people-watching at the mall and getting high. When buying another stash of weed, Charlie hears about Brad’s dad catching Brad with Patrick. Brad’s dad beat him so badly that he didn’t come to school for a week. When Brad returns to school, he ignores Patrick for most of the week until Patrick finally confronts him during lunch. Brad calls Patrick a faggot, and they get into a fistfight. Brad’s football friends team up on Patrick, and Charlie steps in to protect him and ends the fight.

On Friday night, Charlie goes to *Rocky Horror Picture Show* to reunite with his friends. Patrick quits playing Frank ‘N Furter and watches the show with Charlie. They begin spending a lot of time together, and Patrick smokes heavily and takes large amounts of caffeine. When Patrick drops off Charlie at home after a night of drinking in the park, he thanks him for defending him in the cafeteria and then kisses him. Patrick apologizes but Charlie tells him that it’s okay and lets Patrick kiss him again.

During the last weeks of school, Charlie works hard to maintain his good grades, despite spending long nights going out with Patrick. At their last *Rocky Horror Picture Show* performance before graduation, Patrick decides to play Frank ‘N Furter one last time, and Charlie thinks it’s his best performance ever. Charlie’s friends go to prom while he stays home thinking about what a great time they must be having. When he goes to see them the day after, Sam breaks up with Craig because she found out that he had been cheating on her the entire time. The next day, Charlie has lunch at Bill’s house with Bill and his girlfriend, and Bill tells Charlie that he is one of the most gifted people he’s ever met and that Charlie can always count on him as a friend.

For graduation, Charlie gives all of his friends gifts, the most special of which are for Sam and Patrick. To them, he gives his copies of the books that Bill had him read throughout the year with a note telling them both that they are his two favorite people. At the last party with his friends before they leave for the summer, Sam asks Charlie why he didn’t ask her out after she broke up with Craig, and she explains to Charlie that he can’t just put other people’s lives before his. She says that doing nothing doesn’t count as love, and that letting Patrick kiss him wasn’t being honest with him. Charlie kisses Sam, who returns the kiss and eventually slides her hand under his pants to touch him. Charlie stops her and starts feeling terrible and overwhelmed. Unable to drive home, he falls asleep on her

couch. That night he has a dream that his Aunt Helen touched him the way Sam did.

After Sam leaves for college, Charlie’s mental health spirals downward, and he wonders whether what he dreamed about Aunt Helen is true. Charlie’s family finds him naked, unresponsive, and looking at a blank television, and he spends two months in the hospital. While in the hospital, Charlie realizes that Aunt Helen molested him as a child every Saturday while they watched TV. When his siblings visit him, they talk about Aunt Helen and Charlie realizes that there’s no point in blaming her for what she did to him because he would then have to blame the people who abused her, and so on. He writes that thinking that way “wasn’t going anywhere” and “wasn’t the point.”

When Charlie gets released from the hospital Sam and Patrick pick him up and drive him through the tunnel. Patrick turns up the radio, and Charlie stands in the back of the truck with the wind in his face. He thinks about how he still loves his Aunt Helen for buying him presents, and how much he wants the people around him to be happy. He writes that this will be his last letter because the new school year is starting, and he plans to be too busy with “participating” to write letters anymore. He closes his last letter by assuring the reader that things are good with him.



CHARACTERS

Charlie – Charlie, the protagonist of the novel, tells the story of his first year of high school through writing letters to an anonymous friend. At the beginning of the year, he is recovering from his best friend’s suicide the previous spring and feeling isolated at his new school. In his letters, Charlie is sensitive, observant, curious, reflective, and deeply lonely, feeling like an outsider even within his own family. As a child, Charlie was molested by his Aunt Helen, who was his favorite person in the world. She died while driving to buy him a birthday present on his 7th birthday, and Charlie feels at least partially to blame for her death. Throughout the novel, he carries the emotional weight of both his guilt and his repressed trauma, and his family demonstrates a pattern of keeping secrets, never really being open with each other. Because of this, Charlie feels as though he doesn’t have anyone to talk to about his problems, and he eventually experiences a mental health crisis near the end of the novel. Charlie’s open voice in the letters invite the reader in to process Charlie’s experiences along with him. He struggles through the normal teenage challenges—friend groups, intimacy, grades, etc.—along with the emotional burden of his childhood abuse. Luckily, Charlie meets Patrick and Sam, two seniors at his school who invite him into their friend group and give him a sense of belonging. Together, they bond over reading and **music** and navigate relationships, social expectations, and the tough and messy

transitions of adolescence. Charlie also develops a stronger sense of self throughout the year through writing, reading **books**, and listening to music and decides that he wants to be a writer one day.

Aunt Helen – Charlie’s mom’s sister, Helen was Charlie’s favorite aunt, who moved in with Charlie’s family after a string of abusive relationships. At the end of the novel, Charlie realizes that his aunt molested him every Saturday night while they watched television. Since Charlie represses the memories of his abuse for most of the novel, he generally thinks of Helen as the only person in his otherwise cold family to show Charlie affection, and he also loved that she gave him **books** to read. Helen was a victim herself of childhood physical and sexual abuse, and the abusive pattern continued in her adult relationships until she eventually molested Charlie. Helen has a recurring role in Charlie’s memories, almost like a ghost of his repressed trauma that continues to haunt him. As both Charlie’s favorite person and his abuser, Helen is representative of the ways in which abusers mask their harmful behavior to make it look like care, sometimes making it hard for victims, like Charlie, to recognize the abuse and to understand appropriate forms of intimacy.

Sam – Sam, one of the friends Charlie makes in high school, quickly becomes one of his favorite people, as well as the first girl he falls in love with. Sam is a few years older than Charlie, and she is kind, warm, and open. She and her stepbrother Patrick invite Charlie into their friend group and bond over similar interests in **music**. Like Charlie, she was molested as a child, and she deals with it by confronting her memories and deciding to develop a healthy relationship with herself and not accept less than what she deserves. Her ability to deal with her trauma head-on sets a positive example for Charlie, and he also learns from her about healthy forms of intimacy between consenting peers, as she demonstrates for him how to move on from bad relationships and how to learn to participate in meaningful ones. She kisses Charlie, telling him she wants his first kiss to be with someone who loves him. At the end of the novel, she leaves for college with a mutually loving but vaguely defined relationship with Charlie.

Patrick – Charlie’s other favorite person, Patrick is a senior at Charlie’s high school and Sam’s stepbrother. Charlie first befriends Patrick at a football game, and Patrick then introduces Charlie to Sam and the rest of their friend group. Patrick is one of the first people to openly appreciate Charlie and make him feel welcome, embodying the sort of acceptance that he himself doesn’t always receive, since he is gay. His nickname, “Nobody,” represents the invisibility of much of the LGBTQ community who either have to hide their identities (like Patrick’s boyfriend Brad) or are not accepted for who they are once they come out. Patrick provides one of the few examples of healthy and nontraditional masculinity in the story as a semi-open gay young man, and he shows Charlie that it’s ok for men

to be sensitive.

Bill – Charlie’s English teacher, Bill, takes an interest in Charlie’s potential at the beginning of the school year and lends him **books** for extra reading. Besides Aunt Helen, Bill is one of the few adults who make Charlie feel special and give him confidence in his intellectual abilities. Bill even invites Charlie to his house for lunch, and later to his wedding. As a younger adult who isn’t too far removed from his own teenage years, Bill is able to be both a mentor and a trusted confidant to Charlie, and he provides Charlie with a trusting, healthy relationship with an adult male—something Charlie doesn’t experience with his dad or older brother. Bill is the person Charlie trusts with the information about his sister getting hit, in response to which Bill explains that people accept the sort of love they think they deserve. This becomes one of the novel’s main lessons about how to relate to other people, as Charlie interprets it to mean that he has to love himself before he can love or be loved by anyone else. Bill also demonstrates another form of healthy masculinity for Charlie by being an attentive, nonjudgmental listener and by being gentle and kind.

Charlie’s Sister – Although they experience a distant relationship in the beginning of the novel, Charlie and his sister grow closer throughout the year. He initially describes her as pretty, smart, and mean to boys. Charlie’s sister indirectly introduces him to good **music** when she gives him an unwanted mixtape from her boyfriend. At points, she is at risk of repeating the patterns of the earlier generation—she finds herself in an abusive relationship like her aunt’s, and she accidentally becomes pregnant very young like her mother did. With Charlie’s help though, she finds an out to both of those otherwise life-changing situations. When Charlie drives her to her abortion, it marks a major turning point in their relationship. Her and Charlie’s evolving relationship shows that sharing secrets forges bonds, and that having supportive siblings can ease even the most difficult of circumstances.

Mary Elizabeth – Charlie goes on his first date with Mary Elizabeth, a friend of Sam and Patrick’s. She is intelligent, rebellious, and opinionated, and it is with her that Charlie explores his sexuality for the first time. Mary Elizabeth takes pride in being interested in the trappings of counter-culture (like punk rock **music** and edgy hairstyles), but also enjoys the comforts provided by her wealthy parents. Although Mary Elizabeth thinks of herself as Charlie’s girlfriend, he doesn’t find himself very attracted to her or even like her all the much, but their relationship drags on because he is afraid to tell her that he doesn’t want to date her. This comes to a head when, in a game of truth or dare, Charlie is dared to kiss the prettiest girl in the room, and he kisses Sam instead of Mary Elizabeth—a social misstep that puts him at odds with his entire friend group. Charlie’s brief but overwhelming relationship with Mary Elizabeth teaches him how lousy relationships can be when one doesn’t fully participate in them. Though their relationship

ended badly, he and Mary Elizabeth remain friends at the end of the novel.

Charlie's Mom – Charlie describes his mom as a quiet and beautiful person who rarely opens up, perhaps because she was physically abused by her father as a child. When she became pregnant with Charlie's older brother, she dropped out of college to become a stay-at-home mom. Charlie's mom gives him a collection of her favorite **books** for his birthday, and those shared stories establish a stronger bond between them. Though Charlie opens up more to her near the end of the story, it is likely because of his mom's quietness and his father's tendency to hide most emotions that Charlie represses his feelings and memories rather than talking about them.

Charlie's Dad – Charlie's dad was also physically abused as a child, and that experience made him strongly averse to physical punishment of any kind with his own children. Despite his commitment to nonviolence, however, Charlie's dad still subscribes to an emotionally distant and often aggressive brand of masculinity, where anger is the only acceptable emotion to display. His behavior makes Charlie and his older brother feel that crying in public is socially unacceptable, although Charlie remembers walking into the kitchen once and catching sight of his dad weeping profusely. Once a college baseball star, Charlie's dad dropped out of college because he and Charlie's mom became pregnant with Charlie's brother. Charlie's dad seems to live vicariously through his oldest son's athletic accomplishments.

Charlie's Brother – A football star at Penn State, Charlie's brother is the stereotypical example of traditional masculinity: he is aggressive, athletic, homophobic, and only dates "hot" girls. Truly his father's son, Charlie's brother demonstrates care by gifting sports memorabilia and promising to pay for Charlie's college if he gets drafted to a professional team. During one of their rare bonding moments, Charlie's brother taught him how to fight, which comes in handy when Charlie is attacked by a bully, and later when he has to defend Patrick. As a character, Charlie's brother provides a stark contrast to sensitive, introspective Charlie.

Charlie's Grandfather – The father of Charlie's mom and Aunt Helen, Charlie's grandfather worked in a mill as a laborer and struggled to make ends meet. When Charlie's mom and aunt earn Cs on their report cards, Charlie's grandfather beats them as his way of motivating them to do better. Deeply racist and homophobic, Charlie's grandfather also fears open emotions and cannot communicate care to his children except through violence. He regularly offends his family members, and only shows warmth once in the novel towards Charlie's sister after she graduates from high school among the top of her class. Charlie's grandfather is representative of the men who carry the burden of financially supporting their families but who lack the emotional literacy to develop relationships with them.

Brad – Brad is yet another character who experiences familial abuse. He is the senior football quarterback and a popular guy at school who secretly dates Patrick. Brad's dad beats him after finding him together with Patrick, demonstrating why Brad felt the need to hide his sexual orientation. After the discovery, Brad and Patrick get into an argument at school, during which Brad calls Patrick a "faggot," prompting them to get into a fist fight that Charlie breaks up. Weeks later, Charlie and Patrick see Brad hooking up with other guys at the park where Patrick goes to look for discrete hook-ups. Brad is one of the more tragic figures in the novel because he has to hide his identity at home and at school without the supportive friend group that Patrick has.

Charlie's Sister's Boyfriend – Charlie's sister casually dates this boy from her school, whom Charlie describes as very nice and respectful. He wears his hair in a ponytail, and makes her hand-decorated mix tapes. One evening, however, he hits Charlie's sister after she chastises him for not sticking up for himself more. Though they are eventually forbidden from dating once Bill tells Charlie's parents about the abuse, they date in secret until Charlie's sister accidentally becomes pregnant. Her boyfriend rejects responsibility and dumps her, leaving Charlie's sister to arrange for an abortion in secret and by herself. This is yet another character in the novel who is seen by others as an upstanding young man but who handles conflict with violence and shirking of responsibility.

Michael – Michael was Charlie's best friend who committed suicide at the end of 8th grade. In the letter that begins the book, Charlie describes what it was like at school after everyone found out about Michael's suicide, and the guidance counselors suggested that Michael had "problems at home." Confronting the loss of his only friend prompts Charlie's exploration of his own mental health and home life throughout the rest of the year.



THEMES

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



TRAUMA, ABUSE, AND MENTAL HEALTH

As a child, the novel's protagonist Charlie was molested by his favorite aunt. Following this trauma, for much of his childhood and adolescence, Charlie repressed his traumatic memories, as he lacked a positive example of how to release his tension in a healthy way. Most of the people Charlie knows have also experienced trauma and abuse, including many members of his family and

some of his friends. And many of the victims of abuse Charlie knows also go on to perpetrate violence, accept abuse, or both, since this is the behavior they know. Through exploring the complex cycles of abuse and trauma that permeate families and society, Chbosky illustrates how unfortunately common trauma and abuse are, especially in the lives of young people. This challenges a common assumption that children and childhood are defined by innocence—in fact, as Charlie notices, it is during childhood that so many people experience unspeakable trauma and then grow up to inflict trauma themselves.

Charlie's family, in particular, is prone to abuse and trauma—verbal, physical, and sexual—which leads to generations of abuse. Both of Charlie's parents (and their siblings) were beaten as children, for example, and as a result, several of Charlie's aunts spend their adult lives in abusive relationships with men, since they have been taught that abuse is normal. Furthermore, even though Charlie's sister has never been abused, she finds herself in a relationship with a man who hits her, and she stays with him because she believes that it was her fault for provoking him—and because she believes that men are supposed to be dominant and violent. This shows the cultural logic of abuse, through which many people (often women) accept abuse because it seems normal or deserved. In addition to physical abuse, Charlie's family exhibits cycles of sexual abuse. Charlie's aunt Helen was molested as a child by a family friend. Not knowing how to productively cope with her experiences, Helen perpetuated the cycle of abuse when she molested Charlie, leaving Charlie—like her—with a morass of unresolvable emotions, ones that he spends his adolescence trying alternately to repress and accept.

Chbosky begins the novel with the suicide of Charlie's friend Michael to show the stakes of unaddressed mental health needs: readers intuit that if Charlie doesn't find a way to work through what has happened to him, it could also be life-threatening. While for much of the novel Charlie has repressed his memories of sexual abuse, this trauma still has profound effects. Charlie is often anxious and he feels isolated from others, as he is afraid of being close to people. Without being able to remember the source of his trauma, Charlie is stuck trying to manage its effects. Like his friend Patrick, Charlie turns to substance abuse to try to cope with his emotions, which only defers his feelings, rather than resolving them. More positively, Charlie copes with his trauma by making friendships. While sometimes he finds it difficult to bear his friends' own emotional pain, his friendships generally help him feel valuable and embedded in a community, rather than alone with his difficult emotions.

Furthermore, Charlie's friend Sam, who was also molested as a child, gives him an example for how to recognize and work through trauma. She realizes that, as a result of her abuse, she has a pattern of dating people that make her feel small. By the end of the story, Sam commits to a healthy relationship with

herself and starts refusing to accept less than she deserves. Her example of recognizing an unhealthy pattern and committing to fixing it provides Charlie with a positive example of coping with one's past. For Charlie, coping with his trauma through a mixture of substance abuse, close friendships, and personal resolve proves insufficient: he has a mental health crisis at the end of the book and finally remembers that he was molested as a child. Throughout the story, Charlie regularly states that others have it much worse than he does, but with the help of effective mental health support, he slowly learns to recognize that his problems are valid, too, and that he needs to address them.

During his two-month hospital stay with intensive counseling, Charlie comes to terms with his past and who he is now, both because of and despite his childhood trauma. At the end of the story, Charlie decides that it wasn't productive for him to blame others for his abuse, both because "it wasn't going anywhere" and because "it wasn't the point." Charlie explains that cycles of abuse often extend too far back into history to trace, and losing oneself in blame and anger does not provide relief or a productive strategy for moving forward. From his friends, teachers, and eventually even his family, Charlie receives the care and support he needs to begin to open up about his history of abuse, and to begin the work of learning to love himself. In this way, Charlie avoids the same fate as his friend Michael, who supposedly felt there was no one he could talk to about his own problems. In this way, Chbosky demonstrates the life-saving power of speaking out about abuse, confronting the traumas of the past, and seeking help from others in dealing with life's difficulties.



RELATIONSHIPS AND INTIMACY

Charlie's experiences throughout his first year of high school re-shape his understanding of relationships and intimacy, transforming him from an emotionally numb and isolated boy to an affectionate young man with several healthy, intimate relationships. Charlie's initial difficulty with intimacy springs from growing up in a household in which expressing affection was taboo, as well as from his childhood molestation at the hands of his beloved Aunt Helen. Because of this, Charlie has to relearn the boundaries between intimacy and abuse, figuring out what kinds of relationships are good for him and which are harmful. Furthermore, since Charlie hasn't seen many healthy relationships, he believes at first that passivity and putting others before himself are the surest ways to demonstrate his care for his friends. Through his friendships, however, Charlie discovers that loving and respecting himself is a prerequisite for having healthy relationships with others, and that love is an essential resource for cultivating happiness and coping with hardship.

For most of Charlie's life, the examples he had for loving relationships either lacked outward affection or were abuse

masked as care. Several times throughout the novel, Charlie comments on how his family doesn't hug or say "I love you" often. His father treats his emotions like carefully guarded secrets, and his mother, who will cry publicly, doesn't speak very often, much less say how she feels. Charlie's older siblings also refrain to openly showing care for one another, and regularly hurl insults at each other. Charlie's grandfather, like many men, was taught that anger is the only appropriate emotion for men to express. Therefore, when Charlie kisses his grandfather's cheek, his grandfather wipes the kiss away, showing disdain for open affection, especially between men. In a family reluctant to show affection, Aunt Helen was the only one who hugged Charlie. But because he was sexually abused by the only family member who regularly showed him warmth and affection, his perception of intimacy is warped, as it has become conflated with abuse. Adding to the trauma of his abuse, his cold family environment discouraged him from talking about his emotions and experiences, so he carried his trauma in silence, making him feel all the more alone.

While Charlie's family is generally cold, his new friends and mentors at school love him and want to be close with him, which helps Charlie come to a better understanding of how to build healthy relationships. After Charlie tells Bill, his English teacher, that his sister's boyfriend hit her, Bill says, "Charlie, we accept the love we think we deserve," which is illuminating to Charlie. He had never considered before that, in order to have good relationships with other people, one must first have a good relationship with oneself.

The freedom of adolescence and his supportive peer group provide spaces in which Charlie can explore intimacy as well as sexuality. He shares his first kiss with Sam, and from there, he progresses to his first consensual sexual experience with Mary Elizabeth. These experiences are gentle and without the predatory power dynamic in which Charlie's aunt Helen placed him. Because of this, Charlie is able to rediscover intimacy with young women his age. Still, despite Charlie's tremendous progress in building healthy relationships with others, he struggles in the situations in which intimacy is most complex. For example, though Charlie begins engaging in consensual intimacy, he still doesn't know how to reject unwanted advances. When Patrick kisses him, Charlie just lets it happen, thinking that's what friends do, but Sam later explains to him that participating in relationships requires honesty and action. She says, "You can't just sit there and put everybody's lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love... You have to do things." This is perhaps the first time that someone else has called out Charlie's flawed view of relationships and taken the time to help him fix it.

Though Charlie has learned about the importance of honesty in relationships, he can't bring himself to be honest and break up with Mary Elizabeth for fear of hurting her. Instead, he lets his resentment of her gradually build until he chooses to be

"honest" at precisely the wrong moment by kissing Sam instead of Mary Elizabeth during truth or dare. Charlie also struggles with applying his newfound relationship wisdom to his cold and silent family, and when he takes action to safeguard his sister—by confessing to Bill that her boyfriend hit her—she tells him that she hates him and stops speaking to him for a while. At times, Charlie's efforts to love his family only make him feel more ostracized. Eventually, however, when Charlie's sister becomes pregnant and decides to get an abortion, Charlie takes care of her and drives her to the clinic. This moment of working through difficulty together brings them closer, and afterwards the chilly family atmosphere dissipates a little—they even say "I love you" to each other more often.

Charlie's traumatic childhood experiences skewed his understanding of intimacy from an early age, and his family's aloof dynamic only deepened his inability to reciprocate affection. However, once he enters adolescence and finds a new friend group, he has increased freedom to relearn relationship dynamics and explore healthy forms of intimacy. In his relationships with his friends, Charlie learns that he is deserving of love and capable of reciprocating it, even when that proves more complicated (as it often does) than passively placing their desires in front of his own.



MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE

As he matures throughout his first year of high school, Charlie struggles to reconcile himself to others' conceptions of what it means to be a man. He learns this mainly by seeing and imitating the behaviors of the men around him—social norms that instruct him in which characteristics are considered masculine. While some of the men in his life are kind, confident, and emotionally perceptive, others embody another type of masculinity—one characterized by aggression, sexual prowess, social dominance, homophobia, and a general lack of emotional connection and expression. This latter type of masculinity is harmful to Charlie and the men and women around him, which makes him realize that he doesn't have to be—or want to be—that kind of man.

From an early age, Charlie's family strictly defined which characteristics or activities were masculine or feminine, and encouraged Charlie and his siblings to align themselves with traditional gender roles. Charlie's dad and brother, for example, are homophobic and refuse to talk about feelings or show emotion. They stick to conversing about traditionally masculine things: sports, objectifying women, and making money. The social pressure for men to repress emotions is clearest when Charlie cries after his friend Michael's suicide and his brother puts an arm around him and tells him to "get it out of his system before Dad came home." Instead of comforting his son in the face of tragedy, this moment shows that Charlie's father would likely punish him for showing completely natural emotions. By contrast, the women in Charlie's life *are* allowed to show

emotions: after the final episode of M*A*S*H, Charlie's mother and sister cry openly, while his father cries alone in the kitchen to hide his emotions. For Charlie—a sensitive and passionate person who has been through significant trauma—his family's insistence that emotions are for women encourages him to stifle his natural characteristics in order to align himself to his family's masculine ideals.

In addition to emotionlessness, Chbosky shows that violence is one of the primary ways the book's characters conceive of and perform their masculinity. For generations, Charlie's family has passed down the norm that men should be violent, while women should love and respect violent men. Charlie's grandfather admits to beating his daughters (Charlie's mother and Aunt Helen) when they were children for getting poor grades. He believed it was his way of demonstrating care and motivating them to have a better life than he did, but his behavior likely did far more damage than good, as it conditioned them to accept abuse from the men in their lives. Nevertheless, Charlie's family sees masculine aggression not only as acceptable, but as a way of expressing care and concern, which makes accepting violence a shared value across generations. Chbosky clearly shows the effects of this norm on Charlie's sister. Charlie's dad refers to her boyfriend as "soft" because he is respectful and makes mixtapes decorated with artwork, but when Charlie sees his sister yelling at her boyfriend for not asserting himself more, her boyfriend hits her. Instead of staying away from him after this incident, Charlie's sister begins officially dating him, perhaps because she's been taught that aggressive, physically abusive men are desirable, and she believes that she was at fault for prodding him. Charlie himself only internalizes these lessons to a certain extent. He successfully defends himself against a bully named Sean, for example, and while his fighting skills earn him respect, he cries immediately afterwards. He fights again to protect Patrick when Brad's friends team up on him, and again, Charlie experiences shame for having hurt other people, even in self-defense. This shows that Charlie doubts whether striving to embody the masculine norms he learned at home will really make him his best self.

Since the men in Charlie's family fail to give him a positive example of masculinity, he must find role models in people who have a different understanding of gender and sexuality. Patrick, for example, who is Charlie's only openly gay friend, is one of Charlie's favorite people in the world. Patrick shows Charlie that being a man doesn't have to mean being heterosexual. He tells Charlie that many women are socialized to want to "fix" men, seeing abusive or difficult men as a challenge and finding purpose in working to make them better. After their conversation, Charlie sees girls wearing their boyfriends' jackets and he "thinks about the idea of property," which shows that Charlie is becoming simultaneously aware of the experiences of the women around him, and of the role men play

in oppressing them. Charlie's English teacher Bill also becomes a role model who broadens Charlie's ideas of masculinity. While Charlie's family taught him that violence was the only acceptable expression of emotion for men, Bill encourages Charlie's sensitivity, fuels his passion for reading and writing, and even at one point goes out of his way to tell Charlie how special he thinks Charlie is. In doing so, Bill teaches Charlie that a man can be gentle, introspective, communicative, and understanding.

Charlie's relationships with men who don't fit the image of masculinity held forth by his family show Charlie that being a man doesn't mean that he needs to change what makes him Charlie: his natural kindness, sensitivity, and creativity. Moreover, he learns that he can be a man while also fully loving, respecting, and communicating his feelings to the women around him. Through Charlie's wrestling with the narrow and prescribed forms of masculinity that the men in his family represent, Chbosky shows that men must choose break free of these expectations or else be consumed by them.



HEALING AND SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH LITERATURE AND WRITING

By composing the novel as a series of letters written by Charlie, Chbosky emphasizes Charlie's reliance on language to make sense of the world. Writing things down in letters to a stranger seems to give Charlie the ability to better examine and process his experiences. Charlie's English teacher Bill recognizes his strong writing skills and encourages his love of reading and writing with extra assignments. As Charlie reads and reflects on the **books** Bill gives him, he identifies with the various protagonists, and these stories influence his growth throughout the year. Furthermore, Charlie's letters give him a sense of control and a space to work out the things he has been unable to say out loud to another person. In this way, reading about others and writing about himself helps Charlie to discover his voice and identity, which gives him strength as he figures out how to navigate the escalating complexity of his adolescence.

Charlie writes letters to an anonymous addressee as a means of cathartically processing his emotions and controlling his own narrative, both of which are particularly important to him in the wake of his history of sexual abuse. Writing gives Charlie control over the narrative of his life in the sense that the reader sees Charlie's life events through his eyes, and Charlie decides which things to write about and which to omit. Even the things he's ashamed about, like hurting Mary Elizabeth, he gets to tell the reader about on his own terms. Given his anonymity, writing also allows him to be more forthcoming with his thoughts and feelings than he might otherwise be in person. In this way, writing grants him a certain freedom of expression, which is particularly important as he thinks through difficult events. Charlie's writing is also a way of discovering things

about himself he didn't already know, as he writes that sometimes he spends two days thinking about what he "figured out" in his letters. Furthermore, even though Charlie is essentially writing to himself (since his correspondent doesn't know his address or identity), developing the confidence to speak anonymously about himself is a step towards speaking to someone else in person about his traumatic past.

Just as writing letters helps Charlie discover and affirm his own identity, the extra reading and writing assignments he does for Bill shape his sense of self and make him feel valuable for who he is. As Charlie reads *Hamlet*, he feels a strong connection to the young protagonist, writing that "it was helpful to know that someone else has been through it." Charlie learns a lot about himself while reading about the lives of other young men, and seeing his experiences reflected in theirs helps him to put his messy everyday life into the context of a collective coming-of-age narrative that so many young men have experienced. Furthermore, Charlie's reading informs him about the world, which helps shape the views and opinions that help define his personality. During a conversation with his friends, for instance, Charlie uses an idea he learned while reading *This Side of Paradise* to stake a unique claim about celebrities and heroes. Most importantly, Charlie goes beyond identifying with the protagonists of the literature he reads and comes to identify with the authors, helping him shape his sense of himself as a writer and his goals for the future. His friends acknowledge his budding identity as a writer, giving him gifts to encourage it: a typewriter and a suit. Significantly, reading and writing also make Charlie feel valuable. Based on his extra assignments, Bill tells Charlie that he is "one of the most gifted people [he's] ever known," and this praise is important to Charlie's healing process because Bill is the only adult who makes him feel special (that is, besides Charlie's Aunt Helen, who abused him). Through reading and writing, Charlie forges a healthy relationship with an authority figure and mentor who makes him feel like he has something valuable to say.

While reading and writing are often solitary pleasures, one of the most important aspects of Charlie's relationship to literature is that his passion for books connects him to others. During secret Santa, for instance, Charlie reads aloud to the group the poem he has given Patrick as a gift. After he finishes reading, he describes the poem as "something that made everyone look around at each other and know that they were there." Furthermore, Charlie discovers that—since books are so closely tied with his identity—giving and receiving books is an intimate way to show affection. For his birthday, Charlie's mom gives him some books that she liked when she was a teenager, which shows that she notices his passions and gives them something in common. Charlie then gives Sam and Patrick his books at the end of the school year, effectively giving them pieces of himself just as Bill and Charlie's mom gave to him. In this way, reading and writing help Charlie to discover and affirm

his identity in the safety of solitude, and then give him a means to connect to others and confidently express who he is to the world.



ADOLESCENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Chbosky includes characters who had life-altering experiences in their young adulthood, like Charlie's parents, to illustrate that the experiences of adolescence can be lingering and deeply impactful. The teenage characters in the novel have typical experiences like first dates and applying to college, but they also confront issues like accidental pregnancy, sexual assault, and suicide. Nearly every adolescent character in the story has undergone a significant transformation by the end of the novel. By demonstrating that the experiences of adolescence are more meaningful than mere teenage angst, Chbosky validates adolescence as an important time in its own right, precisely because of the growth and transformation that occurs during those years.

Because teenagers exist in a twilight zone between childhood and adulthood, the adults around them often alternate between condescending to them or expecting too much of them. For example, Charlie's parents tell his older brother not to use language like "dyke" or "high" in front of Charlie, even though he's the only one in his family with a gay friend and who has gotten high. In this way, his parents' expectations of him are shown to be out of step with his actual life experiences. Probably because he is the baby of the family, his mother especially tries to shield him from information that she thinks is too mature for him. However, in the same year, his dad has an open conversation with him about safe sex and consent. Charlie's parents alternate between trying to preserve his "innocence" and ensuring that he transitions successfully into the young man they want him to become.

Charlie wonders about his parents' youth and what experiences shaped them into the people they are now. In learning about his family and friends' experiences, he recognizes that adolescence is a time characterized by life-altering decisions. Chbosky sets the tone for the seriousness of adolescence by beginning the story with Charlie describing that his best friend Michael committed suicide at the end of 8th grade. Michael's decision to end his life demonstrates that the intersecting pressures of mental health, family issues, and social isolation during this period in a person's life can lead them to act drastically. Charlie's parents also experienced life-altering changes during their young adulthood, both of them dropping out of college because of an unplanned pregnancy. His dad, formerly a baseball star, now seems to live in the shadow of his unrealized potential. He lives vicariously through his oldest son, now a football star at Penn State. Charlie's parents transitioned overnight from young adults full of promise and potential to someone else's parents, burdened

suddenly with unexpected responsibility.

Like her parents, Charlie's sister becomes unexpectedly pregnant, and her boyfriend rejects responsibility and breaks up with her. With Charlie's support, she gets an abortion. At 18 years old, she can seek medical care without parental permission, indicating that she is considered responsible enough to decide that she is not yet ready for this particular responsibility. After she recovers from the procedure, she eventually begins dating again and goes to the college of her choice, things she most likely wouldn't have done if she had suddenly become a young mother. She had to make a mature, difficult decision about her body and her future, and that decision both required her to act like an adult and allowed her to preserve her adolescence, breaking with the pattern that led her parents to abandon their own life plans.

After meeting Patrick and Sam, Charlie slowly allows himself to experience typical teenage things and explores the boundary between more adult responsibilities and the freedom of youth. Although he passively watches others develop and change around him at first, Charlie eventually learns to embrace his own transformations with the help of his peers and his teacher, Bill. When Bill gives Charlie *Peter Pan* to read, Charlie describes it as a story about a boy who "refuses to grow up, and when Wendy grows up, he feels very betrayed." Charlie is aware that Bill is drawing a comparison between him and Peter Pan, especially since Charlie spends a lot of time watching his friends grow up and feeling left behind. When Charlie gets his driver's license, it grants him freedom of movement and privacy, but within limits. He must always ask his dad for permission to take the car, and the permission always comes after a series of questions about his intentions with the car. Charlie uses his freedom to go on dates and meet his friends, as well as to drive his sister to get an abortion. Thus, the vehicle allows him to venture into both young and mature spaces. At house parties, Charlie experiments with drugs and alcohol, which lower his inhibitions and allow him to speak more freely, but he usually feels lousy afterwards. In this way, having the freedom to experiment also allows him to learn boundaries and consequences for himself.

By the end of the year, Charlie has had his first kiss, his first girlfriend, acted in front of an audience in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and developed lasting relationships with his new friends and with his family members. Perhaps most importantly though, Charlie's biggest transformation is that he now has hope for the future and has stopped hiding in the past. At the end of the story, he expresses excitement about starting the new school year, a drastic change from the dread he felt a year ago. Watching others grow and transform around him, Charlie eventually learns to engage in the freedoms that adolescence affords, and finds hope in his own transformations.



SYMBOLS

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



BOOKS

Throughout the novel, books—especially exchanging books as gifts—symbolize the unifying power of stories. Books become important when Bill gives Charlie extra books to read outside of class. Though Charlie doesn't realize it at first, this is a gesture of investment in Charlie's development and an overture towards building a close mentorship and even friendship. Charlie's mom also gives him her favorite books for his birthday, which establishes a bond between them that didn't exist before. Charlie deepens his relationships with others by giving them books, because knowing which stories others would like to read is an act of care—it shows that Charlie has been paying enough attention to them to choose a book for them. At the end of the story, Charlie gives Patrick and Sam the books he read for Bill over the school year. By giving Patrick and Sam his personal copies, Charlie also is giving them pieces of himself and his journey. The book giving pattern doesn't always go well, however, especially when Mary Elizabeth gives Charlie an e.e. cummings book and then wants to tell him how to feel about it. Sometimes, the stories are a method by which the giver is trying to impose a way of thinking onto the receiver. However, overall, sharing books is a gesture of kindness and unity: although they live through different experiences, sharing books helps the characters build overlapping frames of reference so that they can better understand and communicate with one another.



MUSIC

Like **books**, the characters in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* use music to foster connections between friends. In particular, music symbolizes shared experiences and feelings, good or bad, that cannot be expressed in words: when Charlie hears one particular song for the first time, he refuses to describe it for the reader because he can't—one needs to listen to the song to understand it. Music influences the characters in this book in three primary ways: mix tapes, records, and the radio. Sharing songs and the experience of enjoying music together creates a sense of understanding between the listeners. Like giving books, there is also a strong pattern of gifting music to others in this novel, and music usually functions as a way of communicating affection, understanding, and friendship. For his first Secret Santa gift, for example, Charlie makes a carefully selected mix tape for Patrick, and later, when Patrick is struggling through depression, he listens to Charlie's tape. This shows that the

tape comforts him, since he can feel the affection and care that Charlie put into the music selection. In perhaps the most memorable scene in the story, Charlie rides through the **tunnel** with Patrick and Sam listening to a song on the radio that provides the perfect soundtrack to “driving to your first real party, and you’re sitting in the middle seat of a pickup with two nice people when it starts to rain.” The experience punctuated by the perfect song makes Charlie feel “infinite” and demonstrates music’s powerful abilities to connect people and capture experiences in a way that words just can’t.



THE TUNNEL

The tunnel into the city, though which Charlie, Patrick, and Sam often drive while listening to music, is a special place for them. Because it is a passage, the tunnel directly represents adolescence—the transition from the safe protection of family and childhood into the excitements of adulthood, which is represented by the city. While they’re driving through the tunnel, Charlie and his friends act conspicuously like adolescents: Sam, for example, stands up with the wind blowing her dress and lets out a “fun scream” once they emerge into the city. Sam’s joy in the tunnel echoes her broader joy in her adolescence—she participates in school, has deep friendships, and feels a broad range of emotions and passions. Charlie, on the other hand, is more subdued in the tunnel, which mirrors his preference for observing others embracing adolescence (without participating himself) and his emotional numbness. He describes driving through the tunnel in the calm and quiet, until “finally, just when you think you’ll never get there, you see the opening right in front of you.” It isn’t until the very end of the novel that Charlie stands in the back of Sam’s truck and flies through the tunnel as Patrick and Sam drive, relishing in the freedom he feels living in the present moment. He doesn’t care about reaching downtown, but instead sees the tunnel as a destination itself—something, like adolescence, that he can enjoy along with his peers

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Charlie is writing his first letter to the anonymous reader and explains why he’s writing to them. Though he wishes to remain unknown to the reader, he needs someone to talk to about his life, which at the moment feels particularly difficult because Charlie is conflicted over feeling both happy and sad. His confusion over those emotions suggests that he doesn’t know that it’s natural to be both things at the same time. Furthermore, it seems that Charlie can’t talk to anyone else about the way he’s feeling. These letters appear to be a way for Charlie to tell someone else what he is going through, and also a method for him to “figure out” why he’s feeling the way he does and what to do about it.

☝ Some kids look at me strange in the hallways because I don’t decorate my locker, and I’m the one who beat up Sean and couldn’t stop crying after he did it. I guess I’m pretty emotional.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Charlie recognizes that the other kids at school think he’s strange and understands which of his behaviors they find odd, suggesting that he’s perceptive and quite attuned to social cues. By admitting that he’s pretty emotional, he indicates that the things others find strange about him are things he can’t change because they’re just part of who he is. These observations and admissions make Charlie seem very vulnerable, and the reader gets the sense that he’s being much more honest in his letters than he might be with someone he knows. The fact that Charlie beat up another kid who was bullying him and then cried afterwards also informs the reader that Charlie is not the stereotypical male his father wants him to be—in part, because he feels badly about using violence, even to defend himself.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Gallery Books edition of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* published in 1999.

Part 1 Quotes

☝ So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I’m still trying to figure out how that could be.

☞ My advanced English teacher asked me to call him “Bill” when we’re not in class, and he gave me another book to read. He says that I have great skill at reading and understanding language, and he wanted me to write an essay about [To Kill a Mockingbird](#).

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Bill

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis

Besides the bully, the only other person to notice Charlie during the first few weeks of class is his English teacher. By asking him to call him by his first name, Bill creates an informal, friendly dynamic with Charlie. With the extra books and essays, Bill is taking an interest in Charlie’s intelligence and potential. While other students may see extra reading and writing assignments as a punishment, Charlie feels excited about the opportunity to write more. Charlie gains the attention and praise of an adult authority figure through his reading prowess, and the books are a method through which he and Bill can establish a friendly relationship and cultivate Charlie’s literary skills.

☞ I walked into the kitchen, and I saw my dad making a sandwich...and crying. He was crying harder than even my mom. And I couldn’t believe it. When he finished making his sandwich, he put away the things in the refrigerator and stopped crying and wiped his eyes and saw me. Then, he walked up, patted my shoulder, and said, “This is our little secret, okay, champ?”

“Okay,” I said.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Charlie’s Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This scene is a memory of Charlie’s during which his whole family watches the last episode of *M*A*S*H* together. While Charlie’s mom and sister openly cry during the show, Charlie’s father feels the need to hide his tears from his family. By asking Charlie to keep his crying secret, Charlie’s

dad imparts the notion that emotions are something that men hide from others. Charlie agrees to keep his dad’s secret, feeling like that shared information makes them feel more connected, although he later realizes the emotional weight of carrying other people’s secrets, like this one. Knowing that Charlie’s dad doesn’t approve of men crying in public, the reader can better understand why Charlie feels so conflicted about his emotions, not knowing an acceptable way of expressing them.

☞ Charlie, we accept the love we think we deserve.

Related Characters: Bill (speaker), Charlie’s Sister, Charlie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Bill says this to Charlie after Charlie tells him about his sister being hit by her boyfriend and continuing to date him afterwards. As Charlie tries to make sense of why people have the relationships they do, Bill succinctly informs him that much of it has to do with the way those people feel about themselves. With this statement, Bill implies that in order to have good relationships with other people, one must first have a good relationship with oneself. This idea is an overarching concept that Charlie continues to revisit throughout the novel as he navigates various relationships. It isn’t until Charlie eventually learns to love himself more fully at the end of the novel that he is able to fully experience positive, healthy relationships with his friends, family, and Sam, his first love interest.

☞ I feel infinite.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Patrick, Sam

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Charlie makes this bold declaration as he sits between Patrick and Sam in Sam’s pickup truck after the

homecoming dance as they drive to a party. As he sits between his two new friends listening to a good song, Charlie feels such a profound sense of connection and belonging that he feels boundless. After he says this, Patrick and Sam look at him as though he just said the greatest thing, and this look lets Charlie know that they feel something similar. For a boy who only a few weeks earlier was scared of starting high school alone, Charlie has experienced his first major transformation of the novel thanks to the sense of belonging that Patrick and Sam have provided for him.

☞ “He’s something, isn’t he?”

Bob nodded his head. Patrick then said something I don’t think I’ll ever forget.

“He’s a wallflower.”

And Bob really nodded his head. And the whole room nodded their head. And I started to feel nervous in the Bob way, but Patrick didn’t let me get too nervous. He sat down next to me.

“You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand.”

Related Characters: Charlie, Patrick (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

At Charlie’s first party, he unknowingly eats a cannabis brownie and then accidentally walks in on Patrick and Brad kissing. Charlie agrees to keep their secret and returns to the party. Patrick sees Charlie for who he is, a wallflower, and appreciates his sensitivity and discretion. For the second time this year, Charlie is recognized as special. Though the attention initially makes Charlie uncomfortable, Patrick has a knack for making Charlie feel welcomed and accepted, and Patrick uses this moment at the party to make Charlie feel “seen” in a way he hasn’t felt seen before. Usually fading into the background, Charlie now has the attention and admiration of an entire friend group and this provides him with important validation.

Part 2 Quotes

☞ I have decided that maybe I want to write when I grow up. I just don’t know what I would write.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Bill

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

After improving on his writing assignments for Bill and eventually earning a B on his latest paper, Charlie feels encouraged in his literary skills enough to consider writing as his future profession. By reading the books about other young people struggling through their coming-of-age experiences and writing about them, Charlie is developing a stronger sense of self, and Bill’s encouragement plays a vital role in this process. Charlie also gains an additional sense of belonging by beginning to think of himself as a writer, which gives him a new community of people to identify with. It also gives him a goal to work toward, rather than spending his time getting lost in other people’s stories and thinking about the past. However, this moment also illustrates a disconnect in Charlie’s understanding of his writing. He doesn’t seem to realize that he’s already writing a story in the form of his letters, perhaps thinking that his life isn’t worthy literary material.

☞ Sometimes, I look at my parents now and wonder what happened to make them the way they are. And I wonder what will happen to my sister when her boyfriend graduates from law school. And what my brother’s face will look like on a football card, or what it will look like if it is never on a football card. My dad played college baseball for two years, but he had to stop when Mom got pregnant with my brother. That’s when he started working at the office.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Charlie’s Sister, Charlie’s Brother, Charlie’s Mom, Charlie’s Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Knowing that his parents became unexpectedly pregnant at a young age, Charlie realizes that adolescence and early adulthood are often when people have their most life-changing experiences, like his parents. It seems that Charlie’s dad now lives vicariously through the athletic

success of his oldest son, since he had to sacrifice his own athletic career. And Charlie wonders what his brother would look like if he, like his father, enters adulthood with unfulfilled dreams. Because Charlie's sister is making future plans with her abusive boyfriend, Charlie worries about what will happen to her if they actually follow through with those plans, again emphasizing the importance of the decisions she makes now. Though he recognizes the importance of adolescence and young adulthood for the people around him, Charlie is spending more time thinking about the lives of others than actively participating in his own adolescence.

When we were all getting ready to leave, I walked up to my grandfather and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. He wiped my lip print off with his palm and gave me a look. He doesn't like the boys in the family to touch him. But I'm very glad that I did it anyway in case he dies. I never got to do that with my Aunt Helen.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Aunt Helen, Charlie's Grandfather

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

This moment occurs on Thanksgiving after Charlie's family watches a recording of his brother play football. While everyone else is smiling, Charlie notices his grandfather crying, clearly overwhelmed with pride at his grandson's success. Charlie realizes that, for all his flaws, his grandfather is a complicated person whom he loves. Wanting to communicate his affection for his grandfather, Charlie hugs and kisses him, as family members often do, but Charlie's attempt to demonstrate care is poorly received. Because his grandfather subscribes to a traditional, homophobic conception of masculinity, tenderness between male family members makes him uncomfortable, and he reacts like a child, wiping the kiss away. Despite his grandfather's reaction, though, Charlie feels comfortable in his decision to openly show affection—something the men in his family clearly struggle with. His need to demonstrate care to his family is motivated by his lingering sense of loss over his Aunt Helen. His comment indicates that he regrets not giving her more love before she died.

I had an amazing feeling when I finally held the tape in my hand. I just thought to myself that in the palm of my hand, there was this one tape that had all of these memories and feelings and great joy and sadness. Right there in the palm of my hand. And how many people got through a lot of bad times because of those songs. And how many people enjoyed good times with those songs.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Patrick

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

For his first Secret Santa gift to Patrick, Charlie makes him a mixtape of carefully chosen songs. Charlie's choice to give Patrick a collection of songs illustrates the importance of music in the novel to create shared experiences between characters. Charlie explains how so many other people have memories and feelings associated with those songs and that makes them all connected in a way. With just a small cassette, Charlie is showing Patrick emotional support and affection that can't be expressed in words. The music is also a way for Patrick and Charlie to bond over their similar musical tastes and introduce each other to new things.

It was an old 45 record that had the Beatles' song "Something." I used to listen to it all the time when I was little and thinking about grown-up things. I would go to my bedroom window and stare at my reflection in the glass and the trees behind it and just listen to the song for hours. I decided then that when I met someone I thought was as beautiful as the song, I should give it to that person. And I didn't mean beautiful on the outside. I meant beautiful in all ways. So, I was giving it to Sam.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Aunt Helen, Sam

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

Again, Charlie uses music to communicate care to the

people he loves. He gives this special record to Sam for Christmas because it was the last gift his Aunt Helen had given to him. By choosing to give Sam the record he received as a gift from his beloved aunt, Charlie passes on the love implicit in the gift and signals that Charlie's favorite person has transitioned from Aunt Helen to Sam. As with his mixtape for Patrick, Charlie feels that certain songs can represent his relationship to other people, so it's fitting that he would give the most beautiful song he's ever heard to the most beautiful person he knows. As Charlie explains, Sam, like the song, isn't superficially beautiful, but beautiful in a deep, substantive way.

“I want to make sure that the first person you kiss loves you. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Related Characters: Charlie, Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

After Charlie gives her the record, Sam thanks Charlie and tells him that she loves him, making it clear that his love is reciprocated. Later that evening, she makes this statement, telling him that she wants his first kiss to be from someone who loves him. In this way, Sam provides an opening for Charlie to have his first intimate experience as a teenager that is consensual and loving. Nothing is forced, especially since Sam asks “okay?” before they do anything, letting Charlie know that “no” is also an option if he isn't ready. As both an older girl with more experience and Charlie's new favorite person, Sam provides Charlie with gentle guidance into adolescent experiences like exploring physical intimacy.

Part 3 Quotes

“I feel like a big faker because I've been putting my life back together, and nobody knows.”

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

After experiencing mounting depression over the holidays, Charlie took LSD at a party and was found the next morning sleeping in the snow by policemen. Afraid of what his parents will think, he doesn't tell anyone about his drug use or admit how bad his mental health issues have really gotten even though he begins seeing a psychiatrist again. Back at school, Charlie experiences lingering effects from the LSD but doesn't tell anyone, trying to pull himself together without anyone noticing, and his pretending makes him feel like a “faker.”

Putting his life back together is also an enormous undertaking to do alone, and even though Charlie has a psychiatrist, this statement indicates that he feels like he must confront his personal struggles on his own. This feeling of isolation only increases Charlie's stress because it adds a feeling of phoniness to his already complicated and overwhelmed emotional state.

“I don't know what it was, and I know we didn't really accomplish

anything, but it felt great to sit there and talk about our place in things. It was like when Bill told me to “participate.” I went to the homecoming dance like I told you before, but this was much more fun. It was especially fun to think that people all over the world were having similar conversations in their equivalent of the Big Boy.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Mary Elizabeth, Patrick, Sam

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 105-106

Explanation and Analysis

Finally acting on Bill's advice to participate more, Charlie jumps into a conversation with his friends. When they respond well to what he says, he feels a strong sense of inclusion, realizing how good it feels just to engage in such discussions. Charlie thinks about how the characters in *This Side of Paradise* have a conversation similar to the one he's having with his friends, but those characters lived in the 1920s. Realizing that other people in different times and different parts of the world discuss the same things gives Charlie a greater sense of connectedness with humanity in general. Charlie says that they didn't really “accomplish

anything," but he learns that sometimes the point of conversations isn't to accomplish things but to exchange ideas just for the sake of feeling connected to each other.

☝ I won't go into detail about the whole show, but I had the best time I ever had in my whole life. I'm not kidding. I got to pretend that I was singing, and I got to dance around, and I got to wear a "feather boa" in the grande finale, which I wouldn't have thought anything of because it's part of the show, but Patrick couldn't stop talking about it.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Patrick

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

After Craig doesn't show up for a performance, Charlie gets roped into playing the role of Rocky in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and the performance allows Charlie to be vulnerable in the spotlight while also enjoying the support of his peers. This moment is significant in the novel because Charlie sheds his wallflower-like shyness to perform in front of an audience in a gold bathing suit. Like when Patrick toasted to Charlie at an earlier party, Charlie realizes again how good it can feel to be seen, especially within an accepting community. Playing Rocky also allows Charlie to be openly flirtatious with Sam (who plays Janet) without tension because they understand it's all part of the performance. Not only does Charlie experience camaraderie with his fellow performers, but because the audience also participates in the spirit of the show, this shared experience makes everyone feel connected.

☝ Just before she fell asleep, she said, "Well, if you're going to smoke, crack the window at least." Which made me start laughing again.

"Charlie, smoking. I can't believe it."

Which made me laugh harder, and I said, "I love you." And my sister said, "I love you, too. Just stop it with the laughing already."

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Charlie's Sister

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 119-120

Explanation and Analysis

When Charlie's sister decides to get an abortion after she unexpectedly becomes pregnant and her boyfriend dumps her, Charlie supports her and drives her to and from the clinic. While he waits for her, he feels overwhelmed with worry and sits in the car chain-smoking. His sister is shocked when she finds out he smokes. Charlie laughs when his sister scolds him for smoking because it seems like a silly thing to focus on after having just gone through something as major as an abortion. Instead of making her feel ashamed or judged for her choices, Charlie shows his love for his sister by supporting her through a difficult experience. In the car on the way home, this is perhaps the first time the two of them have willingly said "I love you" to each other, demonstrating that this experience and sharing this secret brings them closer together.

☝ I could say that it was the wine or the beer that I chugged. I could also say that I had forgotten the time Mary Elizabeth asked me if I thought she was pretty. But I would be lying. The truth is that when Patrick dared me, I knew that if I kissed Mary Elizabeth, I would be lying to everyone. Including Sam. Including Patrick. Including Mary Elizabeth. And I just couldn't do it anymore. Even if it was part of a game.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Patrick, Sam, Mary Elizabeth

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

During a party, Charlie and his friends play truth or dare. Not wanting to be forced to tell Mary Elizabeth that he wants to break up with her, Charlie chooses dare for the whole game, and eventually, Patrick dares Charlie to "kiss the prettiest girl in the room." Charlie's dare, however, prompts him to reveal his carefully-avoided truth without having to speak it, and the aftermath of his action demonstrates the serious consequences of choosing exactly the wrong way and moment to finally be honest. Instead of only temporarily hurting Mary Elizabeth by telling her he didn't want to date her, he upset both her and Sam and made his entire friend group uncomfortable. Charlie's actions indicate that, no matter how much he's learned about relationships recently, he still hasn't figured out how to balance honesty with kindness.

Part 4 Quotes

☝ “You ever think, Charlie, that our group is the same as any other group like the football team? And the only real difference between us is what we wear and why we wear it?”

“Yeah?” And there was this pause.

“Well, I think it's all bullshit.”

And he meant it. It was hard to see him mean it that much.

Related Characters: Patrick, Charlie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

After his violent fight with Brad at school, Patrick stops playing Frank 'N Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* performances, sitting in the audience with Charlie instead and expressing his newfound cynicism. Clearly having lost much of his faith in people, Patrick declares that everyone is really the same, and any differences are just superficial, like clothing. Patrick's decision to quit the show coupled with his dark comments indicate that his fight with Brad has deeply affected him, making him feel jaded not only with his relationship but with his peers generally. This declaration signals Patrick's downward spiral as he works through the anger and resentment he feels toward Brad and toward society at large for making him feel he has to hide who he is.

☝ So, he said “thanks” and hugged me again. And moved in to kiss me again. And I just let him. I don't know why. We stayed in his car for a long time.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Patrick

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

After spending a night out drinking and exploring the city with Patrick, Charlie lets Patrick, who is in a confused and vulnerable emotional state, kiss him, thinking that's just what friends do. Charlie's reasoning for letting Patrick kiss him once again illustrates his misunderstanding of how true friendship works, as he thinks passively putting others' needs before his demonstrates friendship more than simply being honest. Though he has made much progress recently

in his relationships, he doesn't know how to reject unwanted advances and thinks the safest way to support Patrick is to sit passively and allow Patrick to kiss him.

☝ “Charlie. Please don't take this the wrong way. I'm not trying to make you feel uncomfortable. I just want you to know that you're very special . . . and the only reason I'm telling you is that I don't know if anyone else ever has.”

Related Characters: Bill (speaker), Charlie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

During lunch at Bill's house, Bill takes the opportunity to tell Charlie how gifted he is, and that Bill feels honored to have been Charlie's teacher. As perhaps the most important male authority figure in Charlie's life, Bill sets a positive example for Charlie that men can also be sensitive, smart, and openly appreciative of one another. Clearly Bill knows that Charlie doesn't receive very much validation, and his praise of Charlie is perhaps the most significant interaction he's had with an adult since Aunt Helen died. Bill's caution in making such a statement, however, reveals his awareness at the potential for any such expression of care and attention to be misperceived as predatory behavior. This is worth noting because it indicates that perhaps Bill has sensed Charlie's own nervousness.

☝ “Charlie, don't you get it? I can't feel that. It's sweet and everything, but it's like you're not even there sometimes. It's great that you can listen and be a shoulder to someone, but what about when someone doesn't need a shoulder. What if they need the arms or something like that? You can't just sit there and put everybody's lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love. You just can't. You have to do things.”

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Charlie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

While Charlie helps Sam pack for college, she asks him why he never asked her out after she broke up with Craig.

Charlie tells her he didn't know if that would make her happy and her happiness was more important to him than his own. Now that Charlie is finally articulating for someone his flawed understanding of how relationships work, Sam explains to him that participating in relationships requires honesty and action. This is perhaps the first time that someone else has called out Charlie's timidity regarding his relationships and taken the time to help him address it. In explaining these things to Charlie, Sam is demonstrating exactly the kind of honesty she's talking about, as she is honest with him—despite the discomfort it may cause—because she cares about him.

“I can't do that anymore. I'm sorry,” I said.
“It's okay, Charlie. Just go to sleep,” Sam said.

But I wasn't talking to Sam anymore. I was talking to someone else. When I fell asleep, I had this dream. My brother and my sister and I were watching television with my Aunt Helen. Everything was in slow motion. The sound was thick. And she was doing what Sam was doing. That's when I woke up. And I didn't know what the hell was going on.

Related Characters: Sam, Charlie (speaker), Aunt Helen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 203-204

Explanation and Analysis

After Charlie and Sam kiss and Sam touches Charlie's penis, he immediately stops her and seems to experience something of a breakdown. Unable to drive home, he falls asleep on her couch, apologizing to “someone” for not being able to continue. Charlie's severely negative reaction to an act of consensual intimacy suggests that someone touching his penis has triggered a repressed memory. As he drifts off, he seems to regress into that memory, talking to whomever it was who last touched him that way. Charlie's dream about Aunt Helen molesting him as a child provides the first clear indication that his aunt may have sexually abused him. His confusion when he wakes up after that dream suggests that this is a memory he has repressed for a long time, and the surfacing trauma makes him feel lost and overwhelmed.

Epilogue Quotes

“It's like if I blamed my aunt Helen, I would have to blame her dad for hitting her and the friend of the family that fooled around with her when she was little. And the person that fooled around with him. And God for not stopping all this and things that are much worse. And I did do that for a while, but then I just couldn't anymore. Because it wasn't going anywhere. Because it wasn't the point.”

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker), Charlie's Grandfather, Aunt Helen

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

After spending two months in a mental health hospital with intensive counseling, Charlie comes to terms with the knowledge that Aunt Helen molested him as a child. With the help of therapy and talking with his family, Charlie has decided to release any anger and resentment he feels. Through Charlie's voice, Chbosky explains that cycles of abuse often extend too far back into history to trace, such that losing oneself in blame and anger does not provide relief or a productive strategy for moving forward. Charlie admits that he focused on blame for a while, but has now moved on, indicating that he is handling his traumatic experience in a productive way.

“I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we'll never know most of them. But even if we don't have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there. We can still do things. And we can try to feel okay about them.”

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

Charlie has decided that he is not who he is because of what his aunt did to him. He acknowledges the importance of his past experiences, but states that there are many reasons for him growing up the way he did. By deciding that his past experiences don't define him, Charlie takes control over his identity and his life. His statement about feeling “okay”

about doing things suggests that he is working to rid himself of the guilt and emotional weight he carried for a long time, feeling freer to experience his life, or “participate,” as Bill told him. Stating that “we can still choose where we go from here” is one of the most assertive statements that Charlie has made in all of his letters, indicating that he feels more empowered to determine his own future.

●● But mostly, I was crying because I was suddenly very aware of the fact that it was me standing up in that tunnel with the wind over my face. Not caring if I saw downtown. Not even thinking about it. Because I was standing in the tunnel. And I was really there. And that was enough to make me feel infinite.

Related Characters: Charlie (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

After Charlie is released from the hospital, Sam and Patrick take him for a drive through the tunnel. Charlie stands in the back and as he rides through the passage, he starts crying. Rather than a sad kind of crying, he’s feeling joyful and relishing in the freedom he feels at being alive in the present moment. He doesn’t care about reaching downtown, but instead sees the tunnel as a destination itself—something, like adolescence, that he can enjoy along with his peers. In this moment, the reader can see Charlie’s largest transformation yet, which is his joy in the present and hopefulness for the future. Finally, by truly and actively participating in his own unfolding life, Charlie feels endless once again.



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.

PART 1

In a letter addressed to an anonymous “Friend,” Charlie explains that he is writing to this person because he heard that they “listen and understand.” He won’t say how he heard this, because he doesn’t want the “Friend” to figure out who he is. Instead, what he wants is simply to know that someone “listens and understands,” and to know that good people exist. He says that he believes that “you of all people would understand that because you of all people are alive and appreciate what that means.”

Charlie is trying to figure out how he can be “both happy and sad.” He thinks this is due to his family, a conclusion he came to after last spring, when he learned from the school loudspeaker that his best friend Michael had died by suicide. Charlie’s brother picked sobbing Charlie up from school and told him first to stop crying, and then to “get it out of [his] system before Dad came home.”

At the sessions with the school guidance counselors, Charlie gets the sense that the counselors are all afraid that Michael’s friends will kill themselves, too. When asked what he thinks, Charlie says (through tears) that what bothers him most is not knowing why Michael did it. The counselor responds that Michael probably had “problems at home” and nobody to talk to about it, but Charlie screams at the counselor that Michael could have talked to him. After that, teachers treat Charlie differently because he “made them all nervous.”

Michael’s death makes Charlie wonder if he, too, has “problems at home,” although he concedes that other people “have it a lot worse.” Charlie, the youngest of three siblings, says that his parents have no favorite child. His brother, who plays football for Penn State, is the oldest, and then his sister, who is “pretty and mean to boys,” is the middle child. His mom cries while watching TV, and his dad “works a lot and is an honest man.”

By addressing the letters to an anonymous “friend,” it’s as if Charlie is speaking to the reader directly and inviting them into the story. His description of the anonymous addressee is general enough that many readers will be able to imagine themselves into the role of the letter’s intended recipient, thinking of themselves as people willing to “listen and understand.” Charlie’s desire to remain unknown to the reader while also sharing details of his life with them suggests that Charlie may have a secret to keep. At the very least, the letters allow him to be more open and vulnerable than he might be with someone who knows him.



Charlie briefly introduces his struggle with his mental health here. Telling the reader about Michael’s suicide lends a serious tone to the start of the novel and gives the reader some background knowledge regarding Charlie’s conflicting emotions. Though crying seems to be a normal response to a friend’s death, Charlie’s brother’s instruction to pull himself together before seeing their dad suggests that open expression of emotions, and particularly tears, are not acceptable in their family.



Though brought in as mental health professionals, the counselors don’t seem to know how to speak to this room of bereaved teenagers. Charlie’s desire to know Michael’s reasons are an effort to make sense of the unthinkable, as though knowing the reasons behind his suicide would make the grieving more manageable. His reaction to the counselor saying that Michael likely had no one to talk to suggests that Charlie feels hurt, angry, and abandoned by Michael.



Charlie’s description of his family builds a picture of a typical middle-class nuclear family in which all the members seem to fit stereotypical gender roles. Charlie’s statement that he “could have it a lot worse” seems to suggest a belief that, because his family is normal on the surface, his own problems must not be very serious.



Charlie's Aunt Helen, who used to give him **books** to read, was his favorite person in the world. She lived with their family for "the last few years of her life" because something bad happened to her, although nobody told Charlie what it was for a long time. Once, he asked in front of Aunt Helen, and his dad slapped him when the question made Helen cry. Helen told Charlie's dad never to do that again, but he said he would do what he wanted in his own house. When Charlie cried, his mom took him to his room and told him what happened to Aunt Helen—"some people really do have it a lot worse than I do," he says. Then he tells his "Friend" that he wrote this letter because tomorrow he starts high school and he's "afraid."

Charlie's distant relationship with his immediate family is hinted at when he writes that his aunt was his favorite person in the world. Writing vaguely about the bad things that happened to Helen further reinforces that multiple people in Charlie's life have been touched by trauma, though the nature of Helen's difficulties, as with Michael's, remains unclear. Helen's defense of Charlie after his dad slapped him shows that she was protective of him. After his mom tells him what happened to Aunt Helen, he again writes that other people have it worse—again pushing his experiences aside to focus on the pain of others. All of this background information helps the reader to understand why Charlie is scared to start high school (without his best friend) and why he has to tell an anonymous reader about it—because he doesn't have anyone else to tell.



In the next letter, Charlie writes that he doesn't like high school, and a friend from 8th grade, Susan, has changed: she used to date Michael, but now she acts dumber around boys and doesn't talk to Charlie anymore. While boys and girls usually aren't best friends, he remembers that Michael and Susan were, kind of like Charlie and his Aunt Helen. The only person who does talk to Charlie at school is a bully who follows him around and taunts him. When Charlie tells him that he seems pretty unhappy, the bully hits him, and Charlie defends himself. He explains that his brother taught him how to fight, so he ended up hurting the bully pretty badly, and he immediately started crying afterwards.

Charlie struggles with accepting that another person close to Michael seems to have moved on without him. Comparing Michael and Susan's friendship to his and his aunt Helen's is an odd comparison given that Michael and Susan are teenage peers, and Charlie was a child when he spent time with his adult aunt. Charlie's honest and perceptive comment that triggered the bully's fury suggests that he's incredibly insightful but also blunt. Though he behaved in a defensible way by simply defending himself, Charlie's emotional reaction afterwards indicates that causing others pain upsets him.



Charlie doesn't get in trouble for the fight, since another student told the principal that Charlie was only defending himself. He notices that the other students look at him strangely since he doesn't decorate his locker and he cried after beating someone up. Charlie admits he's very emotional, and he feels isolated at school and at home since his sister doesn't pay attention to him and his brother is away at college playing football. Because his parents can't afford college tuition for all three of their children, Charlie explains that he needs to work hard to get an academic scholarship to go to college, which is what he's focusing on until he makes friends.

That he doesn't get in trouble shows that Charlie's decision to fight back was an appropriate response, but his crying after the violence makes the other students think he's strange, implying that violence is socially acceptable for boys while being sensitive is not. Knowing about his parents' financial limits give him an increased sense of responsibility to perform well academically and not be a financial burden on his parents. Charlie attempts to cope with his loneliness by focusing on his studies.



In his Advanced English class, Charlie is assigned to read [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), and he says he doesn't have much time to write since he likes to read books twice. He wants to tell the reader that he saw his brother play football on TV, and it was a special moment for his family. His mom cried, his dad put his arm around his mom, and his sister smiled, even though she and her brother fight. Charlie admits that he misses his brother, even though they aren't close.

Charlie's commitment to reading books multiple times suggests that he likes to read and understand the story thoroughly, further characterizing him as a patient and thoughtful young man. Even though they don't bond much, Charlie and his sister are proud of their brother and that pride unites them.



Charlie's English teacher asks Charlie to call him "Bill" outside of class, praises his reading and language comprehension skills, and asks him to write an essay on [To Kill a Mockingbird](#). Charlie's mom isn't sure why Charlie can't just take more advanced classes rather than doing extra work in his freshman class, but Charlie explains that Bill says the classes are all basically the same, just with different **books**.

Charlie feels bad for the boys who like his sister, claiming that she's mean to them. His sister receives mix tapes from one boy in particular, but she gives them to Charlie, who loves the **music**. His favorite song on the tape is "Asleep" by the Smiths. He tells his sister about the song, and she repeats what Charlie said to the boy. She thanks Charlie for telling her about it because the boy was moved that she liked the tape. Charlie hopes that this means he'll eventually be good at dating. Charlie's dad thinks his sister's boyfriend is "soft" and suspects that's why she is mean to him.

One night, Charlie's sister is criticizing her boyfriend for not standing up for himself, and he hits her in front of Charlie. Charlie explains that she just "got soft and nice" afterwards. Instead of breaking things off with this boy, Charlie's sister says they're officially going out and asks Charlie to keep the abuse secret. She and her boyfriend spend more time together and later that weekend, Charlie accidentally walks in on them having sex on the couch. His sister yells at him to get out and calls him a pervert. Later, the family watches Charlie's brother's football game on TV and Charlie's sister's boyfriend compliments Charlie's brother. After he leaves, Charlie's dad says that the boyfriend is "becoming a fine young man who could carry himself." Charlie thinks about the potential things his sister will likely put up with and "feels very bad for both of them."

Charlie's second-favorite class is shop class, where one of his classmates is called "Nothing." Charlie explains that in middle school, the other kids teased this boy calling him "Patty" instead of his real name, Patrick, and Patrick demanded that they call him Patrick or nothing, so they called him "Nothing." A senior now, Patrick entertains his classmates with an impersonation of the shop teacher that Charlie finds "hilarious" but not mean. Even the shop teacher laughs.

Charlie's first friend at school is ironically his English teacher, who gives him the sort of validation that he doesn't seem to be getting anywhere else. Charlie's mom doesn't seem to understand that the value is not in the prestige of taking higher classes but rather, in working with an educator who seems to have taken an interest in Charlie's development.



From Charlie's perspective, his sister seems mean to the boys, but he fails to consider that she's simply behaving the way she's been taught is socially acceptable. Sharing the music creates a bonding moment for them during which Charlie both tells her his opinions about music and helps her form a stronger connection with a potential boyfriend. Coming from Charlie's dad, being called "soft," is an insult to the boy's masculinity, and Charlie suspects that his sister has learned from her father that she should not desire "soft" men.



Charlie's sister's decision to officially date the boy who hits her further suggests that she has been taught that "tough" men are desirable, and that sticking up for oneself means behaving violently. Though it was an accident, Charlie's sister calls Charlie a pervert for walking in on them, making him feel as if he is to blame for a situation that is beyond his control. He sees his sister's boyfriend's behavior further validated when his dad calls him "a fine young man," showing that the previously "soft" boy gains acceptance through his aggression and sexuality. Instead of feeling happy for their relationship, Charlie pities them, seeing their relationship as a series of events they will have to "put up with" rather than enjoy together. More than anything, this perhaps suggests Charlie's own preference for being alone.



Patrick's demand that he be called by his name, though unsuccessful, demonstrates an alternative way of sticking up for oneself that doesn't involve violence. Calling him "Patty" suggests that the other kids either perceive or project a certain level of femininity in Patrick. Having been the object of ridicule himself, Patrick uses his humor to cope with social situations without doing so in a hurtful way.



On his first essay for Bill, Charlie gets a C for run-on sentences, and Bill suggests that Charlie work on increasing his vocabulary. While at the dentist's office with his mother, Charlie thinks about how his dad occasionally tells his mother that she's beautiful, but "she cannot hear him." According to Charlie, his dad is a good husband, just "pragmatic." Charlie thinks about how his mom was always considered the "pretty one," while her sister, Aunt Helen, was "the other one." As he remembers watching television with his siblings and Aunt Helen, Charlie wonders whether it's sad that those experiences are now memories. Charlie says that he especially loved Aunt Helen.

Another TV memory Charlie has is watching the last episode of *M*A*S*H* with his family. After the episode, Charlie finds his father crying alone in the kitchen, and when he sees Charlie, he tells him that it's their "little secret" and says, "Okay, champ?" Afterwards, Charlie's dad lets Charlie sit on his lap. Charlie thinks about how other people have bad relationships with their parents, and some even get hit. He admits that he doesn't understand his parents but loves them very much because his mom takes him to the cemetery to visit the people she loves, and his dad trusts him to keep his secret.

Charlie decides to go alone to the football game on Friday night, which is something he used to do with Michael. At the game, Charlie sits next to Patrick, who introduces him to Sam, another senior, who Charlie says has a pretty smile and green eyes. They invite him to Big Boy after the game where they ask Charlie questions about himself and make him feel included. Charlie assumes that Patrick and Sam are a couple, but they explain that they're stepsiblings. Charlie develops a crush on Sam and has an erotic dream about her that night, which makes him feel ashamed. He wants to ask her on a date someday and hopes that his dream doesn't prevent them from becoming friends. Charlie explains that he wants to have a friend again even more than he wants a date.

After his dream, Charlie discovers what masturbation is and explains it to the reader, "just in case." He tells Sam that he dreamed about her and cries because he feels so bad about it. She just laughs warmly and asks Charlie if he thinks she's pretty. He tells her that she's "lovely," but Sam tells him firmly that he's too young for her. She gives Charlie a hug, and Charlie finds it odd because he doesn't even receive hugs from family members very often, especially since his Aunt Helen died.

Unlike the teachers from middle school, Bill doesn't seem to give Charlie good grades because he's "nervous" about him. Instead, he gives him concrete feedback and encouragement to grow. Charlie's thoughts about his mother suggest that she is unwilling or unable to accept praise, and his word choice in calling his father "pragmatic" indicates a lack of romance in their relationship. His description of his mother and Aunt Helen suggest a possible tension between them, but his memories of Aunt Helen illustrate how special she was, at least to him.



While Charlie's mother can cry openly, Charlie's father treats crying like something shameful and private. In asking Charlie to keep the incident a secret, he imparts the expectation that men keep their emotions secret. Though they seem to have complicated relationships, Charlie writes about his favorite memories of his parents and admits that he loves them—perhaps to remind himself that they care for each other in their own ways.



Significant as a place he used to go with his deceased best friend, the football game represents a bonding place both between friends and for the whole school as they root for their team. Brave enough to go by himself, Charlie's vulnerability in this instance is rewarded when he makes two new friends. Charlie's tone in this letter as he describes his experiences is joyful now that he feels included, especially with people who seem genuinely interested in getting to know him. His reaction to his erotic dream about Sam shows that he views sexual desire as shameful and something that stands in the way of positive relationships.



Charlie's enthusiastic embrace of his new discovery suggests a positive development in his attitude toward his own sexuality, though he still feels ashamed for his dream about Sam. His compulsion to confess his dream to her indicates that Charlie strongly values honesty. Once again reinforcing the notion that his family dynamic is rather cold, Charlie's mentioning that Aunt Helen was the only one who hugged him further establishes their close relationship.



After Sam tells Patrick about Charlie's crush on her, Patrick explains to Charlie how women are socialized to desire men who "can give them a purpose," and they feel bored unless guys present them with a challenge. Afterwards, Charlie sees girls in the hallways at school wearing guys' jackets, and he thinks about the "idea of property." Bill notices Charlie's observations and listens to Charlie as he explains his thoughts. Bill then explains to Charlie that sometimes thinking too much prevents one from participating. After asking about his home life, Charlie tells Bill about Charlie's sister's boyfriend hitting her. Bill explains to Charlie that people "accept the love [they] think [they] deserve," and later phones Charlie's parents to tell them about the abuse.

Charlie's parents forbid his sister from seeing her boyfriend again, but she argues that she loves him and that he's her "whole world." Charlie's mom tells her to never say that about anyone again, and Charlie explains that because she chooses her battles carefully, Charlie's mom always gets her way. Charlie's dad gives his sister a "rare kiss" on the forehead and leaves to confront the boyfriend's parents. After he leaves, Charlie's sister tells Charlie she hates him and that he's a freak. He just tells her he loves her, and he's trying not to be.

Charlie explains that his parents never hit their children. Many years ago, when his dad slapped him after making Aunt Helen cry, his dad apologized and told Charlie about how his stepfather used to hit him. Charlie's dad promised himself that when he became a dad, he would never hit his children. His dad said he felt terrible for slapping Charlie and would never do it again, and he didn't. Charlie says that he's "just stern sometimes."

Charlie admits that he masturbates regularly now and intentionally never thinks of Sam while doing so. He feels guilty for masturbating and promises God that he'll quit, but he continues anyway. Though he's not religious, Charlie says he believes in God and hopes he isn't letting Him down. Then, Charlie transitions abruptly to describing his dad's discussion with his sister's boyfriend's parents. Charlie asks his dad if he thinks the boyfriend's parents hit him, and Charlie's dad says that it isn't their business and even if they do, it's no excuse. Charlie's dad tells him that he did the right thing in telling, but his sister is still angry with him.

Patrick's comments to Charlie seem to be intended to help Charlie understand why women choose to date the men they do, but they also seem to place the blame on women for dating "challenging" men. After their conversation, Charlie notices how some of his peers seem to have embraced the notion that women can "belong" to men. Though he validates Charlie's thoughts as valuable, Bill also pushes Charlie to participate in his life rather than simply watch as everyone else participates in theirs. Charlie's decision to confide in Bill about his sister's abuse indicates that he feels close enough to Bill to trust him with sensitive information. Bill's statement helps Charlie understand that to have good relationships, one must have a good relationship with oneself first.



Reacting to the news of their daughter's abuse as perhaps most parents would, Charlie's parents clearly want to protect their children from harm even if they don't always know how to show love. Even though Charlie usually describes his mom as quiet, it becomes clear here that she exercises her authority in the family at certain moments. Charlie's sister's reaction to Charlie's attempt to protect her shows that his efforts to love his family aren't always appreciated.



This background information helps the reader to better understand Charlie's relationship with his father, as well as his father's behavior. Charlie's sympathy toward his dad—even though his dad hit him—also demonstrates Charlie's tendency to feel sorry for the abuser because of whatever experiences they had that caused them to hit.



Despite his earlier enthusiasm, Charlie's confession of guilt over masturbating again suggests that Charlie closely associates sexuality with shame. His abrupt transition in the topic could indicate that he became uncomfortable with thinking about it too much and needed to switch subjects. Though Charlie's dad had offered Charlie an excuse for why he hit him earlier, now that someone else has hit one of his kids, he feels no interest in the possible reasons why.



With his new friends, Charlie tries to participate more, but he admits that he often spends his time thinking about himself in relation to the characters in the **books** he reads or thinking about what he writes in his letters. Bill gave him *Peter Pan* to read, and Charlie recognizes that Bill is trying to teach him something with this book. He spends more time with Patrick and Sam, who invite him to a party after the homecoming dance.

Charlie remembers the party he watched his brother throw when their parents were out of town. His brother told him to stay in his room during the party. While he sat there, an older couple came entered the room, and decided to fool around knowing that Charlie was there. Charlie witnessed the boy, named Dave, force his girlfriend to perform oral sex on him even though she was crying and repeatedly saying “no.” Charlie’s sister walked into the room and saw them and called Charlie a pervert for being in the room while it happened.

He tells this story to Sam and Patrick while watching Dave, now a senior, score the winning touchdown in the game. In this moment, Charlie realizes that Dave raped his girlfriend. Charlie asks Sam if they should tell someone, but she explains how difficult it is to report and prove rape, especially in high school when the two people are still dating. Charlie feels angry when he sees Dave and the girl dancing together at the homecoming dance the next day. He thinks about fighting Dave but decides to let the air out of his tires instead.

After the homecoming dance, Charlie rides with Patrick and Sam in Sam’s pickup truck to a party, and as he sits between them listening to **music** on the radio, Charlie says that he feels “infinite.” Charlie is warmly welcomed at the party where he eats a cannabis brownie for the first time. After using the bathroom, Charlie accidentally walks in on Patrick and Brad kissing, and Patrick asks Charlie to keep this secret because Brad is afraid of people finding out. Later in the evening, Patrick appreciatively calls Charlie a wallflower, and everyone at the party toasts to him. Charlie begins to cry and says he doesn’t know why they toasted to him, but it was “very special” to him that they did, “especially Sam.”

Charlie’s tendency to get lost in his reading and writing suggest that those spaces are more comfortable for him than participating in the real world. Bill’s book choice for Charlie is a pretty direct message to Charlie to quit dwelling in the past and embrace his adolescence like his peers rather than resent them for growing up, like Peter does Wendy. Sam and Patrick provide Charlie with essential opportunities to participate.



Charlie’s experience of witnessing a sexual assault provides an additional clue as to why he seems to have such a complicated relationship to sexuality and intimacy. Though he saw something he didn’t want to and didn’t comprehend at the moment, his sister calls him a “pervert.” Being made to feel guilty for witnessing a situation beyond his control seems to have reinforced Charlie’s tendency to keep quiet about the things he sees.



Watching a rapist continue to participate in ordinary life and even be celebrated makes Charlie angry. As a young woman, Sam understands the difficult and often unreliable process of holding rapists accountable, and Charlie’s desire to punish Dave for his behavior suggests he possesses a strong urge to seek retribution for people who have been wronged. Because fighting was how he solved his problem with the bully, Charlie’s first instinct is to punish Dave by fighting him, but ultimately, he chooses nonviolence instead.



Charlie feels such a profound sense of connection and belonging as he sits between his friends and listens to music that he feels endless. Among his new friends, Charlie is free to explore new experiences, like cannabis, and he gets to know them better. Brad’s fear of others finding out about his sexual orientation suggests that his friends and family wouldn’t accept him if they knew. Unlike Charlie’s sister, Patrick doesn’t yell at Charlie and call him a pervert for walking in on him and Brad. Instead, he trusts Charlie as a friend to respect their discretion. From his friends, Charlie receives appreciation and recognition that he doesn’t seem to get at home.



Describing more of the homecoming dance, Charlie explains that Patrick and Brad didn't speak to each other, and he saw Brad dancing with a girl who is his girlfriend. Charlie also saw his sister dancing with the boy she's forbidden to see. After the dance, Patrick, Sam, and Charlie drive through **the tunnel** towards downtown while listening to **music**. Sam stands in the back of the truck flying through the tunnel with the wind in her dress and she screams. After she sits back down they all start laughing. Charlie says that in that moment, he swears they were "infinite."

At the dance, Charlie observes the ways in which Patrick and Brad's relationship is the opposite of his sister's. Whereas Patrick and Brad cannot be open about their relationship at school because of social homophobia, school is one of the few places where Charlie's sister can be together with her boyfriend. A direct contrast is made to point out that abusive heterosexual relationships are sometimes more socially acceptable than healthy homosexual relationships. In the tunnel, Sam appears full of life and joy and is an example for Charlie of what enthusiastic participation in life looks like. Her joy is contagious and spreads to Patrick and Charlie, too.



PART 2

Patrick explains to Charlie how he and Brad started seeing each other after fooling around at a party, and they continued to do so at Friday night parties, but Brad always got stoned or drunk beforehand. Eventually, Patrick and Brad had sex for the first time. Afterwards, Brad cried and refused to let Patrick hold him. Patrick helped him tidy himself up and then told him to pretend to be asleep. To keep it a secret, Patrick re-entered the party from a different room and asked everyone if they knew where Brad was. They found him passed out in Patrick's room, and they called his parents because he seemed really sick. Brad's parents sent him to rehab for the rest of the summer, since they didn't want his drinking and smoking to make him miss out on a football scholarship.

Brad's tendency to get stoned or drunk before being intimate with Patrick seems like an attempt to safeguard himself in case someone finds out about them—so that he can just say he didn't know what he was doing because of the drugs or alcohol. After they have sex, however, Brad seems overwhelmed, perhaps because the experience made him confront his sexual identity in a way he hadn't yet. Brad's parents' alleged reason for sending him to rehab indicate that Brad's athletic success is their primary concern. Given the hyper-masculine culture of football in particular, Brad struggles to make sense of his identity both as a football player and a gay man.



When Brad returns from rehab, he avoids Patrick until eventually they agree to see each other sober but in secret except for parties with Patrick's friends, who understand and keep quiet about it. Charlie asks Patrick if having to keep the relationship a secret makes him sad, and Patrick says it doesn't because at least Brad doesn't need to be drunk or stoned to make love with him anymore.

Given that Patrick and Brad only see each other around Patrick's friends, his friends seem to be much more open-minded and supportive than Brad's. Whether during rehab or after, Brad seems to have come to terms with their relationship enough to be fully present during their intimate moments.



Charlie continues making progress on his extra reading assignments for Bill and earns a B on his report on [Peter Pan](#). Charlie decides he wants to be a writer when he grows up. He starts writing for a fanzine called *Punk Rocky* (inspired by the film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) that his friend Mary Elizabeth runs. Charlie's friends perform in the regular screenings of the film, and the audience participates in the performance, as well. Patrick plays Frank 'N Furter and Sam plays Janet. Sam starts dating an older guy named Craig who plays Rocky in the show, and Charlie doesn't think Craig appreciates Sam enough. He realizes that he is in love with Sam because she is the "prettiest and nicest person in the whole world" who is also "very smart and fun."

With Bill's extra assignments and encouragement, Charlie seems to develop a stronger sense of self, recognizing that his literary skills could turn into a viable future for him. Because of Bill's positive feedback, Charlie feels motivated to start writing outside of school assignments and his anonymous letters, which is a new way of participating for him. Additionally, The Rocky Horror Picture Show screenings give Charlie another community to belong to. Because of Charlie's feelings for Sam, the reader doesn't know if Charlie's concerns about Sam's boyfriend are justified or just Charlie's jealousy.



Charlie asks his sister why Sam might feel better about herself because an older boy likes her, and his sister tells him that Sam has “low self-esteem” and used to have a “reputation” as a sophomore. He then asks her about dancing with the abusive boyfriend at homecoming, and after he promises not to tell anyone including Bill, his sister tells him that they still date in secret and plan to get married after college. She tells Charlie not to worry because he hasn’t hit her again and won’t ever hit her again, but Charlie still worries about her.

Charlie’s brother calls home on rare occasions, and his parents worry about him. Charlie hopes that his brother is having the kind of college experience where he “meets a smart girl who wears a lot of sweaters and drinks cocoa” with whom he can discuss **books**. But, his brother has posters of cars, beer, and supermodels on his walls, he never makes his bed, and he mostly talks about the football team.

Charlie wishes he could be on a sports team, but, as he says, the sports he played made him too aggressive. Charlie’s dad was also a college athlete like his brother but had to leave college when Charlie’s mom became pregnant with his older brother. His dad tells stories about his “glory days,” and Charlie thinks about how handsome and rugged his dad looks in old photographs and how pretty his mom looks. He wonders what happened to make them the people they are now.

When Charlie’s brother finally calls home, he tells his parents that he can’t make it home for Thanksgiving, which upsets his mom. She takes Charlie clothes shopping and “worries out loud” the entire time, but Charlie explains that he understands his mom’s anxiety. The next day, Sam and Patrick compliment Charlie’s new clothes, saying his mom has good taste, which he tells her after school. This makes her happy, and she suggests that Charlie have them over for dinner sometime. Charlie writes that the last friend he had over for dinner was Michael, and they stayed up late walking around the neighborhood. His mom told him recently that Michael’s parents are now divorced, which, she said, is common for couples who lose a child.

Somewhat similar to Bill’s earlier statement about accepting certain kinds of love, Charlie’s sister also feels that people make relationship decisions because of how they feel about themselves, but she doesn’t seem to apply this logic to her own relationship. Though Charlie seems to enjoy when people confide in him, carrying the weight of others’ secrets, like his sister’s, takes an emotional toll.



Charlie hopes his brother is having the kind of college experience Charlie wants rather than what his brother likely wants. Charlie’s description of his brother illustrates how starkly different the two are. While Charlie is quiet, sensitive, introspective, and creative, his brother seems like the quintessential jock. Charlie’s wish for his brother suggests that he wishes his brother would become more sensitive and thoughtful, like him.



Though his family seems to value aggressive men, it seems that they also recognize that there are times when aggression can be harmful, as indicated by their pulling Charlie out of sports. It seems that Charlie’s dad now lives vicariously through the athletic success of his oldest son, since he had to sacrifice his own athletic career. Knowing that his parents became unexpectedly pregnant at a young age, Charlie realizes that adolescence and early adulthood are often when people have life-changing experiences, like his parents.



While shopping with one’s mom is usually a time for bonding, Charlie’s mom spends the time worrying about everyone else rather than being present for that time with Charlie. His understanding of her worrying rather than anger or frustration at being ignored shows that Charlie is a deeply empathetic character. It also demonstrates that he nearly always puts others’ needs before his own. Because the last friend he had over for dinner was Michael, there is increased significance in bringing new friends home: it’s another step towards moving on after Michael’s death. Charlie’s mom’s remark about Michael’s parents’ divorce illustrates how families can fall apart after traumatic events.



Charlie thinks about spending holidays with his mom's family. His grandfather tends to offend most of the family and make racist comments, and Charlie's brother is the only one who can manage him. One time, Charlie's grandfather told him and his brother about how difficult his life used to be as a laborer and how he once beat their mother and Aunt Helen for getting Cs on their report cards, demanding that it never happen again. On Thanksgiving, Charlie's extended family watches a recording of Charlie's brother playing football, and Charlie sees his grandfather crying. He realizes that, in demanding better from his daughters, he meant that he wanted to be the last one to work in a mill. Before leaving, Charlie kisses his grandfather goodbye, but his grandfather wipes off Charlie's kiss. Charlie explains that his grandfather doesn't like touching between men in the family.

As Christmas approaches, Charlie and his friends participate in a Secret Santa exchange. Charlie gets Patrick and makes him a mix tape with carefully selected **music**. As he collects the songs, he experiences an "amazing feeling" thinking about many other people who have listened to and gotten through "bad times" because of those songs. Charlie writes that he has continued his extra reading and writing assignments for Bill and he notices a trend in the books Bill gives him. Just like the songs on his tape for Patrick, all of the books Bill gives him are his favorites.

Patrick loves the mix tape, and Charlie suspects Patrick knows that Charlie is his Secret Santa. For his first gift, Charlie just receives socks, and he thinks Mary Elizabeth must be his Secret Santa. He later receives a tie, white shirt, shoes, and a belt, along with instructions to wear everything to the Christmas party. For the rest of Patrick's gifts, Charlie gives a magnetic poetry set, watercolor paints, a harmonica, and a **book** about Harvey Milk. After Patrick told him he was gay, Charlie did research on the gay community. Patrick loves all of his gifts.

At the party, Charlie meets Sam and Patrick's parents, whom he likes a lot. He says they don't make you feel awkward when you meet them and they let Sam and Patrick and their friends have their party undisturbed. Charlie says everyone knows he was Patrick's Secret Santa, and he stands up to give his last gift to Patrick, a poem that he reads aloud to the group. After Charlie reads it, everyone sits quietly and looks at each other in a way that meant they knew "that they were there." Patrick plays Charlie's tape and they continue exchanging gifts until Patrick reveals himself as Charlie's Secret Santa and gives Charlie a complete suit because "all the great writers" have suits. Everyone applauds when Charlie completes his outfit.

Charlie's grandfather, like many men, was socialized to think that violence was an acceptable way of showing his care for his family members. He hit his daughters as a means of motivating them to work towards a better life. Charlie once again recognizes abuse as such but also feels sympathy for the abuser. Only wanting to show his grandfather that he loves him, another of Charlie's attempts to demonstrate care is poorly received. Because his grandfather subscribes to an aggressive and homophobic form of masculinity, tenderness between male family members makes him uncomfortable to the point of hostility.



Charlie's choice to give Patrick a collection of songs again points to the importance of music in the novel to create shared experiences between characters. With just a small cassette, Charlie is showing Patrick emotional support and care. Just like his carefully selected songs, Charlie realizes that Bill is giving him carefully selected books, which is his way of showing Charlie support and care. The books help to shape Charlie's identity because they influence his understanding of the world around him and his own experience.



Since socks seem like an impersonal gift, Charlie suspects one of the friends that he's not as close to is his Secret Santa. Charlie's selections for Patrick's gift demonstrate the careful attention he pays to the people around him. The book in particular and the research Charlie did to find it illustrate Charlie's investment in his relationship with Patrick and in making Patrick feel cared for.



Like their children, Sam and Patrick's parents seem to have a knack for making people feel welcome. Charlie's choice to give Patrick a poem as his last gift is yet another way that characters in the novel give literature or music to each other as a way of building intimacy. The shared experience of hearing the poem makes them all look at each other and feel present together in that moment. Patrick acknowledges this feeling by playing Charlie's mix tape so that they can share in the music, too. Patrick's gift to Charlie acknowledges his identity as a budding writer, and their friends' applause gives Charlie confidence in that identity.



Charlie presents everyone at the party with a carefully chosen gift, even though no one except Sam and Patrick got him a gift. The most special gift is a record with the song “Something” by the Beatles that he gives to Sam. It was a gift from his Aunt Helen. Sam hugs Charlie and tells him that she loves him, and Charlie writes that it was the third time since his Aunt Helen died that someone had told him that. Sam gives Charlie a typewriter and asks that he write about her. Later that evening, Sam kisses Charlie because she wants his first kiss to be from someone who loves him. Charlie describes the kiss as something he “could never tell [his] friends about out loud.” Charlie includes a copy of the poem he read for Patrick at the end of the letter and says nobody knew who wrote it but someone heard it was a kid’s suicide note.

Sam and Patrick leave for Christmas, vacation and Charlie spends the day thinking about his memories of sledding. He walks to the sledding hill and watches young kids as they fly down the hill. Charlie thinks about how they will grow up someday and he wishes that sledding would always be enough. Christmas and his birthday are coming up, and Charlie is glad that they will be over soon because he goes to “a bad place” at this time of year, which started after his Aunt Helen died. He was held back a grade because it “got so bad.” He explains that sometimes, things just start to slip away, and he breathes heavily trying to refocus. Trying not to think about it, he writes about his plans for the next few days, which involve Christmas shopping and celebrating his birthday, December 24. Bill gave him [The Catcher in the Rye](#) to read over break, which was Bill’s favorite **book**.

On Christmas, Charlie is feeling more anxious, but he doesn’t want to tell his mom about it. Wishing Michael and Aunt Helen were around, he admits he doesn’t like his birthday, which was the day before. On his birthday, Charlie went shopping with his mom and sister and struggled to find a gift for his dad, which made him realize that he doesn’t know his dad, and he got visibly upset. His mom calmed him, and eventually, he found a copy of the last episode of *M*A*S*H* to give to his dad. His mom listened patiently as he told her about the night they all watched it together, and she remarked that he’s a good storyteller. Charlie told his mom that he loves her, and she said it back, which made him feel better for a while.

Charlie’s choice to give everyone in the group gifts (even though only Sam and Patrick gave him one) emphasizes his giving nature. Charlie has now given music to both Sam and Patrick as a way of communicating his sense of connection to them. By choosing to give Sam the record he received as a gift from his beloved aunt, Charlie passes on the love implicit in the gift. Sam reciprocates his love and seems to replace Aunt Helen as Charlie’s primary source of affection. By including a copy of the poem for Patrick, Charlie lets the reader in on the experience as well. The idea that the poem may have been someone’s suicide note prompts the reader to wonder why Charlie choose this poem specifically and if he could be asking his friends for help indirectly.



Separated from Patrick and Sam, Charlie sinks back into his habit of ruminating on the past and longing for a time when things were easier. Writing about his mental health after his aunt’s death suggest that her death was extremely difficult for him. Telling this reader about “his bad place” implies that Charlie needs to tell someone about his recurring mental health issues. Having plans, a schedule, and something to read seem to give him a sense of control when his mind begins spiraling out.



Charlie’s desire to talk to Michael and Aunt Helen about his anxiety indicates that those were the only people he felt comfortable confiding in, more so than his immediate family. Charlie’s realization that he doesn’t really know his father further illustrates his rather distant relationships with his family members. He attempts to close some of that distance with thoughtful gifts and storytelling, managing to have a bonding moment of open affection with his mom. Feeling connected to his family helps ease his anxiety, if only temporarily.



At dinner on Christmas Eve, Charlie and his mom and sister wait for his dad to return home after picking up his brother. Charlie's mom notices that he looks sad and asks him if it's about Aunt Helen. He says he feels this way every year on his birthday, but his mom helps him calm down. His family has dinner together and they give him birthday gifts: **music** from his sister and dad, a signed football poster from his brother, and **books** from his mom that used to be her favorites. Reading his mom's copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* and thinking about his upcoming driver's test makes him feel better.

The next morning, his family opens presents and his dad really likes his copy of *M*A*S*H*, which makes Charlie happy. On the way to their dad's family's Christmas party, Charlie's brother tells them about his girlfriend, a cheerleader and philosophy major. Charlie's sister criticizes her brother for emphasizing her looks so much, and he tells her that she's being a "bitchy dyke." Charlie's mom's response is to tell him not to use that language in front of Charlie. Charlie's siblings get into a fight, which ends in Charlie's brother telling his sister that Kelly "believes in women's rights so much that she would never let a guy hit her," and he can't say the same about his sister. Charlie's dad slams on the breaks and stares at the two of them. They apologize to each other, and Charlie's mom demands an end to the fighting. Charlie drives the rest of the way.

At his grandma's house, Charlie looks at old photographs and thinks about his family's past. His grandmother's first husband died in Korea and her second husband was abusive and beat her and her children (Charlie's dad and Charlie's Aunt Rebecca) for seven years until Charlie's great uncle found out about it. Charlie's great uncle and his friends beat up the husband so badly that he died in the hospital. They never got in trouble for it, and Charlie's dad explained that in their neighborhood, people sorted out some things without the police. Charlie's Aunt Rebecca also had abusive relationships as an adult, but by that time the neighborhood had changed, and no one was around to defend her. Charlie wonders how her three children will turn out, and he thinks his dad feels bad for leaving his grandma and Aunt Rebecca.

Charlie's mom grows increasingly attuned to Charlie's distress, though Charlie apparently still feels more comfortable being fully honest about his mental state in his letters than in his conversations with his mother. Like Charlie gave his friends music and books to show them he cares, his family members (with the exception of his brother) gifted music and books to him to demonstrate that they've paid attention to his interests. Having his mother's favorite books creates a stronger bond between them because of their shared appreciation for stories.



Charlie's satisfaction with making his dad happy again shows Charlie's pervasive desire to make others happy. Charlie's brother describes his girlfriend for his dad as if the measure of his success as a man is having a pretty girlfriend. Charlie's mom's response to her oldest son's language suggests that it's only inappropriate because Charlie is in the car, and not because it's a sexist and homophobic slur directed at her daughter. Charlie's dad draws the line when Charlie's brother blames his sister for her abuse, suggesting that while verbal abuse is acceptable, taunting her about physical abuse is off limits.



Charlie's family clearly has a pattern of abuse on both sides and a complicated view of violence. To end violence against Charlie's grandma, dad, and aunt, Charlie's great uncle and his friends used even more severe violence, killing a man. It appears to be an inherited trait in Charlie's family that the women learn to expect either abuse or protection from abuse from the men in their lives. Because Charlie's dad didn't provide that protection for his sister, he failed at his responsibility according to those unspoken rules. These expectations seem to emphasize avoiding or punishing abuse rather than teaching the next generation not to be violent.



On the ride home, Charlie's family visits Aunt Helen's grave and Charlie thinks about her experiences. He writes that she was molested as a child and when she told her father, Charlie's grandfather, he didn't believe her, so the abuse continued. Aunt Helen had drinking and drug problems as an adult and a string of abusive relationships. Charlie explains that she was an unhappy person for most of her life. Eventually, she tried turning her life around and moved in with Charlie's family. On Charlie's 7th birthday, she died in a car accident while driving to get Charlie's gift. He remembers being at the hospital telling a doctor that Aunt Helen was the only one who hugged him. Charlie feels responsible for his aunt's death, and as he thinks about her, his mental health declines.

He reads *The Catcher in the Rye* three times to keep his mind occupied and makes a mix tape to celebrate his first time driving alone. For his first trip, Charlie drives to the cemetery to visit Aunt Helen, where he leaves a mix tape for her and tells her about his life. He promises her to only cry for important things from now on. Charlie's mental health continues to worsen, and he explains that he doesn't want to keep thinking the way he has been, wanting to "sleep for a thousand years. Or just not exist." He says he's feeling so bad that he might need to go to the doctor again.

While at a New Year's Eve party with his friends, Charlie takes LSD and then stands outside alone thinking about how everyone else has somebody except for him. He shovels the driveway at four in the morning, and his mind races through disconnected thoughts, memories, and hallucinations. Eventually, he thinks about how all the **books** he's read have been read by other people and the **music** he likes has also been heard by other people and that makes him feel connected. At the same time, because everyone else is with a partner, Charlie feels lonely and writes that he finally understands the end of the poem he read for Patrick, even though he "never wanted to."

PART 3

After writing his last letter, Charlie fell asleep outside in the snow where policemen found him and brought him to the hospital. Charlie has a history of wandering off when his mental health declines, and his family worries. The doctor suggests Charlie see a psychiatrist again. Charlie's family watches him carefully, his mom speaks softly to him and his dad gives him "love pats," which Charlie describes as "soft punches of encouragement administered to the knee, shoulder, and arm." Charlie's sister helps him fix his hair, which he apparently cut off in chunks during his foggy state, and Charlie decides never to take LSD again.

Charlie's grandfather's behavior demonstrates that while he may have wanted his children to be more financially successful than he was, he failed to provide basic protection against continued assault. Charlie's aunts' experiences of childhood abuse had deeply damaging effects that manifested in continued problems as adults. For many of the people in Charlie's life, key events in childhood largely impacted their adult lives. Knowing that his aunt died eight years ago, Charlie has been carrying the emotional weight of her death and his perceived guilt for a long time, and the reader can see how this childhood trauma is continuing to impact Charlie's development.



Given how often Charlie mentions her and that his first independent drive is to visit her grave, it's clear that Aunt Helen is an ever-present figure in Charlie's mind. After visiting her grave, his letter indicates stronger signs of serious depression and his desire to "not exist" suggests suicidal thoughts. The reader is prompted to remember that Michael supposedly committed suicide because, like Charlie, he didn't have anyone to talk to about his problems.



Experimenting more with drugs, the effects of the LSD seem to increase Charlie's frenzied mind rather than distract or calm it. Even at a party with all of his friends, he still feels isolated, though, for a brief moment, remembering the unifying powers of music and books gives him a sense of connection with people he's never met. By declaring that he finally understands the end of the poem, Charlie is saying that he identifies with the author of what might have been a suicide note, indicating to the reader just how rock-bottom Charlie feels.



Admitting to his history of blacking out and wandering away, Charlie gives the reader additional clues as to how severe his mental health issues have been in the past, and are starting to become again. Charlie's family's behavior around him now is similar to how his 8th grade teachers behaved: they're extra nice to him because he makes them nervous. Charlie attributes the blackout to the LSD, but his descriptions of his history of similar episodes suggests that the LSD only contributed to his already fragile mental state.



Several days later, Charlie is still experiencing some hallucinations, and he worries that they'll never stop. He tells this to Sam and Patrick, and Sam gives him a cigarette to calm his nerves and help him regain his focus. The cigarettes make him feel relieved and encouraged to "put his life back together." After class, Bill calls Charlie's essay on [The Catcher in the Rye](#) his best yet and praises Charlie's rapid development. He gives him another **book**, [On the Road](#), as a reward. Charlie starts smoking more regularly.

Charlie feels encouraged as he shares memories with his new psychiatrist, who has **music** magazines in his waiting room. In conversation with his friends, he ties something he read in one of the magazines to a quote from one of Bill's **books**, *This Side of Paradise*: "This is not a time for heroes because nobody will let that happen." As they sit talking at Big Boy, Charlie thinks about how other people likely have had the same conversations in the past and are having similar conversations around the world right now. Those ideas and his experience sitting and chatting with his friends make him feel more positive, and he writes that he had a great day.

Charlie also has a good conversation with Bill about [On the Road](#), during which Bill makes him feel "like a grown-up." He lets Charlie smoke in his office, although he urges Charlie to quit. Bill says he might leave teaching to write plays in New York, and he gives Charlie another **book** to read, *Naked Lunch*, which Charlie finds confusing. Though he tries to find ways to distract himself at home, his family members don't seem to want to talk to him and they send him away.

After a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* performance, Mary Elizabeth asks Charlie to the Sadie Hawkins dance. Craig didn't show up to play Rocky, so Charlie had agreed to step in. Although he was nervous at first, he writes that he had the best time he's ever had. He describes the scene where he and Sam (playing Janet) playfully touch each other, which was the best part, according to him. At the end of the show, Patrick shoved Charlie in front for his own bow, and everyone applauded him. Charlie feels simultaneously happy for the applause and glad his family wasn't there to see him, especially his dad. Later, Charlie tries to ask his sister for dating advice, but she is distracted and tells Charlie she needs to be alone.

Though perhaps not Sam and Patrick's intention, Charlie is learning to self-medicate with various substances, now including nicotine. Bill's praise also serves as a soothing balm to Charlie's mind and a boost to his self-esteem. While other students likely would have seen the extra work as punishments, Charlie understands that the extra reading and writing are bonuses for him and even views books as rewards.



Feeling like he has something to bond with his psychiatrist about helps Charlie feel more positive, and the things he reads both in music magazines and in books become relevant to his everyday conversations. Whereas he used to just listen to everyone else talk, Charlie's reading encourages him to participate in conversations and helps him to form opinions. The experiences Charlie has talking with his doctor and to his friends demonstrate how much better he feels when he actively partakes in discussions rather than passively taking in information.



Unlike other adults in Charlie's life, Bill doesn't condescend to Charlie, and this is perhaps why Charlie feels so comfortable sharing almost as much with Bill as he does in his letters. By allowing Charlie to smoke while they talk, Bill allows Charlie to make his own decisions while also expressing his care by urging Charlie to quit the unhealthy habit. While Charlie's teacher finds the extra time to talk to Charlie, his family members don't seem to notice that he needs someone to talk to.



The Rocky Horror Picture Show gave Charlie an opportunity to be vulnerable in front of an audience but with the comfort of having his friends around him. Like when Patrick toasted to Charlie at the party earlier in the book, Charlie realizes again how good it can feel to be seen. The performance also allowed him to play flirtatiously with Sam without the sexual tension because they both understood it was just part of the show. Charlie's relief that his dad isn't there to see him perform indicates that Charlie can't imagine being vulnerable in this way in front of his father and perhaps fears his father's reaction. Usually inclined to eagerly impart advice to Charlie, his sister's behavior implies that she's going through some personal problems of her own.



Sam gives Charlie some advice for dating Mary Elizabeth, but afterwards Charlie just thinks about how he wishes he could stop being in love with Sam. At the dance, Mary Elizabeth does all of the talking and tells Charlie that he's sensitive and she had a great time with him. Charlie is confused because all he did was let her talk. He told her he wasn't ready to kiss yet, and she says she understands. Charlie admits to the reader that he doesn't know if he will ever be ready. Charlie also sees his sister fight with her boyfriend and leave.

After the dance, Charlie finds his sister crying in the basement. He keeps asking her what's wrong, but she tells him to leave her alone. As he turns to go, she hugs him tightly, which Charlie finds weird because she has never voluntarily hugged him before. She eventually tells him that she's pregnant, but when she told her boyfriend at the dance, he insisted that it wasn't his baby and dumped her. She makes Charlie promise never to tell anyone, and he comments that she won't be able to hide it for long. She tells him that she won't "let it go that far." Charlie agrees to drive her to the clinic next Saturday.

Charlie waits for his sister at the clinic and starts thinking about how she'll look after she comes out. He feels overwhelmed, starts crying, and goes to wait in the car. As he sits chain-smoking and crying, his sister comes out and scolds him for smoking, which makes him laugh. He makes her comfortable in the back seat and he tells her he loves her, which she says back. When they return home, they tell their parents that they went to McDonald's and a movie. Charlie and his sister agree to keep her abortion a secret, and she tells him she really does love him.

After Charlie's parents find out he's dating Mary Elizabeth, Charlie's dad has a conversation with him about safe sex and consent. Afterwards Charlie remembers that when he was little, his father was afraid that he was gay because he liked to kiss another little boy. Charlie goes on another date with Mary Elizabeth to see a foreign film and then to a record store. At the store, she buys him a Billie Holiday record, and they go back to her house to listen to **music**. They drink brandy next to the fireplace, and Mary Elizabeth tells Charlie that one day she wants to marry a man and live in Vermont. After confirming that he likes her and thinks she's pretty, they end up kissing, and Mary Elizabeth lets Charlie remove her bra and touch her.

Just like she helps Charlie through other adolescent experiences, Sam provides an essential role in helping him navigate relationships, too. Mary Elizabeth and Charlie's very different perceptions of how the date went illustrate how relationships can quickly start off on the wrong foot if both people don't participate fully. However, Mary Elizabeth's understanding and kindness when Charlie isn't ready to kiss yet also provides a gentle, slow-paced entry into intimacy on Charlie's terms.



By clinging on to Charlie, Charlie's sister indicates that she desperately needs support and comfort at this moment. Like her parents before her, Charlie's sister experiences an unplanned pregnancy, but she makes a different choice than they did that allows her to preserve her youth rather than be burdened suddenly with parental responsibility. Though Charlie's sister defended her boyfriend to her parents for hitting her and continued betraying their trust in order to see him, Charlie's sister's boyfriend again demonstrates a lack of respect and care for her.



Charlie recognizes this moment as one of the life-changing experiences people have during adolescence, thinking it could even make his sister "look different." He laughs when his sister scolds him for smoking because it seems like a silly thing to focus on after having just gone through something as major as an abortion. Instead of making her feel ashamed or judged for her choices, Charlie shows his love for his sister by supporting her through a difficult experience, and this time, his efforts are successful, bringing them closer together.



Though they tend to shelter him in other ways—like shielding him from strong language—Charlie's parents are open with him when it comes to performing what they see as desirable masculine traits, such as having sex with women. Charlie's dad's homophobia becomes apparent yet again when Charlie explains his dad's earlier fears about Charlie's sexuality. Because she's gentler when it comes to intimacy, Mary Elizabeth creates a space in which Charlie can further explore sexuality.



Although Charlie is feeling annoyed in his relationship with Mary Elizabeth, Sam thinks they're great as a couple. He spends more time listening to Mary Elizabeth talk about the great things she has exposed him to like Billie Holiday records. When he invites Sam and Patrick to dinner with his family, Mary Elizabeth assumes she is invited, too, and his parents pay more attention to her than Sam and Patrick. He asks his sister for advice, who tells him that Mary Elizabeth has low self-esteem and feels that she is gaining a "superior position" by introducing Charlie to new things, which makes her feel better about herself. Charlie writes that he doesn't want to be just something for Mary Elizabeth to be in charge of. Both Charlie's sister and his psychiatrist tell Charlie to be honest with her, but he doesn't know how to do that while also being nice.

Charlie starts feeling more resentful of Mary Elizabeth, even returning a gift she gave him before immediately feeling bad and going back to rebuy it. He feels so bad that he tells her that he got her something nice while shopping with his sister, even though he hadn't, so he buys her a new copy of [To Kill a Mockingbird](#). She calls it "original," and after Charlie explains how special it is to him she thanks him and says it's very sweet. But then she goes on to tell him that she thinks the book is "overrated." Charlie says that he "put [his] feelings away somewhere after that." He tells his dad why he's avoiding Mary Elizabeth, and his dad tells him to "be a man." Charlie distracts himself by reading [Hamlet](#), Bill's latest assignment.

After *Rocky Horror Picture Show* on Good Friday, Charlie and his friends go to an apartment to play truth or dare, and Charlie chooses dare to avoid having to tell Mary Elizabeth the truth. Patrick dares Charlie to "kiss the prettiest girl in the room on the lips," and Charlie decides at that time to be honest, so he kisses Sam instead of Mary Elizabeth. This makes both Sam and Mary Elizabeth angry, and Sam says to Charlie, "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Charlie wants to apologize, but Patrick says they should leave and he drives Charlie home. On the way, Charlie tells Patrick everything that's been going on. Patrick tells him that "it's too bad" that Charlie isn't gay, and Charlie tells Patrick that if he were gay, he'd want to date Patrick. That night, Charlie lies in bed and thinks that something is "really wrong" with him, but he doesn't know what.

Previously, music has been shared between characters to forge stronger bonds and understanding, but it now functions more as a means for Mary Elizabeth to impose her tastes onto Charlie, and this pushes him away. Though Charlie is still fairly passive in all of his relationships, he notices the effects of his passivity the most with Mary Elizabeth and blames her for the situation rather than recognizing his role in it as well. As it becomes clearer to Charlie that he resents Mary Elizabeth, it also seems to get harder for him to be honest with her about his feelings. Because he cares so much about protecting other's feelings, he doesn't know how to balance honesty with kindness, and the relationship makes him feel even more out of control of his own life.



Returning Mary Elizabeth's gift was Charlie's impulsive way of trying to reject her efforts to exert control over him, though his sympathetic side ultimately gets the better of him. He tries to change the way they exchange their interests by trying to share a book that's special to him with her, but she thwarts his attempt by once again dominating the conversation. His dad's advice to "be a man" further illustrates his dad's idea of manliness being synonymous with assertiveness, and even aggression. Once again, Charlie turns to reading to avoid dealing with his present moment.



It's rather ironic that Charlie's dare prompted him to tell his carefully avoided truth, and the aftermath of his action demonstrates the serious consequences of choosing exactly the wrong way and moment to finally be honest. Instead of only temporarily hurting Mary Elizabeth by telling her he didn't want to date her, he upset both her and Sam and made his entire friend group uncomfortable. Patrick and Charlie's lighthearted exchange afterwards illustrates their mutual understanding and appreciation of each other. Charlie's thoughts as he lies in bed that night show that he knows he messed up, but suggest that something feels wrong with him on an even deeper level.



Nobody calls Charlie for the rest of Easter break, so he reads [Hamlet](#) and relates to the main character, thinking that it “was helpful to know that someone else has been through it.” Later, he calls Mary Elizabeth to apologize, but she tells him that it’s “too late.” Patrick advises Charlie to stay away for a while. He writes that his sister has a new boyfriend now, and his brother and his girlfriend broke up when she found out that he was cheating on her. They all seem too busy for him, and Charlie feels like he deserves the isolation. He wishes he didn’t have to take medication and see a psychiatrist that his dad can’t afford. He just wants someone to tell him what’s wrong with him and make it all go away. After a week of separation from his friends, Charlie begins smoking pot regularly.

In addition to providing an escape from his real-life situations, the books Charlie reads also show him that other young men have gone through the messy experiences of coming of age. Though he tries to mend things with his friends, his actions have caused a rift. While everyone else seems to be navigating other relationships, Charlie feels desperate to find a sense of connection again. Charlie’s brother candidly admitting that he cheated on his girlfriend suggests that he doesn’t worry about other people’s feelings nearly to the same extent that Charlie does. Charlie’s worries about being a financial burden to his parents compound his conflicted feelings about needing help with his mental health.



PART 4

When they start school again, Charlie looks at the people around them and wonders what their days are like. He thinks about how, if he had gone to another school, he wouldn’t know his friends, so he’s not sure why it all feels so personal. As his loneliness increases, Charlie spends time people-watching at the mall and sees a tough-looking older kid help a lost little boy. The older kid tells the little boy’s mom to watch him better next time. He watches the little boy and his mom eat French fries together and wonders about the lives of the other people passing by. The repetition of the mall activity unsettles him. Charlie says that the only person he’s spoken to in the past two weeks is Susan, whom he asked if she misses Michael. She just stared at him blankly, and her friends called Charlie a freak as he walked away.

By observing those around him, Charlie hopes to figure out what’s going on with himself and how to handle it. The tough-looking older kid helping a lost little boy illustrates that people are much more than their outward appearance, and perhaps that Charlie sees himself as a lost little boy in need of guidance. As Charlie watches the little boy with his mom, he seems to long for that care and easy connection with a parent. Looking for someone to bond with over his lingering grief, Charlie doesn’t realize that maybe Susan is coping in her own way, and Charlie’s blunt question catches her off guard. Charlie’s attempt to be vulnerable with her in that moment only results in making him feel even more like an outcast.



While buying another stash of weed, Charlie hears about Brad’s dad catching Brad with Patrick. Brad’s dad beat him so badly that he didn’t come to school for a week. Even though Charlie wants to call Patrick and make sure he’s ok, Charlie is worried that he won’t be welcomed back into the friend group yet. He goes to *Rocky Horror Picture Show* on Friday just to see Patrick play Frank ‘N Furter, but he sits unnoticed in the back and leaves before the show is over. He talks to himself on the way home, pretending his friends are with him. At home, he wants to join his sister and her new boyfriend while they watch a movie, but she says they want to be alone. Charlie starts reading his next **book** assignment from Bill to distract himself.

Brad’s fears about being open about his sexuality are shown to have been justified, given his father’s violent reaction. Yet again, another person in Charlie’s life is a victim of familial abuse. Again, Charlie is unsure of how to demonstrate his care in a tricky situation, so he chooses to do so passively. Charlie turns to reading once more to lose himself in someone else’s story.



When Brad returns to school on Monday, Charlie recognizes a change in him: he no longer has a bounce in his step, and he won't look people in the eye. Brad ignores Patrick for most of the week until Patrick finally confronts him during lunch. Brad yells, "Faggot!" at Patrick as he walks away, and the two boys get into a fistfight. Brad's football friends team up on Patrick, and Charlie steps in to protect him and ends the fight. He threatens to tell everyone about Brad if he ever hurts Patrick again. Patrick gets suspended for starting the fight, and both Brad and Charlie get a month's detention. In detention together, Brad thanks Charlie for stopping his friends. Sam is waiting for Charlie after he gets out of detention and tells him they can all be friends again.

On Friday night, Charlie goes to *Rocky Horror Picture Show* to reunite with his friends. He and Mary Elizabeth become friends again, and she tells him that she's now dating an older guy who she's happier with because he has his own opinions. Patrick quit playing Frank 'N Furter, saying he never wanted to do it again. He watches the show in the audience with Charlie and asks Charlie if he ever thinks that all friend groups are really the same, and the "the only real difference between us is what we wear and why we wear it". Patrick says he thinks "it's all bullshit." Charlie says it was "hard to see him mean it that much."

Charlie and Patrick begin spending a lot of time together, and Patrick smokes heavily and takes large amounts of caffeine pills. When Patrick picks up Charlie for a night out, he's listening to the mix tape that Charlie made for him, and says he's been listening to it all night. Charlie notices that Patrick has a "sick smile" on his face that's "glazey" and "numb." Patrick tells Charlie that he feels free and that things will be different when he goes to college. They spend the night drinking in a park exchanging stories. When Patrick drops off Charlie at home, he thanks him for defending him in the cafeteria and then kisses him. Patrick apologizes but Charlie tells him that it's okay and lets Patrick kiss him because "that's what friends are for."

Perhaps because he wants to protect himself by pushing Patrick away, Brad publicly hurls a cruel, homophobic slur at Patrick. Brad, taking after his father, uses violence to deal with his problems. Once again, Charlie uses his fighting skills to solve a conflict, though this time to protect a friend. Despite his earlier behavior, Brad's gratitude to Charlie indicates that he still cares about Patrick. While Charlie is punished by the school this time for fighting, he is rewarded for saving Patrick by regaining acceptance into the friend group.



Mary Elizabeth's comments annoy Charlie, but also demonstrate that maybe their relationship could have gone much differently if Charlie had asserted himself and participated more. Patrick's decision to quit playing Frank 'N Furter suggest that the joy in being more open about his sexual orientation—as the character allows him to do—is diminished as a result of the conflict with Brad. Clearly having lost some of his faith in people, Patrick declares that everyone is really the same, and any differences are just superficial.



Always a giver and supporter in relationships, Charlie passively spends time with his friend, but isn't honest with Patrick about his concerns. Patrick's choice to listen to the tape from Charlie shows that he feels the support and care Charlie put into the tape, and, as Charlie had hoped, the tape is helping Patrick get through this "bad time." Charlie's reasoning for letting Patrick kiss him once again illustrates his misunderstanding of how true friendship works. He thinks passively putting others' needs before his demonstrates friendship more than simply being honest would.



Spending nearly every night with Patrick, Charlie explains how hard it is to see his friend hurt so much. Since he can't make Patrick stop hurting, Charlie just follows him around as Patrick shows Charlie "his world." One night, Patrick takes Charlie to the park where men go to hook up with each other. He explains the "rules" to Charlie before going off with another boy. An older man asks Charlie for a cigarette and sits down next to him. Charlie recognizes him as the local TV sports anchor, and the man talks to him about sports, even mentioning Charlie's older brother. Charlie asks the man what it's like to be on TV, and the man gets up and leaves. Patrick takes Charlie to various places throughout town like karaoke bars, dance clubs, and a bathroom at a gym, and he tells Charlie that it's difficult to always be safe.

Charlie explains that Patrick always begins their nights excited and ends them looking sad. At one point, they see Brad picking up another guy in the park, but Patrick says nothing. He throws a wine bottle out the window as he drives Charlie home. When he drops off Charlie, Patrick doesn't try to kiss him again like he had every other night, but instead, just thanks him for being his friend.

During the last weeks of school, Charlie writes about everyone else's upcoming plans like graduation and prom. He says that Bill is feeling sentimental about finishing his first year of teaching and he decided not to move to New York. He gives Charlie a list of movies to watch and write about and the last extra **book** of the year, *The Fountainhead*. He tells Charlie to be a "filter" and not a "sponge" when reading this book. Charlie works hard to maintain his straight A's and almost gets a B in math, but his teacher tells him to stop asking "why?" and just follow formulas. He remembers feeling afraid of starting high school, but he feels so good at this moment that his earlier fear seems funny. He mentions that Patrick has stopped drinking ever since he saw Brad in the park with other men.

Charlie enjoys *The Fountainhead* and admires the author for wanting to be a great writer even though she came to America barely speaking English. He feels inspired to try to write a story, but he only gets one sentence written. Because everyone else is busy with end-of-the-year plans, Charlie says he has a lot of time for writing and reading. He feels excited for his friends but wishes those things were happening to him, too. Thinking about his future graduation, Charlie hopes to be valedictorian and wonders if Bill would help him write that speech.

While he continues passively supporting Patrick, Charlie learns a lot about the secretive gay community. He doesn't seem to realize it when an older man is clearly trying to pick him up, however. Unexpectedly hearing his brother's name mentioned during this experience perhaps makes Charlie forget where he is and what's happening. Because of his time with Patrick, Charlie becomes more aware of and sympathetic to the struggles of gay men, many of whom feel they have to conduct their relationships in the shadows. The secretive pick-up culture contributes to added health and safety risks, as Patrick points out.



Something about seeing Brad with someone else at the park triggers a change in Patrick and he tosses the alcohol away almost as if to say that he doesn't need it anymore. Because he doesn't kiss Charlie anymore, perhaps he also realizes that the kisses weren't helping either.



Instead of making his own end-of-the-year plans, Charlie is fixated on everyone else's lives. Bill's decision to continue teaching instead of moving to New York suggests that he is feeling fulfilled in his current work. He incorporates films into their extra assignments as a way of exposing Charlie to critically thinking about stories presented through different media. Though he gives Charlie some preliminary guidance before he reads the books, Bill largely allows Charlie to experience and think through the stories on his own.



For the first time, Charlie mentions background information on the author of the book Bill gives him, suggesting that he's developing a stronger interest in the writers behind the stories and identifying with them. He attempts to write the beginning of a book and can't figure out where to go with it, not realizing that he's been writing his story all along in his letters. Instead of living in his present moment, Charlie daydreams about moments he thinks will make him happy three years from now. However, it's a positive development that Charlie feels excited about the future.



All of his friends have decided on which colleges they will attend in the fall: Patrick is going to University of Washington, Sam is going to Penn State, Charlie's sister is going to Sarah Lawrence, and Mary Elizabeth is going to Berkeley. Seeing his friends excited about their colleges makes Charlie think of a quote he read in [The Fountainhead](#) about a man telling his friend that he would die for him but he won't live for him. Charlie interprets this line as every person having to live for themselves and choose to share their lives with others. Charlie shares all of this information with his psychiatrist, but says the psychiatrist just wants to talk about his childhood memories and says it's important.

At the seniors' last day of school, Charlie feels happy for everyone he loves because they are happy. His sister even allows him to hug her in the hall. After school, Charlie, Sam, and Patrick go to Big Boy and talk "about the things that seemed important at the time." Suddenly, Patrick starts running up the hill toward the sunset and then Sam and Charlie follow. Charlie writes that "everything was as good as it could be." At the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* performance that night, Patrick decides to play Frank 'N Furter one last time, and Charlie thinks it's his best performance ever. Charlie's sister and her new boyfriend come to the show, and Charlie teaches them how to dance the *Time Warp*. Afterwards, Charlie's sister hugs him again, and he leaves with his friends to go to a party.

Charlie deejays at the party, and everyone complements his skills with playing the right **music** at the right moment. He considers deejaying to make money for college, though his brother told him that if he plays professional football, he'd pay for Charlie's college. On prom night, Charlie feels extremely lonely without his friends at school, although his mom made him his favorite sandwich to bring for lunch knowing he'd feel sad without them. Charlie hopes that everyone enjoys their prom and that no one gets into a car accident. Charlie gets home from school the next day to find that his friends and sister are all still asleep from the late night. At school, Bill invites Charlie to spend a day with him and his girlfriend at his house.

Though he genuinely feels happy for his friends and their accomplishments for getting into their desired colleges, he also recognizes those accomplishments mean a new chapter in their lives—one he doesn't get to experience along with them. The literature he reads helps him start to understand what Bill meant when telling Charlie to participate: that one can love and support their friends, but first they must live for themselves. Though Charlie feels that these realizations are significant, his psychiatrist's focus on his childhood memories suggests to the reader that the psychiatrist suspects there's something even more important there that Charlie doesn't realize yet.



Celebrating other's joy makes Charlie happy, too. The three of them running off after the sunset represents both the freedom and excitement they feel, but the sunset also represents that something is coming to an end. For the moment, that feels good to Charlie. Patrick's decision to play Frank 'N Furter one last time implies that he's feeling more like his old self, but also ready to move on to new things after this last performance. The growing bond between Charlie and his sister is implied with her attendance at the performance, as Charlie invites her into that community, and it gives them another experience to share.



Charlie's ability to choose just the right music is recognized again, making him feel validated and in tune with the people around him. Charlie's day at school without his friends provides just a small example of what the next three years could be like once they go away to college. Though it doesn't help much, his mom's gesture of kindness with the sandwich shows the small ways in which she tries to show him affection. While Charlie worries about how he'll get through the days without his friends, Bill's invitation offers Charlie an essential connection with someone who will still be around.



After prom, Sam and Craig broke up. Charlie explains how nice everyone looked and how much fun they had there despite the bad **music**. Charlie's sister and Patrick both told him that the school-organized after party was great and had a deejay playing good music, and people snuck in alcohol. Craig had rented a hotel suite for the group and was mad because everyone else wanted to go to the after party, so only he and Sam went to the suite. The day after the prom, Mary Elizabeth's new boyfriend, Peter, who is friends with Craig, demanded that Craig tell Sam he had been cheating on her since the beginning of their relationship.

After Craig tells Sam, she leaves crying. Peter and Craig start yelling at each other, and Patrick and Charlie prevent them from getting into a fight. While they drive Peter home, he tells them the full account of Craig's cheating, but he isn't sure how much Craig told Sam. They hope, for her sake, that Craig gave her a "soft" version, and they agree not to tell her the whole truth unless they need to. Charlie realizes that he doesn't feel happy about Sam and Craig breaking up, but instead he feels sad that she was hurt. That's when he realizes that he really loves her.

During his lunch at Bill's house with Bill and his girlfriend, Charlie describes their house as comfortable and filled with **books**. They listen to jazz **music** throughout lunch. After chatting for a while, Bill thanks Charlie for the wonderful experience he had teaching him and asks Charlie if he knows how smart he is. Charlie shakes his head no, and Bill tells him that he is one of the most gifted people he knows and that he wants to make sure Charlie knows he's very special. Bill worries that no one else has ever told him that. Bill also tells Charlie that he considers Charlie to be a friend. This makes Charlie cry, and he tells Bill that he's the best teacher he's ever had.

Charlie hugs both Bill and his girlfriend before he leaves their house, and on the way home he thinks about how the last person who said he was "special" was Aunt Helen. He admits that he's grateful to have been called that again and thinks everyone "is special in their own way." He still hasn't heard from his friends since the dramatic breakup, so he spends the evening buying graduation presents for them.

Not getting to experience it for himself, Charlie has to hear about all the fun second-hand. According to the story, Craig seems to have made a decision for the group and then resented them for not appreciating that decision, and furthermore, he prevents Sam from enjoying her after-prom experience with her friends. The discovery of Craig's cheating confirmed Charlie's earlier suspicions that he didn't appreciate Sam. In this moment, there's a strong parallel between Craig and Charlie's brother, both of whom cheated on their girlfriends, which suggests that they feel entitled to relationships with women without feeling any sense of duty to be respectful or honest with them.



Though the conflict here stems primarily from dishonesty, both Charlie and Patrick decide that the kinder option for Sam in this situation is partial honesty and protection from the whole truth. Their choice demonstrates that in some circumstances the full truth can only do more damage. In addition to all the other secrets he carries, this is yet another secret that Charlie holds for the people he loves. Charlie's belief that he must really love Sam because her happiness is more important than his contradicts his earlier realization about living first for himself before sharing his life with others. He seems to struggle to apply his knew knowledge to his relationships.



Bill's house mirrors the atmosphere that Bill himself creates—warm, gentle, and inviting. As perhaps the most important male authority figure in Charlie's life, Bill sets a positive example for Charlie, showing that men can also be sensitive, smart, and openly appreciative of one another. Clearly Bill knows that Charlie doesn't receive enough validation, and his praise of Charlie is perhaps the most significant interaction he's had with an adult since his aunt died.



Again, Bill and his girlfriend embody warmth and are more affectionate with Charlie than his own family. Aside from his friends, Bill is the first person in a long time to make Charlie feel "seen," and replaces his Aunt Helen as his primary adult influence. Charlie's decision to go shopping for his friends illustrates his efforts to feel connected to them even when they're apart.



On his last day of school, Charlie rides the bus home and says that he normally sits toward the middle of the bus because he doesn't know whether he belongs to the “nerds” in the front or the “squids” in the back. On this day, he sits in the front to see the other kids and thinks about how different everyone looks. That evening, Charlie's brother comes home for his sister's graduation. During dinner, Charlie mentions that the TV sports anchor complimented his brother and then suddenly remembers that the anchor was trying to pick him up at a secret gay park. Luckily, his parents are satisfied when he just tells them that he met the man at the park. Though Charlie still hasn't heard from his friends, he looks forward to seeing them the next day.

The next morning, Charlie's family has a brunch to celebrate his sister's graduation. Charlie's grandfather immediately begins making racist comments as soon as they arrive at the school, and Charlie's brother manages to quiet him by threatening to take him back to the nursing home and making him miss his sister's speech. As Charlie's sister gives her speech, Charlie and his brother exchange a smile and hold their crying mom's hands. Charlie watches his sister and his friends receive their diplomas, and says it was a “great day.” After the graduation, Charlie's grandfather is the first to hug Charlie's sister, and Charlie says his dad hugged her the longest.

At her graduation party, Charlie's sister opens her gifts. Her older brother promised to take her shopping for her college supplies, and Charlie gives her a hand-carved stone house to “make her feel like she's at home” always. Sam calls Charlie during the party and invites him over, but he can't leave until his relatives do. Once they finally leave, Charlie's father thanks him for staying and gives him twenty dollars and his car keys. On his way to the dance club, Charlie drives through the **tunnel** thinking about how “glorious” it is. He describes it as entering a calm dream before making a grand entrance into the city.

At the dance club, Charlie dances with Sam, and when a slow song comes on they hold each other a little closer, and Charlie wishes the clock would stop. Afterwards, he and his friends go to Peter's apartment, and Charlie gives all of his friends graduation gifts, the most special of which are for Sam and Patrick. To them he gives his copies of the **books** that Bill assigned throughout the year with a note written on his typewriter telling them both that they are his two favorite people. He tells all of his friends that he will miss them, and then starts crying. Sam takes him to the kitchen and tells him that she's really scared to be alone at college. They agree that when things get to be “too much” for them, they will call each other and write letters.

Even after a full year of school, Charlie still doesn't know where he belongs, especially since his friends are leaving. The bus ride prompts him to confront this lack of belonging in a small way. He notices the changes in other people, but—perhaps because he feels somewhat in the same place he was at the beginning of the year—Charlie doesn't consider how different he looks. Charlie's dilemma in having to tell a partial truth about meeting the TV anchor further demonstrates that his experiences with Patrick and his relationship with his brother are two aspects of his life that likely can never overlap.



The dynamic between Charlie's grandfather and brother suggests that the two traditionally masculine men understand each other in a way that no one else understands them. Both men manage surprising displays of compassion when they feel proud of their family members.



The gifts that Charlie's brother and Charlie give to their sister further illustrate how vastly different their characters are. Both care about their sister, but Charlie's brother, like his father, shows care through financial support while Charlie demonstrates his affection with an extremely thoughtful, creative, and personal present. While he's alone in the tunnel this time, Charlie recognizes how good the passage feels, and feels excited for the transition that the tunnel represents, suggesting perhaps he's starting to embrace his adolescence more and more.



Charlie and Sam's romantic dance implies that there are still feelings between them—definitely on Charlie's end and maybe for Sam, too. Again, Charlie gives stories to communicate his love for others, this time all of his favorite books from Bill. Charlie is sharing these important parts of his growth and self-discovery with his two favorite people. Sam's confession that she is also scared of being alone helps Charlie recognize that those feelings aren't abnormal, and she demonstrates for him how to ask for help and support when it's needed.



The next day at school without his friends, Charlie feels lonely. One kid calls him “teacher’s pet” after Bill’s class, but Charlie says that didn’t bother him because he thinks the kid “missed the point somewhere.” He tries to make friends with the person with the locker next to his but fails. Feeling glad the school year is over, Charlie looks forward to spending time with his friends before they leave. He also says he earned straight A’s for the entire year, and his mom hangs his report card on their refrigerator.

During a busy week of preparations and farewell lunches, Sam has lunch with Craig to get closure, and Charlie explains that she feels sad, but a “hopeful kind of sad.” At the last party with his friends before they leave for the summer, they all sit together and reminisce about the year. Eventually it’s just Sam, Patrick, and Charlie, and Charlie remembers a time when he was walking in between the two of them and feeling that he belonged for the first time. Patrick decides to go to bed and leaves Sam and Charlie alone. Sam asks Charlie to stay with her as she finishes packing.

As she packs, Sam turns to Charlie and asks why he didn’t ask her out after she broke up with Craig. He explains to her that her feeling happy was more important to him than him getting to think about her romantically. She explains to Charlie that he can’t just put other people’s lives before his. She says that doing nothing doesn’t count as love, and he needs to show it with actions. Sam also explains that letting Patrick kiss him wasn’t being his friend because it wasn’t being honest with him. Charlie is uncomfortable, but Sam continues, telling him that she told him not to think of her romantically before because she doesn’t want to be someone’s crush, since that means the person only likes the idea of her rather than the real her.

Crying a little, Sam explains that she blamed Craig for holding her back, but she realizes now that she wasn’t being honest by not doing the things she wanted. She decides to get to know herself better and not let anyone else make her feel small again. When she asks Charlie where he is and what he wants to do, he kisses her, and she returns the kiss. Gradually, they undress while kissing. But, when Sam slides her hand under his pants to touch him, Charlie stops her. He explains that it felt good and he didn’t know what was wrong, but he starts feeling terrible and overwhelmed. Unable to drive home, he falls asleep on her couch. Just before he drifts off, Charlie says, “I can’t do that anymore. I’m sorry,” but he wasn’t talking to Sam.

While the kid’s insult may have bothered Charlie more at the beginning of the year, his reaction to it now suggests that he’s acquired a little more confidence over the year. Charlie’s rejection from his locker neighbor imply that his quest to make new friends likely won’t be easy, but spending time with his current friends distracts him from that upcoming struggle. In a rare moment of validation, Charlie has his academic efforts recognized.



Though she was in an unhealthy relationship with Craig, Sam demonstrates a healthy way of closing that chapter of her life and allowing herself to move on to the next thing. As she, Charlie, and their friends sit and reminisce, they form a sort of collective memory. The memories between Patrick, Sam, and Charlie are particularly significant for Charlie because they were the beginning of relationships that have been life-changing for him. Patrick’s leaving suggests that he understands that Charlie and Sam want to be alone.



After finally articulating for someone his flawed understanding of how relationships work, Sam explains to him that participating in relationships requires honesty and action. This is perhaps the first time that someone else has called out Charlie’s faulty view of relationships and taken the time to help him address it. In explaining these things to Charlie, Sam is demonstrating exactly the kind of honesty she’s talking about. Even though it makes Charlie uncomfortable, she is honest with him because she cares about him.



In this moment, Sam models for Charlie again how to productively recognize a bad relationship and move on from it. She embraces the notion of having a good relationship with oneself before trying to have good relationships with others. The honesty and vulnerability she creates opens up the opportunity for Charlie to do the same. Charlie’s severely negative reaction to an act of consensual intimacy suggests that someone touching his penis has triggered a repressed memory. As he drifts off, he seems to regress into that memory, talking to whomever it was who last touched him that way.



That night Charlie has a dream that he is watching TV with his siblings and Aunt Helen, and Aunt Helen touches him the way Sam did. He wakes up to find Sam and Patrick standing over him looking worried. After they eat breakfast with Sam and Patrick's parents, the rest of their friends come over to say goodbye before Sam leaves. As Sam hugs Charlie, she tells him that it's okay that he wasn't ready last night and that she would miss him. Charlie tells her that she's his best friend. After she drives away, Mary Elizabeth invites Charlie to Big Boy with her and their friends, but Charlie feels bad and decides he needs to go home.

As he drives, Charlie hears songs that aren't playing and sees TV shows that aren't on. He says he's writing all of this down to keep from "breaking apart" because he can't talk to anyone else about it. He thinks he could maybe have talked to his Aunt Helen about it, but now he's questioning that because he's beginning to think what he dreamed about Aunt Helen is true. Feeling like his thoughts are crashing in, Charlie keeps thinking about how the lost little boy at the mall will grow up and "hit [his] sister." He says he has to stop writing, but first, Charlie thanks the anonymous reader for being someone who listens, understands, and doesn't mind getting letters from a kid. He tells them that they mean a lot to him, but he doesn't want to waste their time anymore.

Charlie's dream provides the first clear indication that his aunt may have sexually abused him. Despite Sam's kindness and understanding, their experience the night before seems to have brought something traumatic to the surface for Charlie. He draws a parallel between Sam and Aunt Helen when he tells Sam that she's his best friend, something he previously said about Aunt Helen. Instead of seeking comfort from the rest of his friends after Sam leaves, something about this experience is making him seek isolation.



This time without the help of LSD, Charlie seems to be sinking into a blackout. His letter writing is an attempt to regain control over the situation, as something about ordering the words on the page seems to help him hold it together. But now that he is confronting the memory that his favorite person molested him, his previous coping mechanisms are ineffective. As he sinks further into crisis, his mind plays through the cycles of abuse he's witnessed as represented by the little boy at the mall who, like many men, could grow up to be another abuser. Even in the midst of crisis, Charlie takes the time to express gratitude to the reader, but his last comment about wasting their time creates tension and suspense. The reader doesn't know what Charlie will do and is reminded of what happened when Michael no longer felt like he could talk to someone.



EPILOGUE

Charlie spends two months in the hospital after his family finds him naked, unresponsive, and looking at a blank television. He didn't speak to anyone for a week. When he finally starts talking again, he answers a new doctor's questions. Charlie says he doesn't want to talk about the questions and his answers, but he explains that with this doctor's help, he realizes that Aunt Helen molested him as a child every Saturday while they watched TV. He explains that the hardest thing for him was being in the room when the doctor told his parents that Aunt Helen molested him. His mother sobs, and his father looks extremely angry because they didn't know. Charlie says that he likes his doctor, and she has helped him work through the stages of this experience.

Charlie's triggering experience seems to have resulted in an almost catatonic state because his mind couldn't handle the resurgence of his traumatic memories. Where he has been rather forthcoming previously, now Charlie only wants to give the reader the high-level summary of his recent experiences, perhaps because he's still working through extremely tough things. Knowing that Aunt Helen turned out to be both Charlie's favorite person who showed him open affection and his abuser helps the reader to understand why Charlie might have been inclined to forgive other abusers: his own experiences of abuse were tangled up and confused with affection.



Charlie's family and friends visit him regularly, and his older brother even reads Charlie's essay on [Walden](#) and tells him how much he liked it. His brother's praise makes Charlie feel good. Charlie also talks about how Patrick treats him the same in the hospital and cracks jokes to make him feel better. Patrick and Sam promise to drive Charlie through the **tunnel** once he's released. Bill and his girlfriend visit Charlie and invite him to their wedding, and Charlie writes that it's exciting to have things to look forward to. When his siblings visit him, they talk about Aunt Helen, and Charlie realizes there's no point in blaming her for what she did to him because he would then have to blame the people who abused her, and so on. He writes that thinking that way "wasn't going anywhere" and "wasn't the point."

In the hospital, Charlie decides that he isn't the way he is because of what happened with Aunt Helen. He knows what happened is important, and he should remember it, but people are who they are for a lot of reasons, as his doctor tells him. Charlie says that he can choose where to go from there, to do things, and feel good about them. Thinking about the future, Charlie decides that if he has children, he'll never tell them that someone has it worse because it doesn't change the fact that the kids are upset.

When Charlie gets released from the hospital he goes to McDonald's with his mom and they eat french fries together. Later, Sam and Patrick pick him up and drive Charlie through **the tunnel**. Patrick turns up the radio, and Charlie stands in the back of the truck with the wind in his face. He thinks about how he still loves his Aunt Helen for buying him presents, and how much he wants the people around him to be happy. He starts crying because he's aware that he's "really there," and that feeling is enough to make him feel "infinite." Charlie writes that this will be his last letter because the new school year is starting, and he plans to be too busy with "participating" to write letters anymore. He ends by asking the reader to believe that things are good with him and promises to believe the same about the reader.

Though it was extremely hard, having his family finally know about his experience of abuse creates a new understanding and openness between them. Patrick once again demonstrates his knack for making people feel accepted by not being careful or nervous around Charlie. Sam and Patrick's promise to drive Charlie through the tunnel represents their commitment to helping him enjoy and experience his adolescence and all the transformations it involves. One major transformation that already occurred is Charlie's acceptance of his experience and releasing of any anger or resentment he feels about it. Following Sam's example, Charlie realizes that the most productive thing he can do is to move on.



By deciding that his past experiences don't define him, Charlie takes further control over his identity and his life. He recognizes the significance of his experiences and uses them to evaluate his future choices, but doesn't allow them to prevent him from living. He also seems to have learned that while other people might have even worse problems, other's experiences don't invalidate his.



In a direct comparison to the lost little boy at the mall, Charlie also returns from feeling lost and overwhelmed to bonding with his mom as they share french fries. As Charlie later rides through the tunnel standing in the back of Sam's truck, he relishes the freedom he feels living in the present moment. He doesn't care about reaching downtown, but instead sees the tunnel as a destination itself—something, like adolescence, that he can enjoy along with his peers. In this moment, the reader can see Charlie's largest transformation yet, which is his joy in the present and hope for the future.





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