A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVE EGGERS

Dave Eggers grew up outside Chicago before attending the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. When he was twenty-one, his parents both died of cancer five weeks apart. Eggers subsequently took responsibility for his seven-year-old brother Toph, moving to Berkeley, California, where he supported himself doing freelance graphic design. After a number of years writing on a freelance basis and editing *Might* magazine, Eggers published *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* in 2000, which became a bestseller. Eggers has written a number of novels since then, which have been increasingly focused on social issues in the United States. He is also the founder of the independent publishing house and literary magazine *McSweeney's*, as well as the nonprofit tutoring and writing center 826 Valencia. He lives in California with his wife, Vendela Vida, and children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius takes place in the 1990s, when a number of significant historical events and changes came to fruition. For instance, the First Iraq War took place between 1990 and 1991; in 1992, the Los Angeles Riots (or the Rodney King Riots) took hold of the city after four violent police officers were acquitted; and the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s continued to claim thousands of lives. Despite all this turmoil, though, not everyone was politically involved. Eggers, for one, only fleetingly mentions current events—his most frequent engagement with such concerns occurs when he worries in passing about the possibility of contracting AIDS. Still, though, his memoir is set against a backdrop of change, and the startup mentality he adopts when creating *Might* magazine is indicative of the simultaneously entrepreneurial and anti-establishment spirit that was common in San Francisco in the 1990s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius was published at the tail end of what became known as the "memoir boom" of the 1990s. As such, it is difficult to discuss its literary merits without referring to other '90s-era memoirs like, for example, Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, which was published in 1993. *Girl, Interrupted* was so successful that it was made into a feature-length film in 1999, ultimately proving that the memoir as a genre was a commercially viable and popular form. Another well-known work from around this time is the Irish author Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, a book that relies upon anecdotes from the author's life. While writing *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers is painfully aware of the fact that this genre has recently become trendy—he even makes a possible reference to Frank McCourt in the Acknowledgements section, saying, "Maybe writing about actual events in the first person, if not from Ireland and before you turned seventy, was *Bad*." Despite what he says about the genre, though, there's no denying that he has contributed significantly to the surge of memoirs at the turn of the century.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius
- **When Published:** 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Lake Forest, Illinois and the Bay Area in California
- **Climax:** Eggers is most interested in analyzing his life and the lives of the people around him, so his memoir doesn't follow a linear plot. As such, there is no discernible climax, though one of the book's defining moments comes when his mother dies.
- **Antagonist:** Death
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

McSweeney's. When Eggers was young, his mother—whose maiden name was McSweeney—used to receive confusing letters from a mysterious man named Timothy McSweeney, who claimed to be her relative. Later, Eggers named his literary journal *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* as a way of honoring both his mother and this stranger, who he eventually learned suffered from mental illness.

Visual Art. In addition to his work as a writer, Dave Eggers also occasionally produces visual artwork, and has had several solo gallery shows. In 2017 he released *Ungrateful Mammals*, a book of drawings of animals paired with dramatic phrases.

PLOT SUMMARY

Eggers is twenty-one and living in Lake Forrest, Illinois as his mother dies of stomach cancer. After multiple operations, she has reached a critical stage and decided that she never wants to return to the hospital. As she lies on the couch watching TV, Eggers tries with his sister Beth to cater to her needs while also

taking care of his little brother, Toph, who is only seven years old. Toph does what he can to stay out of the way, spending most of his time in the basement playing videogames. Apparently, Eggers's father died just several weeks ago. He too had cancer, but his illness emerged much more suddenly and progressed rapidly, ultimately striking him down one morning without warning.

The oncologist treating Eggers's mother has informed the family that under no circumstances can she start bleeding. Because her white blood cell count is low, even a minor cut could be fatal. As Eggers sits and watches TV with her on New Year's Eve, his mother gets a nosebleed that they're unable to stop. Pinching her nose, he tries not to worry about the fact that this situation could escalate quickly. Worse, he and Beth have promised they won't take her back to the hospital. Before long, though, it becomes clear that her nosebleed won't stop, and Eggers and Beth finally persuade her to let them bring her in. Together, the family goes to the emergency room, where Eggers's mother spends the night before going into intensive care for a day. After this, she rests in a large room that Beth calls "the death room." As she sleeps, Beth and Eggers lie on an adjacent bed with Toph. During this time, Eggers thinks about his father's funeral, remembering what it felt like to listen to the minister talk and how he snuck away later that night to have sex with his girlfriend, Kirsten. Back in the present, Eggers and Beth remember that the next day is their mother's birthday.

Eggers's mother is released from the hospital. At home, Eggers and Beth hire full-time care, but she still deteriorates quickly. Eventually, anything she says seems like it could be the last sentence she'll ever speak. After many visitors and phone calls, she passes away under heavy sedation. Soon after, Eggers and Beth sell the house and most of their furniture and move to Berkeley, California, where Beth begins law school and they all sublet a house for the summer in the hills with a view of the San Francisco Bay.

In California, Eggers takes primary responsibility for Toph, though Beth helps. The two brothers form a close bond, and Eggers makes it his goal to create a life of happiness and possibility for Toph. A combination of a brother and a guardian, he drives fast and blasts music, wanting Toph to know that they are "collecting on" what they're "owed." "We are owed, goddamnit," he says, singing at the top of his lungs and making sure Toph understands that "in this world, in [their] new world, there will be rocking." For the entire summer, Eggers and Toph focus on having fun. Living on the money they made from selling the family home—plus the government assistance Toph receives—they go to the beach every day and throw the Frisbee, catching it in elaborate ways that attract crowds.

By summer's end, reality crashes down on Eggers. Because they have to move out of their sublet, he realizes how hard it is to find affordable housing in an area close to the school Toph will be attending. Worse, no one wants to rent property to them, since they don't fit into the stereotype of financially stable or responsible tenants. Desperate, Eggers eventually offers to pay a year's worth of rent upfront to live in a small single-story house in a sleepy Berkeley neighborhood, and the landlord accepts.

During this period, Eggers tries to strike a balance between his role as Toph's guardian and his life as a young bachelor. He and Toph live together like roommates, their home messy and disorganized, their eating habits strange and unbalanced. Nonetheless, Eggers is a good caretaker. When he goes to Toph's school for an open house, though, he finds himself feeling uncomfortable because all of the parents cast odd glances at him, trying to determine his relationship to Toph.

Not only does Eggers's youth make him somewhat of an outcast at school functions, but his role as a guardian also impedes upon his social life. He has trouble finding the time to get away from the house, and comes to savor his nights out with friends, who don't understand what it's like to have other responsibilities.

Around this time, Eggers works as a temp while also doing freelance design work. Eventually, he and his friend Moodie start *Might*, a magazine created "by and for" "twentysomethings." The publication is snarky, parodying commercial magazines and popular culture. Using some of his inheritance, Eggers secures an office space for *Might*, and the burgeoning company puts out calls for interns and writers. They're surprised to find that they receive multiple responses, as young people in San Francisco (and beyond) are excited about working for a publication with an anti-establishment ethos.

While Eggers and Moodie are launching *Might*, the MTV series *The Real World* comes to San Francisco and puts out a casting call. Although *Might* publishes a piece making fun of the show, Eggers is attracted to the idea of joining the cast, so he mails in an audition tape and—to his surprise—is invited to come for an interview. When he arrives, he sits down with a producer named Laura, who asks him increasingly pointed personal questions. Eggers represents their conversation as a transcript, but it soon becomes clear that his account has strayed from reality. "*This isn't really a transcript of the interview, is it?*" Laura asks at one point, breaking out of character and confirming that Eggers is using this interview format as "a catchall for a bunch of anecdotes that would be too awkward to force together otherwise." Eggers then continues explaining what it was like growing up in Lake Forest, talking about everything from his parents' deaths to the racial and socioeconomic demographics of his hometown. Several days later, he learns that he hasn't been cast on *The Real World* because, although his story is sad, Laura and her team had already heard multiple stories like it, and they can only have one sad suburban-raised white man on the show.

Despite this rejection, Eggers eventually makes it onto an episode of *The Real World* because Judd—the person who was chosen in place of him—is an artist who submits his drawings to *Might*. Thinking they'll get good publicity if they appear on the show (which is ostensibly the reason Eggers wanted to go on in the first place), they invite Judd to the offices and talk idealistically in front of the cameras, ultimately producing an eight-second clip that airs nationally.

Might eventually moves to a larger office space paid for by the people who hire Eggers and Moodie to do freelance design work. Despite this fancier setting, the magazine still isn't making money, and Eggers begins to feel disheartened. He never wanted a job, he notes, and *Might* is beginning to feel like more of a chore than a labor of love. Plus, his duties as Toph's guardian continue, making it hard for him to juggle the life of an ambitious magazine editor. He and Toph soon move out of their current house and into the city, but this does little to change Eggers's sinking feeling about his career. What's more, his personal life is rather chaotic, and he's constantly reminded of death and misfortune. One reason for this is that his childhood friend John, who also now lives in San Francisco, is severely depressed and often contemplates suicide. One night, John says he's going to purposefully overdose on pills, so Eggers rushes over and calls the police, who then call the paramedics, who take him to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. All the while, Eggers stands by, waiting in the hospital lobby and thinking about how he'll write about this experience and if it's fair for him to tell someone else's intimate story.

In addition to John's suicide attempt, Eggers is forced to confront the idea of disaster when he begins to pass a kidney stone while at work. When people finally notice him writhing on the floor, his friend Shalini takes him to the hospital. Later, Shalini endures a head injury after falling off a collapsed deck, and Eggers has the opportunity to visit *her* in the hospital, coming frequently to check on her as she remains in a coma for a long time. Even though she eventually wakes up, her short-term memory never recovers.

All of these near-death experiences force Eggers to confront his past, and he begins to feel guilty about the fact that he and Beth never tracked down their parents' **ashes**. When he returns to Lake Forest for a wedding, he decides to revisit places and people from his past, ultimately making his way to the funeral home where his parents' services were held. When he gets there, he asks if they have any paperwork that might document where his parents' remains were sent. The young man working at the funeral home goes downstairs to look, and when he returns, he's carrying a cardboard box containing the ashes of Eggers's mother. Shocked, Eggers takes the box and makes his way to Lake Michigan, where he spreads his mother's remains in the water, all the while questioning if this is something she'd actually want him to do. After his trip to Illinois, he goes back to California and decides to stop publishing *Might* and move to New York with Toph, who gamely says that he believes "it's good to move around, see stuff, not get stuck."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dave Eggers – The narrator and protagonist of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Eggers is twenty-one when both his parents die, leaving him and his sister, Beth, to take care of their seven-year-old brother, Toph. Although they both help one another with this duty, the primary caretaking responsibilities fall to Eggers because he is closest to Toph. When the family—except for their older brother Bill—moves to Berkeley, California and sublets a house together, Eggers makes an effort to create a fun and optimistic life for Toph, treating him like more of a roommate than a child. Before long, though, Toph starts attending school again, and he and Eggers find their own place to live, since their sublet has ended and Beth is starting law school. Thus begins a period in which Eggers tries to balance his life as a guardian and a young bachelor, all while attempting to establish a career as an underground, anti-establishment magazine editor. As he does this, he finds it difficult to navigate the various roles he's expected to play. When, for example, he looks at a group of middle-aged mothers at one of Toph's baseball games, he wonders how he's supposed to fit in, thinking, "*Am I them*?" Other than this tinge of insecurity, though, Eggers is sarcastic and hyperbolic throughout the text. His scathing humor rarely spares anyone or anything, including himself, as he criticizes even his own authorial decisions in a tongue-in-cheek, self-aware manner.

Toph Eggers – Eggers's little brother. Like Eggers, Toph watches his parents die within five weeks of one another. Since he's only seven at the time, he's less involved (or present) during their final days than Eggers, spending the majority of his time playing videogames in the basement as a way of avoiding his parents' deaths. At first, Toph is quiet and apprehensive when he, Eggers, and Beth move to California. Unsure of this new arrangement, he eyes his older brother questioningly, though he eventually comes to appreciate Eggers's exuberant optimism, enjoying—for instance—throwing the Frisbee in elaborate ways on the beach and coming home to a squalid, bachelor-style apartment. Whether or not he knows it, Toph is a major source of worry for Eggers, who constantly fears that he'll run into harm. What's more, Eggers also worries about the fact that he has written so extensively about Toph, though he indicates that his little brother approves of his intentions and his memoir project as a whole. In keeping with the sense of affirmation that Toph lends Eggers, he assures his older brother at the end of the book, when they're about to move to New York, that he likes the idea, saying that he thinks "it's good to move around, see stuff, not get stuck." In this way, he returns

the support his brother gives him, creating a "symbiotic" relationship.

Eggers's Mother (Heidi Eggers) – Eggers, Beth, Toph, and Bill's mother. At the beginning of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Heidi Eggers has already undergone multiple treatments for stomach cancer. After several operations and many emergency room visits, she decides she never wants to return to the hospital, resolving to die at home if it comes to it. However, Eggers and Beth convince her to break this rule when she gets a nosebleed that won't clot. Although she relents and goes to the hospital this time, she dies not long after coming back home. When Eggers remembers her in later sections of his memoir, he portrays her as a kindhearted but harsh person. She forces her husband to control his drinking, but when this fails, she resigns to the reality of his alcoholism, though she limits the amount he consumes in the house. When she gets angry, she often hits her children in the head, though this becomes less serious when Bill—the oldest—decides to start laughing and ducking away from her when she swats at him, turning the ordeal into a joke that even she finds funny. Like his worries about Toph, Eggers frets about the fact that he has written so many personal details about his mother, knowing that she wouldn't approve of his efforts to publicly represent her dying days. When he returns to Illinois for a wedding, he finally tracks down her **ashes** (which have been sitting in the funeral home all these years) and decides to spread them on Lake Michigan. As he does so, he once again second-guesses himself, wondering if she would actually *want* to be released into the lake. Nonetheless, he decides that this is the best way to honor her.

Eggers's Father (John Eggers) – Eggers, Beth, Toph, and Bill's father. Eggers only provides fragmentary and rather random bits of information about his father, which perhaps indicates how close he was to the man. Still, he makes it clear that Bill Eggers, a "commodities-oriented lawyer" practicing in Chicago, is a private man with unique, almost eccentric ideas. For instance, he decides to put a fish tank in a small recess in the living room wall, and though he doesn't measure the dimensions of the space before acting on this decision, the tank fits perfectly and then goes untouched for quite some time. The fish inevitably die, but Eggers's father keeps the tank in the living room, glowing strangely from its perch. At some point after Eggers's mother is diagnosed with stomach cancer, John sits his children down and bluntly encourages them to expect her death. What they don't expect, though, is that *he* will die five weeks before her. Indeed, Eggers's father is diagnosed with lung cancer after his wife learns of her stomach cancer, but his illness is much more aggressive, killing him before anyone has fully realized that he's going to die. In his memoir, Eggers reveals (though not at first) that his father was an alcoholic and that he was often physically abusive to him and his siblings. By withholding this information at the beginning of the book, he enables readers to mourn his father's loss before complicating this feeling with unflattering notions about the way John Eggers treated his family.

Beth Eggers – Eggers and Toph's older sister. Like Eggers, Beth takes on childcare responsibilities when their mother and father both die, leaving Toph without any parents. Although Eggers is the one who becomes Toph's primary guardian, he and Beth help one another simulate parenthood. When they move to Berkeley, California while Beth attends law school, they establish rules about how they will split these duties. They decide to refrain from introducing Toph—at least in his younger years—to significant others. When Eggers goes out for an evening in San Francisco, he leaves Toph with Beth, at least until Toph is old enough to stay with a babysitter or stay home by himself. Beth is perhaps the only person who understands Eggers's life, since she knows what goes into taking care of Toph while simultaneously maintaining a social life and a professional life. Unlike Eggers, she isn't so interested in unpacking her family's history, unless this means sitting with Toph and sentimentally showing him old photo albums to make sure he remembers his parents. Eggers, on the other hand, fixates on more tangible things, like what happened to his **parents' ashes** after they were cremated (he and Beth never picked them up and then moved too many times to have received them in the mail). Finally, when he's ready to get serious about tracking down their parents' remains, Beth tells him that the crematorium eventually found her and called her, but she said she didn't want the remains. "What do we want with some stupid ashes?" she asks Eggers.

Bill Eggers – The oldest of the Eggers children. When Eggers's mother is in the process of dying, Bill is already twenty-four and working in Washington, D.C. for the Heritage Foundation—Eggers, who has only a vague idea of what his brother does, describes Bill's job as having "something to do with eastern European economics, privatization, conversion." When Eggers, Beth, and Toph move to Northern California, Bill relocates to Los Angeles, where he works for another conservative think-tank. For the most part, Bill isn't present very much, but he is a supportive older brother to all three of his siblings.

Kirsten – Dave Eggers's college girlfriend. After several months of dating, Eggers and Kirsten still feel "tentative" about the relationship, but then Kirsten comes home with Eggers for a visit and he tells her that his mother is terminally ill. She responds by telling him that her mother has a brain tumor. Because her father hasn't been in her life since she was fourteen, this means that Kirsten, like Eggers, is on the brink of becoming an adult orphan. This common experience endears both them to each other, and their relationship takes on a new intensity. When Eggers, Beth, and Toph move to the west coast, Kirsten comes too because she has always wanted to live in California. Living for the summer in the same sublet as Eggers,

she works and refuses financial help from anyone. The stress of making enough money eventually wears on her relationship with Eggers, so when they're all required to leave the sublet, she and Eggers decide not to live together. From then on, they have an on-again-off-again relationship until, finally, they break up a year later.

Moodie – One of Eggers's high school friends, and the co-founder of *Might* magazine. When Moodie and Eggers were teenagers, they ran a "highly successful" fake I.D. company, using brand-new "Macintosh technology" to print false driver's licenses for their friends. As young adults living in Berkeley, they convert one of the rooms of Eggers and Toph's single-story house into a "tiny graphic design operation." Before long, they decide to start *Might*, serving as co-editors.

John – One of Eggers's friends. John grew up in the same neighborhood as Eggers in Lake Forest, Illinois, and because their parents were friends, they have known each other for a very long time. Even when they "had less and less to say to each other" in high school, they were "still inextricably tied." Like Eggers, John is an adult orphan, his mother having died when he was a sophomore in high school and his father having died when John was in college (shortly after Eggers's father died). Since then, John has had severe depression. In fact, he often threatens to kill himself. After posing this kind of threat one night, Eggers rushes over to his apartment and calls the police. Assessing the situation, the police summon paramedics, who take John to have his stomach pumped at the hospital. At this point, John begins transcending his role as a conventional character in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, speaking directly to Eggers and shaming him for using his story. It later becomes clear that Eggers has chosen to call him John (a fake name) because this was his own father's name—a fact John resents because he doesn't want to be used for Eggers's selfish storytelling purposes. As such, John becomes a representation not only of the grief inherent to parental loss, but also of Eggers's insecurities and misgivings about writing about the people in his life.

Shalini Malhotra – A woman Eggers meets after setting up the *Might* magazine office in a "filthy corner of a shaky warehouse" where the rent is only $250 a month. Shalini also works in this warehouse, helping "with *just Go!*, a tiny ecotravel magazine." She also produces her own publication, *Hum*, which is "dedicated to uniting and speaking for/to/from twentysomethings of the South Asian American persuasion." Shalini becomes a close workplace friend to Eggers and Moodie, giving them "semi-erotic during-work backrubs," though their relationship with her remains platonic. One night, Shalini is at a party on a deck that collapses. The accident kills a number of people, but she survives. Having landed on her head, she goes into a coma. Upon hearing the news, Eggers begins visiting Shalini quite often. Finally, after months, she wakes up and is able to resume her life, though her short-term memory remains impaired.

Meredith Weiss – One of Eggers's friends. Meredith lives in LA but frequently visits San Francisco. When Eggers goes out one night while Toph is with a babysitter, he calls Meredith and invites her to come dancing. She accepts, and they spend the night drinking in a club before going to a beach, where they talk about his plans for *Might* magazine. As they speak excitedly about this idea, they are drawn to one another and soon find themselves kissing passionately. As they lie against the sand, a group of teenagers approaches them and starts to hassle them, throwing sand in Eggers's eyes and roughing them up in a mean but mostly playful manner. After this, though, Eggers can't find his **wallet**, so he chases them down and accuses them of stealing. With Meredith, they help him look for his wallet but are unsuccessful, so Eggers calls the police, but they kick him in the crotch and leave. Meredith then stays with Eggers until the police come. Meredith is also friends with John, and calls Eggers every time John threatens suicide.

Sarah Mulhern – A woman Eggers has admired since childhood, when they were both on the same swim team. Two years his senior, Sarah was a proficient swimmer and diver, and Eggers never worked up the nerve to talk to her. Shortly after his father dies, though, he finds himself drunkenly talking to her in a crowded bar, and it isn't long before they sneak off and go to her house, where they have sex while trying to keep her parents from hearing them. The next morning, Sarah sneaks Eggers out of the house and drives him home. When they arrive, he wants to explain that this was a mistake and that he's dating Kirsten, but he catches a glimpse of his frail mother through the window of the family room. Not wanting his mother to see him in Sarah's car, he kisses her goodbye and scrambles out. Many years later, when he returns to Lake Forest for a wedding, Eggers goes on a date with Sarah and spends another night with her. This time, he enjoys the feeling of waking up in her bed the next morning. He wants to go to breakfast and slowly pass the morning with her, but she makes up an excuse about having somewhere to be, and he suddenly finds himself on her doorstep wondering what happened.

Laura Folger – A producer and "casting person" for MTV's *The Real World*. Laura invites Eggers to an interview after he submits an audition tape to be on *The Real World: San Francisco*. As she asks him questions, Eggers pontificates about a number of things, closely examining his life until it becomes clear that the interview has strayed from reality. "*This isn't really a transcript of the interview, is it?*" Laura asks, and Eggers responds by admitting that it is more of a "catchall for a bunch of anecdotes that would be too awkward to force together otherwise."

Sari Lockers – A sexologist that Eggers interviews for a piece in *Might* magazine making fun of her book, *Mindblowing Sex in the Real World*. Although the publication ends up running a disparaging piece about her work, Eggers finds that he actually

likes Sari. Perhaps more obviously, he is also attracted to her, and he gets hung up on the idea of having sex with a sexologist. Despite his poor treatment of her, she agrees to see him the next time she's in town. Before she leaves for the airport at the end of her trip, she comes to his apartment, where they start getting physically intimate. Just as they're about to move to the bed, though, Toph comes home and interrupts them.

Lance Crapo – Someone who Eggers and Moodie "recruit" to help develop *Might* magazine's business plan. Lance is "an heir to one of the biggest potato-farming families in Idaho" and knows how to handle "the magazine's business aspects." He even finds a young woman named Skye Bassett to help the magazine by "running around New York" taking meetings.

Skye Bassett – An actress and waitress who lives in New York City and agrees to help *Might* magazine by taking meetings on the east coast. Skye has appeared in a small role in the movie *Dangerous Minds* and works as a waitress, goes on auditions, and somehow also manages to help the magazine. She dies suddenly and unexpectedly of a virus that attacks her heart.

Stephen – Toph's babysitter. Stephen is from England, Scotland, or Ireland—Eggers can't remember which. When he comes to babysit Toph one night, Eggers is delighted to have a night of freedom, but this excitement quickly turns into a sharp sense of fear. As he drives away, he becomes convinced that Stephen will murder, molest, or kidnap Toph, and he isn't able to shake this feeling until he returns home late that night and sees that nothing has happened.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Marny – One of Eggers's friends who works on *Might* magazine. Like many of his other colleagues, Marny also went to high school with Eggers in Lake Forest, where they even dated for a brief period.

Zev Borow – An overzealous intern who comes to work for *Might* magazine after graduating from Syracuse University. Zev's enthusiasm almost exhausts Eggers, who by the time of Zev's arrival is having doubts about whether or not he wants to continue putting in the work to publish the magazine.

Judd – A cartoonist who is cast on *The Real World* instead of Eggers. While starring on the show, Judd sends his portfolio to *Might* magazine, and so Eggers and Moodie invite him to show them his artwork in person, hoping he'll bring the camera crew along.

Adam Rich – A former child actor, who starred in the 1970s ABC dramedy *Eight is Enough*. Eggers and Moodie convince him to let them publish a fake obituary about him in *Might*.

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.

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND META-NARRATION

In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers challenges the validity of his own autobiographical project. As early as the "Acknowledgements" section, which precedes the book's first chapter, he refers to memoir writing as "inherently vile." Despite his distaste for the genre, though, he still indulges his impulse to examine his life. He even points out that, although memoirs are perhaps "wrong and evil and bad [...] we could all do worse, as readers and writers." In this way, he criticizes autobiographical writing even as he ignores his own misgivings. Playing with this tension, he often switches gears in the middle of a story to comment on *how*, exactly, he's telling that story. This analysis of the text in real time is a meta-narrative technique, or a way of examining the act of narration by calling attention to the storytelling process itself. By questioning his authorial decisions, Eggers invites readers to join him in his consideration of craft and form. He then folds this meta-narrative back into the memoir, moving on with whatever story he's in the middle of telling. In turn, this authorial self-consciousness (or self-awareness) enables readers to come closer to Eggers's experience, since they now have an understanding of his story itself *and* the critical thinking that has gone into telling that story. As such, Eggers slyly uses his skepticism of memoir to fuel this autobiographical project.

It quickly becomes clear that *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* doesn't conform to the narrative conventions of most memoirs. In the book's Acknowledgements section, for instance, which is twenty-five pages long and appears before the first chapter, Eggers outlines some of the memoir's salient themes, including "The Painfully, Endlessly Self-Conscious" aspect of the book. He also promises to be "clear and up-front about this being a self-conscious memoir"—an impulse reflected in the fact that Eggers is already examining his authorial impulses before the book has even begun.

He takes this point one step further in the next theme, entitled "The Knowingness About the Book's Self-Consciousness Aspect." Regarding this, he notes: "While the author is self-conscious about being self-referential, he is also knowing about that self-conscious self-referentiality"—that is, he is self-conscious about being self-conscious. Already, Eggers has presented readers with a dizzying amount of analysis and introspection. This is quite purposeful, as it seems Eggers wants to break the conventional structure of the memoir. To do this, he parodies the autobiographical tendency to unpack and analyze everything, no matter how small. However, by satirizing

the memoirist's impulse toward introspection, he ultimately scrutinizes himself even more closely. As a result, he challenges his own devices as a way of utilizing them to a greater extent.

Despite Eggers's feeling that memoir writing is an "inherently vile" practice that promotes self-obsession and narcissism, he clearly believes that examining oneself can be a worthwhile endeavor. Wading through his sarcasm, readers might find themselves empathizing with his story, which is quite sad. In fact, Eggers's story is so sad that he feels the need to use irony and meta-narration to tell it. The "gimmickry is simply a device, a defense," he writes, "to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story, which is both too black and blinding to look at—*avert…your…eyes!*" According to Eggers, the self-conscious and meta-narrative "gimmickry" is "nevertheless useful, at least to the author, even in caricatured or condensed form, because telling as many people as possible about it helps, he thinks, to dilute the pain and bitterness and thus facilitate its flushing from his soul." This self-conscious distance helps him relate his story, which would otherwise be too painful to closely examine. As such, he turns his memoir into a "caricature" of his life, enabling him to "dilute the pain and bitterness" of his experiences through narration that isn't going to emotionally devastate him. And although this long preamble to Eggers's "story" is "painfully" self-conscious and glib (and to some readers, perhaps off-putting), it gives readers the chance to experience the author's struggle to come to terms with a difficult past.

No matter how much Eggers satirizes his own project by commenting on his narrative process, it's clear he believes there's something at the center of his story worth telling. For instance, when he visits his friend John in the hospital, he waits in the lobby and thinks about using the experience as "fodder for" a short story, but then he realizes that people have already written about such things. Because of this, he decides to write an "experimental short story" with meta-narrative observations about what it's like to sit in a hospital thinking about writing an "experimental short story." As he follows this cyclical thought process, he notes: "I could be aware of the dangers of the self-consciousness, but at the same time, I'll be plowing through the fog of all these echoes, plowing through mixed metaphors, noise, and will try to show the core, which is still there, as a core, and is valid, despite the fog. The core is the core is the core. There is always the core, that can't be articulated. Only caricatured."

It's worth noting that while Eggers thinks about these structural and narrative concepts, he also advances a story. For the moment, he directs readers' attention to "self-consciousness" by analyzing what it would be like to write this "experimental short story." At the same time, though, readers also know that within the narrative he's currently sitting in the hospital waiting to see his friend. As such, there is a narrative "core," a story Eggers is telling even as he spins a vast conceptual web. This, it seems, is why he employs absurdly meta-narrative and self-conscious "gimmicks": he believes that the only way to access the "core" of certain stories is to make them into caricatures. As a result, readers see that his self-aware narrative style does more than simply mock the memoir genre—it enables him to represent ideas that otherwise escape articulation.

COMING OF AGE, PARENTHOOD, AND RESPONSIBILITY

In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers ties the idea of youth to a sense of possibility. When he is only twenty-one years old, he becomes the primary caretaker of his eight-year-old brother, Toph, because their parents both die within five weeks of one another. This is overwhelming at first, but in the aftermath of losing his parents, Eggers finds himself adopting a sense of optimism about the future. Rather than succumbing to depression under the weight of his new circumstances, he moves with Toph and their sister to California, where he learns to navigate adult responsibilities while maintaining a lighthearted outlook that champions the experience of being young. This attitude is largely for Toph's sake, since Eggers wants his little brother to grow up unencumbered by grief. However, Eggers's relative optimism is also the result of a certain kind of youthful exuberance, a worldview in which the idea of being young brings with it notions of endless possibility and freedom. After all, he—like Toph—is still growing up, and rather than locking himself into the sober role of a stereotypical adult parent, he embraces the fact that he's an unconventional guardian who remains open to life's many possibilities. By putting this perspective on display, he promotes the idea that maturity has less to do with age than it has to do with one's ability to adapt to life's difficulties in a dynamic, flexible way.

After his parents die, Eggers quickly establishes that he will raise Toph according to his own youthful worldview. This is how he shoulders the responsibility of suddenly becoming a guardian. When they move to California shortly after selling the family house, he and Toph wind along the coastal edge of Highway 1, feeling invincible as the radio blasts rock music. While the car "thrums loudly" and Eggers sings at the top of his lungs, he looks at Toph. "In this world, in our new world, there will be rocking," he notes. Eggers frames his and Toph's situation not as a bleak, sad existence, but as an exhilarating "new world," and he goes out of his way to demonstrate to his little brother that this world will be different than the one their parents gave them. With Eggers as his guardian, Toph will lead a life of "rocking" and driving fast along scenic highways. By speaking of this lifestyle in terms of newness, Eggers exalts the exciting sense of opportunity that comes with his and Toph's youthfulness and lack of parental supervision. Instead of

wallowing in their shared misfortune, he encourages Toph to see their life in California as the beginning of something thrilling.

Of course, it's not always easy for Eggers to maintain this optimistic outlook, especially since he has to serve as Toph's guardian at such a young age. When he watches his brother's baseball games, for example, he finds himself unable to fully assimilate into the standard realm of parenthood. "I watch, and the mothers watch," he notes. "I do not know how to interact with the mothers. *Am I them*?" In these scenarios, he becomes acutely aware of his age, reminded of how strange and unexpected his circumstances truly are. Although this makes him uncomfortable at first—causing him to question his validity as a caretaker—he eventually strives to celebrate (once more) the fact that he's young. "Fuck it," he writes. "I don't want to be friends with these women, anyway. Why would I care? I am not them. They are the old model and we are the new." By referring to Toph and himself as the "new model" of parenthood, Eggers once again praises his position as a young caretaker, deciding that he can take on this kind of meaningful responsibility without sacrificing his life as someone who is himself still coming of age.

The world also feels full of opportunity to Eggers because he believes he and Toph are "owed" something for the hardships they've endured. "Every day we are collecting on what's coming to us," he writes, "each day we're being paid back for what is owed, what we deserve, with interest, with some extra motherfucking consideration—we are *owed*, goddamnit—and so we are expecting everything, everything." After his parents died, he could have lamented his family's loss and buckled beneath the cruelty of life. Instead, he looks ahead, his misfortune ultimately fueling his appetite for everything that is still to come his way, all of the opportunities and rewards and delights that he has yet to experience. Indeed, he "expect[s] everything" rather than resigning himself to the idea that life is terrible and bleak. It is perhaps this forward-looking mentality that enables him to embrace his role as Toph's guardian; he doesn't see the future as a mirthless drudge toward an unrewarding existence, but rather as a path toward something wonderful. And though his optimism might be a bit overzealous, there's no denying that his willingness to move on from his parents' deaths while simultaneously assuming responsibility for his younger brother is a sign of maturity. In this way, he demonstrates that conventional markers of adulthood and responsibility—age, marriage, home ownership, etc.—pale in comparison to how a person responds to hardship, which is perhaps the best indication of maturity.

DEATH, HUMOR, AND THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Because his parents die within five weeks of one another, Dave Eggers becomes well-acquainted with death, recognizing it as unavoidable and commonplace. However, this realistic outlook doesn't help him come to terms with death in any sort of practical way. Although he projects an outward display of optimism that often carries him through difficult times, the experience of watching his parents die has profoundly altered the way he sees the world. More often than not, he finds himself morbidly fantasizing about the worst-case scenario. He imagines his car careening off cliffs, envisions babysitters killing and mutilating Toph, and frets that he has contracted AIDS and will die before reaching thirty. Large sections of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* detail these invented catastrophes, as Eggers creates increasingly absurd disaster scenarios. In fact, his fears are often so lavish and ridiculous that they become comedic, and readers have no choice but to laugh at Eggers's grandiose depictions of horror. In other words, Eggers's florid descriptions of disaster end up subverting themselves, their obvious humor undermining (or trivializing) the author's genuine fear of death. By diluting his terror with humor, then, Eggers proves that even the most serious fears can be reframed to seem more manageable.

Eggers is only twenty-one when he loses both of his parents. Unsurprisingly, as a result he becomes keenly aware of the fact that death is inevitable. What's more, he understands how powerless humans are when it comes to mortality. If a person is going to die, there's only so much that doctors can do to save them. This is the case for Eggers's mother, who suffers a painful battle with stomach cancer and endures countless operations before eventually succumbing to her inevitable end. Having witnessed this process, Eggers comes to reject the various narratives people superimpose upon death to make it seem easier to process. For instance, he dismisses the idea of "dying with dignity," saying: "You will die, and when you die, you will know a profound lack of [dignity]. It's never dignified, always brutal." By saying this, he reveals his blunt and bleak perspective, insisting upon speaking straightforwardly about death instead of trying to soften its blow. Dying, he says, is "brutal," a word that frames mortality as unforgiving and overwhelming. "Dignity is an affectation," he adds, going on to say that it is "fleeting and incredibly mercurial." These wishy-washy attributes, he intimates, don't have anything to do with death, which is a sober and painful reality. And according to Eggers, sugarcoating this reality won't make it easier in the end.

Despite Eggers's belief that the brutality of death can't be softened, he still tries to lighten the mood when his mother is in her final weeks. He does this by making jokes, trying to add some cheerfulness to this otherwise miserable situation. For example, when a doctor warns Eggers that his mother absolutely cannot start bleeding because her blood can't clot, Eggers kids, saying, "No more knife fights. No more knife throwing." The doctor ignores him. "This doctor does not joke much," he notes. "Some of the nurses do. It is our job to joke with the doctors and nurses." It's worth noting that Eggers sees

it as his duty to "joke with the doctors and nurses," as if this is a necessary part of helping his mother through her illness. However, it seems that he tells jokes primarily for *himself*, hoping to make it easier to deal with the eventual loss of his parent. "I know that I should joke in the face of adversity," he writes, "there is always humor, we are told. But in the last few weeks, we haven't found much. We have been looking for funny things, but have found very little." Humor, Eggers asserts, is a vital part of coping with "adversity." At the same time, he also admits that it's sometimes hard to find "funny things" in the midst of sadness.

After Eggers's mother dies, he develops a new way of confronting the idea of mortality: he concentrates on the worst-case scenario. Focusing on all the ways death might touch him, he obsessively spins tales of potential chaos and tragedy. For instance, after leaving Toph with a babysitter named Stephen one night, Eggers goes out for a night on the town. Although he's excited for this evening of freedom, it isn't long before he vividly imagines the ways in which Stephen might harm or kill Toph. "I become convinced," he writes, "in a flash of pure truth-seeing—it happens every time I leave him anywhere—that Toph will be killed. Of course. The baby-sitter was acting peculiar, was too quiet, too unassuming. His eyes had plans." Thinking this way, Eggers pictures of a flurry of terrifying possibilities, including "handcuffs, floorboards, clown suits, leather, videotape, duct tape, knives, bathtubs, refrigerators." As Eggers strides into what should be a fun, carefree evening, he finds himself envisioning Toph's demise, his imagination tormenting him with highly specific horrors. Although this thought process is disturbing and twisted, the way Eggers presents it bears a touch of morbid humor. The details he provides are so specific and odd that they seem absurd and start to lose their credibility. In this way, he manages to upend his own worries, revealing their irrationality even as he permits himself to be afraid. By running through the worst-case scenario, he acknowledges the ever-present potential for death and misfortune while also managing to go on despite these possibilities. Nothing, it seems, can sugarcoat the reality of death, so Eggers chooses to do the opposite, allowing himself to catastrophize until any kind of *actual* misfortune seems comparatively tame.

IDENTITY

In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers pays close attention to the identities people assume and the roles that they or others attach to these identities. Eggers himself straddles multiple personas, simultaneously fulfilling the role of a responsible guardian and a wayward bachelor. Naturally, he often finds it difficult to concentrate on each identity, especially since they are so distinct. Of course, his priorities as Toph's caretaker consume his daily life, but this doesn't mean he exclusively identifies as a guardian, since he also values his social life, which exists independently from his life as a de-facto parent. As such, he tries to occupy a middle ground, where he can exist as more than one thing. Unfortunately, society is eager to put people into categories, meaning that people rarely recognize that Eggers's identity is actually a composite of several roles and personas. By accentuating this struggle to exist at the intersection of multiple identities, Eggers shows readers how difficult it is for people who don't conform to conventional stereotypes to live in a world that groups people into simple and one-dimensional categories.

The most obvious friction between Eggers's personas arises between his identity as Toph's guardian and his identity as a young bachelor. Describing what it feels like when he gets the rare opportunity to go out with friends, he writes: "maybe they'd just be sitting around, at Moodie's usually, watching cable, getting ready, and I would be there, on the couch, with a beer from the fridge, savoring every minute, not knowing when it would come again, and they would be casual, having no idea what it meant to me." In these moments, Eggers's closest friends have "no idea" what it means to him to simply be "sitting around" with them. They don't register the fact that he's torn between being a guardian and having a social life, instead assuming that he must feel exactly like they do. In reality, of course, this isn't the case. "I felt so detached sometimes," he writes, "went for weeks at a time without really being around people my age, like living in a country where no one understands your words." Even as Eggers hangs out with his friends, he no longer feels like he can fully identify with their youthful lifestyle, since the majority of his time is spent "detached" from them.

What's interesting about Eggers's friends, though, is that they *do* sometimes remember that he—unlike them—has caretaking responsibilities. In fact, they often place too much emphasis on this, asking him about Toph when he'd rather be enjoying a night out like the rest of them. One night, for example, Eggers is at a bar with friends and beginning to feel disappointed that the evening isn't wilder. He wishes he could start an orgy, or at least something that would make him feel like it was worth leaving behind his duties as a caretaker. As he thinks this, several friends ask him about Toph, each one eventually saying, "Where is he, anyway?" This bothers Eggers. "Why ask me, when I am out trying to drink and incite orgies, where my brother is?" he wonders. He feels like this question keeps him from embracing the carefree existence of a young person with an active social life. Suddenly, his friends remind him of how he's different from them, forcing him to think about his role as a guardian. In turn, it becomes clear that the people around Eggers won't let him exist as two things at once. Instead, they fluctuate between seeing him as a regular young man and seeing him as a caretaker.

Not only is Eggers aware of the ways others try to pigeonhole

him, he's also sensitive to how people—including himself—force others into unfortunate stereotypical categories. This is overwhelmingly (and uncomfortably) apparent when he and his friend Meredith encounter a group of Latino teenagers on a beach late at night. The teenagers approach them as they're having sex, mock them, throw sand in Eggers's eyes, and generally give them a hard time, though they eventually leave and it becomes clear that they're nothing but a group of rowdy adolescents. However, Eggers is suddenly convinced that they stole his **wallet**, which he can't find. When he chases them down and they deny his accusation, he threatens to call the cops. He asks them who the police are going to believe: "Two regular people sitting on the beach, or you people?" Saying this, he vocalizes his belief that he and Meredith—two white people—are "regular," whereas these teenagers, whom he assumes are Mexican, inherently become suspects because they aren't white. He even adds: "I mean, I don't know what your status is with green cards and everything, but this could get really fucking ugly, you guys." It's quite obvious here that Eggers is drawing upon racist stereotypes and using them to cast this group of teenagers in an unflattering light. When he finally gets home after having made such a scene, he sees his wallet lying on the dresser, a turn of events that emphasizes the fact that he was wrong to assume the worst about these teens.

Considering that this is Eggers's memoir, his choice to include this story suggests that he wants to shine a light on the ugly and blatant assumptions he made about these teenagers based on their race. In general, Eggers doesn't shy away from examining his own implicit biases throughout the book, sometimes even putting them on display in such an unflinching way that readers might question whether or not he's fully in control of the message he's sending about his own prejudices. However, if readers wish to give Eggers's engagement with race and socioeconomic class a sympathetic interpretation, they can refer to the fact that he's interested in demonstrating that people often categorize others according to superficial aspects of their identity. In short, Eggers tries to interrogate the human habit of assigning reductive identities to other people. Whether or not he successfully manages to do this without casting himself as prejudiced and insensitive is ultimately up to the reader.

GUILT AND POETIC LICENSE

Eggers tells many stories about other people in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, but he also feels guilty about this aspect of his project. First and foremost, he worries about what his parents would think of his decision to publicly recount their final days. He frets that they would hate him for putting their stories into the world, stories that don't fully belong to him even though he was present as they unfolded. He also often feels guilty about the manner in which he tells a story, since he makes a vast number of approximations that serve his ends as a storyteller but don't necessarily accurately represent the actions or emotions of the person about whom he's writing. Despite all these insecurities, he continues writing his memoir, simply incorporating his misgivings into the book itself. As a result, he suggests that these concerns about who has the right to tell a story are important to the process of composition and not significant enough to prevent a writer from expressing him- or herself. Guilt, he intimates, is a natural part of life and something that is unavoidable when writing about others. As such, he grants himself the poetic license to tell these stories despite his hesitations.

Eggers blatantly addresses his feelings of guilt regarding the fact that he has told the story of his parents' final days. In a meta-narrative conversation with Toph in which Toph transcends his role as a character and speaks directly to Eggers, Toph says: "You're completely paralyzed with guilt about relating all this in the first place, especially the stuff earlier on. You feel somehow obligated to do it, but you also know that Mom and Dad would *hate* it, would crucify you." It's worth mentioning that this passage appears 115 pages into the text, after Eggers has already very lucidly described the details of his mother's sickly deterioration. Given this fact, it's obvious that Eggers isn't quite guilty enough about this matter to keep himself from writing about it in the first place. Instead, he decides to deal with his concerns within the actual book itself, allowing it to function as a device that actually strengthens the memoir. After all, this is perhaps the best way to turn his parents' stories into his own: by highlighting his guilt and insecurities about narrating these tales, he directs the reader's attention to himself.

Eggers's meta-narrative conversation with Toph isn't the only instance in which he grapples with the question of whether or not he has the right to tell someone else's story. When he visits his friend John in the hospital after John has threatened suicide and had his stomach pumped, John tries to literally escape the narrative Eggers has created. John stands up and detaches himself from the various hospital machines, saying, "Screw it. I'm not going to be a fucking anecdote in your stupid book." Protesting, Eggers rambles on about how John is "supposed to" stay in the hospital overnight, listing off the succession of events that took place in real life, when John was actually hospitalized. Nonetheless, this fictionalized version of John says, "I want no part of that. Find someone else to be symbolic of, you know, youth wasted or whatever." In this scene, Eggers wrestles with the notion that he has enlisted his friends—*real* people—as "symbols" of things that are important to him but perhaps not relevant to their own lives. He feels guilty that he's using other people for his own selfish ends. However, he quickly gets past this misgiving, saying, "Whatever. This is mine. You've given it to me." Asserting his right to tell John's story, Eggers communicates to readers that guilt is a necessary evil

when it comes to the process of storytelling, one that can be overcome because—in the end—an author deserves the opportunity to express their experience and point of view.

In another conversation with John that takes place toward the end of the book, Eggers pinpoints what it is that enables him to ignore his guilt and take the poetic license necessary to tell someone else's story. John is the one who articulates this, saying that Eggers is like a "cannibal" who is content to "devour" anyone whose story might serve his purpose. "You think that because you had things taken from you, that you can just take and take—everything." According to this interpretation, Eggers gives himself an excuse to ignore feelings of guilt because of his belief that he is "owed" by the world. Thinking he deserves the best after all the hardship he went through with his parents, he allows himself to "cannibalize" stories that he might otherwise feel uncomfortable appropriating. In keeping with this metaphor, if he consumes other people, then they actually become part of him, thus giving him the right to retell their tales as his own. It is this kind of rationalization that makes Eggers willing to take poetic license. Furthermore, by putting this mental process on display, he simultaneously criticizes and rationalizes his decision to write about other people, once again making the matter about himself and thereby solidifying his authorial right.

SYMBOLS

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

THE WALLET

Eggers's wallet used to belong to his father, and it clearly represents one of the few things of his father's that he has been able to incorporate into his own life. As such, he's desperate to retrieve it when he thinks he has lost it. "The wallet is gone," he writes. "My father has slipped further down the well. The wallet was the constant reminder; every time I used it, it was always there, in my pocket!" However, this wallet takes on new symbolic complexity when Eggers becomes so obsessed with finding it that he permits himself to make racist assumptions about a group of unwitting teenagers. Threatening to call the police—which he refers to in his head as "*My* police"—he jumps to the conclusion that these kids have taken his wallet, and this conclusion is largely based on the fact that they aren't white. When he finally goes home, though, he finds the wallet sitting on his dresser. As such, the wallet becomes a manifestation not only of how much Eggers misses his father, but also of the anger and desperation he has about his own misfortune. Unable to focus on anything except the fact that the wallet belonged to his father, Eggers makes brash and irrational accusations, ultimately emphasizing how powerfully emotions can alter a person's behavior.

HEIDI AND JOHN EGGERS'S ASHES

Eggers's quest to track down his parents' remains comes to stand for the ways in which people process loss. For most of the book, Eggers is unsure about the whereabouts of his parents' ashes. This is because he and Beth have moved multiple times since their parents were cremated, making it hard for the cremation company to track them down. To a certain extent, they both seem content to simply leave things like this, with their parents' remains existing somewhere out there in the world. However, Beth eventually receives a call from the cremation company, and she tells them they don't want to claim the ashes. When Eggers hears this, he's upset. "I loved how vague it was before," he notes, admitting that he liked not knowing where his parents' remains ended up. This "vague[ness]" at least allowed him to think that he might someday find the ashes. Beth, on the other hand, just wants to wash her hands of the entire experience. By highlighting this difference, Eggers uses his parents' remains to symbolize the different ways people mourn the loss of a loved one. For him, his parents' ashes represent the idea of possibility, since the prospect of tracking them down comforts him. For Beth, the ashes only remind her of her grief.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* published in 2001.

Acknowledgements Quotes

❝ Further, the author, and those behind the making of this book, wish to acknowledge that yes, there are perhaps too many memoir-sorts of books being written at this juncture, and that such books, about real things and real people, as opposed to kind-of made up things and people, are inherently vile and corrupt and wrong and evil and bad, but would like to remind everyone that we could all do worse, as readers and writers.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xxi

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers establishes very early in his book that he's suspicious of the memoir genre itself. Writing *A Heartbreaking Work of*

Staggering Genius in the mid to late 1990s, he no doubt noticed that a slew of other authors were publishing autobiographical works that often became bestsellers, making the genre somewhat trendy. This clearly makes Eggers self-conscious, since he's someone who identifies as a unique and creative individual. After all, he is the editor of *Might* magazine, a publication that makes fun of celebrities and fame. Because of this, he straightforwardly acknowledges that he's working in a genre that has become popular. He even calls memoirs "inherently vile and corrupt and wrong and evil and bad," which is his way of showing readers that he isn't writing this autobiographical text in order to jump on a bookselling bandwagon (and also revealing his tendency towards humorous hyperbole). However, he also resents the idea that the newfound trendiness of memoir writing might restrict him from producing what he wants to produce. As such, he "remind[s] everyone" that, despite its popularity, the memoir genre isn't the worst thing in the world.

> […] an incomparable loss begets both constant struggle and heart-hardening, but also some unimpeachable rewards, starting with absolute freedom, interpretable and of use in a number of ways. And though it seems inconceivable to lose both parents in the space of 32 days […] and to lose them to completely different diseases (cancer, sure, but different enough, in terms of location, duration, and provenance), that loss is accompanied by an undeniable but then of course guilt-inducing sense of mobility, of infinite possibility, having suddenly found oneself in a world with neither floor nor ceiling.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Eggers's Father (John Eggers), Eggers's Mother (Heidi Eggers)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xviii

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eggers addresses the fact that his parents' deaths had a strange effect on him. On the one hand, losing them both in the span of "32 days" threw him into a "constant struggle" that "hardened his heart" to the world. On the other hand, the experience also came with several "unimpeachable rewards," including a sense of "absolute freedom." This is obviously an unexpected effect, since people don't usually think about death and tragedy "begetting" a boundless sense of possibility. However, Eggers's feeling of freedom makes sense, considering that his mother's drawn-out illness required him to essentially stop his own life so that he could be home to care for her. When she died, then, a burden was lifted. Unfortunately, this "absolute freedom" naturally comes with a tinge of guilt, since feeling anything but sorrow after a loved one dies seems inappropriate.

> [The author] is fully cognizant, way ahead of you, in terms of knowing about and fully admitting the gimmickry inherent in all this, and will preempt your claim of the book's irrelevance due to said gimmickry by saying that the gimmickry is simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story, which is both too black and blinding to look at—*avert…your…eyes!*—but nevertheless useful, at least to the author, even in caricatured or condensed form, because telling as many people as possible about it helps, he thinks, to dilute the pain and bitterness and thus facilitate its flushing from his soul […].

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xx

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when Eggers describes a handful of thematic elements that he (referring to himself as "the author") has woven throughout *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. First, he concedes that his narrative style is quite self-referential, as he often comments on his own decisions both as an author and as a character in the book. However, in this moment he adds another layer, drawing attention to this very process of self-reference. By doing so, he creates a whirlwind of analysis and introspection, one so thick it hardly allows readers to fault him for being cloying or overt about his project. In other words, he "preempt[s]" any criticism someone might level at him regarding his use of self-conscious narration by saying that he's aware of how he's using it. This is a defense mechanism in more than one way, since it not only protects him from readers' criticism, but also protects him from the "core" of his story, which is full of so much "black and blinding rage" that the only way to approach it is by spinning multiple layers of sarcastic self-analysis. This humor and self-consciousness ultimately helps him turn painful thoughts into "caricatured or condensed form[s]" of themselves.

This part concerns the unshakable feeling one gets, one thinks, after the unthinkable and unexplainable happens—the feeling that, if this person can die, and that person can die, and this can happen and that can happen…well, then, what exactly is preventing everything from happening to this person, he around whom everything else happened? If people are dying, why won't he? If people are shooting people from cars, if people are tossing rocks down from overpasses, surely he will be the next victim. If people are contracting AIDS, odds are he will, too.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Eggers's Father (John Eggers), Eggers's Mother (Heidi Eggers)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xxiii

Explanation and Analysis

Explaining how the idea of fatalism has influenced his life, Eggers says that his parents' untimely deaths have given him an "unshakable feeling" that bad things will inevitably happen to him. He feels this way because he has seen the "unthinkable and unexplainable." Not only did both his parents die of cancer when he was only twenty-one, but they died within five weeks of one another. This unfortunate coincidence therefore makes Eggers feel as if he's destined for hardship and tragedy. Whereas most people are able to ignore such fears because they see just how unlikely this misfortune actually is, Eggers knows firsthand that sometimes even the most improbable travesties actually *do* happen. This is why he projects himself into the worst-case scenario throughout his memoir; he can't "shake" the sense that there's nothing preventing these things from happening to him.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I'll keep sharp objects out of proximity, I had joked to the doctor. The doctor did not chuckle. I wondered if he had heard me. I considered repeating it, but then figured that he had probably heard me but had not found it funny. But maybe he didn't hear me. I thought briefly, then, about supplementing the joke somehow, pushing it over the top, so to speak, with the second joke bringing the first one up and creating a sort of one-two punch. *No more knife fights*, I might say. *No more knife throwing*, I might offer, heh heh. But this doctor does not joke much. Some of the nurses do. It is our job to joke with the doctors and nurses. It is our job to listen to the doctors, and after listening to the doctors, Beth usually asks the doctors specific questions […] and sometimes I ask a question, and then we might add some levity and a witty aside. I know that I should joke in the face of adversity; there is always humor, we are told. But in the last few weeks, we haven't found much. We have been looking for funny things, but have found very little.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Beth Eggers, Eggers's Mother (Heidi Eggers)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

It's not hard to see that Eggers often turns to humor in times of duress. After all, his entire memoir is full of humorous anecdotes and absurdist, hyperbolic jokes, and this is seemingly what enables him to talk about his difficult memories of his parents dying. In his mother's final weeks, though, he discovers that it's not always easy to think of jokes "in the face of adversity." Worse, his mother's oncologist doesn't pay attention to his jokes. This causes Eggers to think that it is his "job"—not the doctor's—to "joke." In other words, he realizes that it's up to him to "add some levity" to the otherwise grave matters at hand, since this doctor is only focused on providing medical care. As such, he and Beth are in charge of making "witty asides" that might assuage their stress and fear about their mother's death. What's worth noting, though, is that Eggers says nothing about whether his mother finds his jokes funny. As a result, it's reasonable to assume that he so desperately searches for humor for his own sake, not his mother's.

Would we have enough towels? God no. We could use sheets, we have plenty of sheets— It might be only a few hours. Would that be enough time? What's enough time? We would talk a lot. Yes. We would sum up. Would we be serious, sober, or funny? We would be serious for a few minutes— Okay okay okay okay. Fuck, what if we ran out of things to say and— We've already made the necessary arrangements. Yes, yes, we wouldn't need to talk details. We'd have Toph come up. Would we have Toph come up? Of course, but… oh he shouldn't be there, should he? Who wants to be there at the very end? No one, no one. But for her to be alone…of course she won't be alone, you'll be there, Beth'll be there, dumb-ass. Fuck.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Beth Eggers, Toph Eggers, Eggers's Mother (Heidi Eggers)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Eggers thinks about what will happen if his mother dies at home because of a nosebleed. He wonders if they have enough towels to mop up the blood, curious about how long it would take before she would lose a fatal amount of blood. Stressed by the fact that he has promised to not take her to the hospital, he considers the worst-case scenario. What's most interesting about his thoughts in this moment is that they encompass a wide range of ideas. First, he thinks about the purely logistical details of her death, wondering if they will have enough time to say goodbye to her (and if they have enough towels for all the blood). However, he soon starts thinking about what, exactly, he will do when the moment comes. He knows that his mother's last minutes of life will be important, and he wants to respect this, but he also doesn't know what's appropriate in this context. "Would we have Toph come up?" he asks himself, considering whether or not Toph should see his mother "at the very end." By showcasing this thought process, he reminds readers that things are rarely clear when it comes to death. Rather, losing a loved one plunges a person into an emotional storm of sadness, confusion, and indecision.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Only here are you almost sure that you are careening on top of a big shiny globe, blurrily spinning—you are never aware of these things in Chicago, it being so flat, so straight—and and and we have been *chosen*, you see, chosen, and have been given this, it being owed to us, earned by us, all of this—the sky is blue for us, the sun makes passing cars twinkle like toys for us, the ocean undulates and churns for us, murmurs and coos to us. We are owed, see this is ours, see.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers thinks this as he drives along Highway 1 in California with Toph, looking out over the expansive Pacific Ocean and feeling a strange sort of freedom. His giddiness reminds readers of his earlier admission that he feels a sense of "unimpeachable freedom" after his parents die. In keeping with this, he insists he and Toph have been "chosen," a word that suggests they're destined for good things. They have, he thinks, "earned" the right to enjoy the world. As such, they look around and feel like "the sky is blue for" them and like the "ocean undulates and churns" for them. Because they've endured so much hardship, Eggers is convinced that life "owes" them, and he intends to pass this feeling to Toph as they speed along the highway and revel in the beauty of California.

They laugh, I chuckle—not too much, I don't want to seem overeager, but enough to say "I hear you. I laugh with you. I share in the moment." But when the chuckling is over I am still apart, something else, and no one is sure what I am. They don't want to invest their time in the brother sent to pick up Toph while his mother cooks dinner or is stuck at work or in traffic. To them I'm a temp. A cousin maybe. The young boyfriend of a divorcee? They don't care.

Fuck it. I don't want to be friends with these women, anyway. Why would I care? I am not them. They are the old model and we are the new.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of how Eggers feels when he sits on the sidelines at Toph's baseball games. While he watches his little brother, he's cognizant of the effect his own presence has on the other parents. In particular, he wonders what the middle-aged mothers that sit nearby think about him. He even makes a small attempt to assimilate into their group, "chuckling" at their jokes without fully participating in their conversations. All he wants, it seems, is for them to understand that he's old enough (or mature enough) to "share in the moment." In other words, he wants them to recognize that he, like them, is an adult capable of assuming responsibility for a child. However, there's another part of him that doesn't want to be associated with them at all. "Fuck it," he determines. "I don't want to be friends with these women, anyway." In this moment, he reminds himself that he doesn't need to conform to the conventional image of parenthood just because these mothers don't acknowledge the validity of his role as Toph's guardian.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ It's an effort [...] to let him know, if it weren't already obvious, that as much as I want to carry on our parents' legacy, he and I will also be doing some *experimenting*. And constantly entertaining, like some amazing, endless telethon. There is a voice inside me, a very excited, chirpy voice, that urges me to keep things merry, madcap even, the mood buoyant. Because Beth is always pulling out old photo albums, crying, asking Toph how he feels, I feel I have to overcompensate by keeping us occupied. I am making our lives a music video, a game show on Nickelodeon—lots of quick cuts, crazy camera angles, fun, fun, *fun*! It's a campaign of distraction and revisionist history—leaflets dropped behind enemy lines, fireworks, funny dances, magic tricks.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Beth Eggers, Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers knows that he has to take care of Toph, but he also understands that he isn't required to "carry on" every single one of their parents' rules or habits when it comes to raising him. After all, they are in a unique situation, and so Eggers might as well embrace this fact and accept that he isn't a conventional caretaker, but rather a cross between an older brother, a roommate, and a parent. This is why he decides to do some "*experimenting*" with Toph. However, there's more to this choice than simply wanting to remain true to his own childrearing style. Indeed, he seems to feel a certain obligation to "keep things merry." He wants to "entertain" Toph as a way of distracting him from the possibly crushing sadness of his parents' death. While Beth focuses on upholding their parents' legacy by showing Toph old pictures, Eggers tries to make sure his brother can still lead the carefree life of a young boy.

❝ They are scared. They are jealous.

We are pathetic. We are stars.

We are either sad and sickly or we are glamorous and new. We walk in and the choices race through my head. Sad and sickly? Or glamorous and new? Sad/sickly or glamorous/new? Sad/sickly? Glamorous/new?

We are unusual and tragic and alive.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eggers goes to an open house at Toph's school and worries about what people think of him. In particular, he wonders if the middle-aged parents of Toph's peers see him and his little brother as "pathetic" because they're such an unconventional pair. Compared to everyone else, Eggers is young and ragged, which is why he feels out of place. As a result, he can't help but second guess the way he presents himself, wondering if he looks "sad" or "sickly," hoping he and Toph don't seem like the kind of people who others should pity. At the same time, his characteristic confidence remains intact, so he vacillates between two extremes: insecurity and pride. "We are pathetic. We are stars," he writes, making it clear that even in his own mind, his identity flashes back and forth between opposing poles. This, it seems, is what it feels like to be an outsider, making it hard for Eggers to determine whether or not he should be proud that he doesn't conform to the stereotypical image of parent.

Chapter 4 Quotes

If when she comes over she questions anything about the state of the house—"Oh God, there's food under the couch!" or even "Holy bachelor pad!"—or worse, any parental decisions made in her company or otherwise, she is first glared at in Toph's presence, later lectured out of his earshot, and then becomes fodder for month-long trashings in conversations with Beth about people who know nothing about anything and how dare they say anything, these people, these lotus-eating simpletons who have never known struggle, who would never question other parents, but feel the right to question me, us, simply because we are new at it, are young, are siblings.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Beth Eggers, Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers has very strict rules about the women he dates, and he outlines them in this passage. In turn, he makes it immediately clear that he doesn't welcome any kind of criticism from his potential romantic partners, even if they say something in jest like, "Holy bachelor pad!" This, it seems, is a rather harmless thing to say, but to Eggers it suggests that the woman he has brought home disapproves of his lifestyle, and this inevitably leads him to wonder if she'll also judge the way he's raising Toph. To that end, if she says anything about his "parental decisions," he won't hesitate to "lecture" her, since he believes that people cast unfair judgement on him simply because he's younger than the average guardian. Although this is most likely the case, it's worth noting that he's clearly making things especially hard on himself. After all, he often laments the fact that he doesn't have a social life and can't meet any women because of his role as Toph's caretaker. When he *does* meet women, though, he subjects them to incredibly harsh scrutiny, all but ensuring that he'll remain single.

"[…] I mean, it was almost as if it was too much to happen in one day, as if a number of days had been spliced together to quickly paint a picture of an entire period of time, to create a whole-seeming idea of how we are living, without having to stoop (or rise) to actually pacing the story out."

"What are you getting at?"

"No, I think it's good, it's fine. Not entirely believable, but it works fine, in general. It's fine."

Related Characters: Dave Eggers, Toph Eggers (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation between Toph and Eggers. Eggers has just put Toph to bed, and as he's about to leave, he turns to comment on the fact that they had a busy day. Toph agrees, going on to say that it almost feels "as if a number of days ha[ve] been spliced together to quickly paint a picture of an entire period of time." At this point, readers probably sense that Eggers is using Toph to comment on his own authorial choices. After all, he has already admitted in the preface that he has compressed time in order to better tell his story. Now, Toph puts his finger on the fact that Eggers is trying to create a broad "idea" of how they're living, pointing out that this is an alternative to "actually pacing the story out" as a conventional narrative. This is the first time in the text that Toph breaks out of character to provide a meta-narrative analysis of how Eggers is writing his story. As such, this is an important moment because it reminds readers—after having read roughly 100 pages of relatively straightforward narrative—that Eggers is also interested in dissecting his own storytelling techniques.

You know, to be honest, though, what I see is less a problem with form, all that garbage, and more a problem of conscience. You're completely paralyzed with guilt about relating all this in the first place, especially the stuff earlier on. You feel somehow obligated to do it, but you also know that Mom and Dad would *hate* it, would crucify you […]. But then again, I should say, and Bill and Beth would say—well, probably not Bill, but definitely Beth—that your guilt, and their disapproval, is a very middlebrow, middle-class, midwestern sort of disapproval. It's superstition as much as anything—like the primitives who fear the camera will take their soul. You struggle with a guilt both Catholic and unique to the home in which you were raised. Everything there was a secret—for instance, your father being in AA was not to be spoken of, ever, while he was in and after he stopped attending. You never told even your closest friends about anything that happened inside that house. And now you alternately rebel against and embrace that kind of suppression.

Related Characters: Toph Eggers (speaker), Bill Eggers, Beth Eggers, Eggers's Father (John Eggers), Eggers's Mother (Heidi Eggers), Dave Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In their meta-narrative conversation about how Eggers has chosen to tell his story (and his parents' stories), Toph upholds that his older brother feels "guilty" about the entire project of his memoir. He knows that his mother and father "would *hate* it" if they knew he was writing about them, since they were always private people. However, Toph also cuts Eggers some slack, admitting that his guilt also probably has to do with "the house in which [he was] raised." Although his father was an atheist, his mother was Catholic, a religion that encourages believers to periodically confess their sins, a practice that many people think inspires extraordinary amounts of guilt. As a result, Eggers is ashamed to violate his parents' privacy, though he also resents that he's been made to feel this way, ultimately thinking the story is his to tell. As Toph articulates this "problem of conscience," Eggers finds himself capable of putting his finger on the tricky dynamic that lies at the heart of his desire to write about his life—a dynamic that encompasses both guilt and the feeling that he deserves to write what he wants.

> Anyway, with me you have this amazing chance to right the wrongs of your own upbringing, you have an opportunity to do everything better—to carry on those traditions that made sense and to jettison those that didn't—which is something every parent has the chance to do, of course, to show up one's own parents, do everything better, to upwardly evolve from them—but in this case, it's even more heightened, means so much more, because you get to do this with me, *their own progeny*.

Related Characters: Toph Eggers (speaker), Dave Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Toph says this to Eggers while directly addressing his brother's misgivings about how he's telling his story. When he says that Eggers has the chance "to carry on" the "traditions" set forth by their parents, readers will recall Eggers's previous assertion that, although he wants to carry on their parents' "legacy," he also wants Toph to know that they will be "*experimenting*." In this moment, Toph acknowledges that his older brother is obsessed with this idea, constantly trying to strike a balance between the traditions of their family and his own childrearing practices. After all, Eggers thinks of Toph and himself as the "New Model," a certain kind of updated, contemporary family that doesn't adhere to traditions or stereotypes. At the same time, Eggers is cognizant of the fact that he should try to keep alive "those traditions that [make] sense," since they are essentially all Toph has left of his parents, considering that he doesn't have many memories of them.

Chapter 5 Quotes

> Then, at the moment that I am turning the corner, I become convinced, in a flash of pure truth-seeing—it happens every time I leave him anywhere—that Toph will be killed. Of course. The baby-sitter was acting peculiar, was too quiet, too unassuming. His eyes had plans. Of course. So obvious from the beginning. I ignored the signals. Toph had told me Stephen was weird, repeatedly had mentioned his scary laugh, the veggie food he brought and cooked, and I just shrugged it all off. If something happens it'll be my fault. He will try bad things on Toph. He will try to molest Toph. While Toph is sleeping he will do something with wax and rope. The possibilities snap through my head like pedophilia flashcards—handcuffs, floorboards, clown suits, leather, videotape, duct tape, knives, bathtubs, refrigerators—
>
> Toph will never wake up.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Stephen, Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

As he drives away from his house to go out for the night, Eggers can't stop himself from playing out terrible scenarios in his head. This, he says, "happens every time" he leaves. Thinking about the worst-case scenario, he envisions extraordinarily vivid images. Worse, he begins to feel guilty about having left, thinking that it will be his fault if Toph dies. "I ignored the signals," he thinks, convinced that he'll somehow be the one to blame for his brother's unlikely death.

This kind of thinking arises from Eggers's past experiences with loss. Because he was exposed to death in such a life-

altering way when he was trying to care for his sick mother, he has trouble keeping himself from thinking about mortality. This reaches back to his previous idea regarding fatality, a notion he sets forth in the acknowledgements section—because he knows terrible things can happen, he explains, he can't avoid the "unshakeable" feeling that they *will* happen. Of course, his thoughts about Stephen killing Toph are so extreme that readers are able to understand how unlikely they are to actually happen, but Eggers is too consumed by his morbid hypotheses to see this for himself.

> [...] maybe they'd just be sitting around, at Moodie's usually, watching cable, getting ready, and I would be there, on the couch, with a beer from the fridge, savoring every minute, not knowing when it would come again, and they would be casual, having no idea what it meant to me, even when I'd be a little manic about it all, a little overeager, laughing too much, drinking too quickly, getting another from the fridge, no problem, okay, hoping for something to happen, hoping we'd go somewhere good, anything to make the night *count*, make it worth it, justify the constant red/black worry, the visions—I felt so detached sometimes, went for weeks at a time without really being around people my age, like living in a country where no one understands your words[.]

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Moodie, Stephen, Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers delivers this description of his social isolation as a monologue to an imaginary jury. Convinced that Stephen is going to kill Toph, he's sure he—Eggers—will be held accountable, and so he thinks about what he'll say when he's called to court. As he creates this terrible scenario, though, his mind wanders, and he eventually finds himself talking about how much it "mean[s] to" him to simply hang out with his friends, even if they're not doing anything particularly exciting. This, readers understand, is what Eggers misses out on as a result of his role as Toph's guardian. Because he doesn't like getting Toph babysitters, he rarely goes out, and when he does, he wants to "make the night *count*." This makes sense, considering how much he worries about leaving his little brother at home. In order for it all to be "worth it," he hopes that "something will happen" or that he and his friends will "go somewhere good." And as he thinks about this—savoring every moment of his freedom—his friends casually go on with their night, unaware of the fact that a simple night out is an important experience for Eggers. As a result, he feels estranged from his friends, who lead the kind of carefree lives he's unable to maintain.

> You wouldn't believe what people will believe once they know our story. They're ready for anything, basically—will believe anything, because they've been thrown off-balance, are still wondering if any of this is true, our story in general, but aren't sure and are terrified of offending us.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers says this to a friend while telling her an absurd story about Toph. Standing in a crowded bar, she has just asked him where his little brother is, and because several others have already asked him this question—which he thinks is pointless—he decides to have some fun by telling her that he hasn't seen Toph since he ran off after shooting someone at his school. When she asks if the police officers believed his story when he told them about it, he says that people will believe almost anything "once they know" his and Toph's story. "They're ready for anything, basically—will believe anything," he says, clearly referring to the fact that she too has immediately believed his highly unbelievable story. This, he knows, is simply because she—along with most everyone else—isn't accustomed to encountering a guardian like Eggers, who doesn't fit the mold of a conventional caretaker. By making fun of this woman for believing him, Eggers demonstrates to readers not only that people are inclined to believe ludicrous things about him and Toph, but also that they are "terrified of offending" them, thinking that they must be fragile because of the hardship they've experienced.

I tell her how funny it is we're talking about all this because as it so happens I'm already working to change all this, am currently in the middle of putting together something that will address all these issues, that will inspire millions to greatness, that with some high school friends […] we're putting something together that will smash all these misconceptions about us, how it'll help us all to throw off the shackles of our supposed obligations, our fruitless career tracks, how we will force, at least urge, millions to live more exceptional lives, to {standing up for effect} do extraordinary things, to travel the world, to help people and start things and end things and build things…

"And how will you do this?" she wants to know. "A political party? A march? A revolution? A coup?"

"A magazine."

Related Characters: Meredith Weiss, Dave Eggers (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eggers talks with Meredith about his ambitious plans to change the world. They're sitting on the beach and have been telling each other about all of their lofty goals, which are well-intentioned if unrealistic or idealistic. Now, Eggers grandly declares that he's already "working to change" the world. Waxing poetic about his vision, he promises to "smash" the "misconceptions" that society has about their generation. As he speaks this way, it's worth noting that—despite his impressive claims—the things he's saying are actually quite vague. For instance, he says that his project will "throw off the shackles" of his generation's "supposed obligations," but he doesn't specify what, exactly, the obligations *are*, other than that they seem to have something to do with their "careers." Eggers's vagueness in this speech has to do with the fact that he's full of youthful energy and feels like anything is possible. Of course, this is a commendable worldview and isn't something that ought to be disparaged. However, Eggers seems to be making fun of himself in retrospect by building up readers' (and Meredith's) expectations throughout this scene, but when Meredith finally asks how he plans to do this, he merely says: "A magazine." Suffice it to say, magazines have existed for a long time, and though literature does certainly have the power to effect change, it seems unlikely that one independent magazine in San Francisco in the mid-1990s will "force" "millions to live more exceptional lives."

Chapter 6 Quotes

Everyone's seen the show. We all despise it, are enthralled by it, morbidly curious. Is it interesting because it's so bad, because the stars of it are so profoundly uninteresting? Or is it because in it we recognize so much that is maddeningly familiar? Maybe this is indeed us. Watching the show is like listening to one's voice on tape: it's real of course, but however mellifluous and articulate you hear your own words, once they're sent through this machine and are given back to you, they're high-pitched, nasal, horrifying. Are our lives that? *Do we talk like that, look like that?* Yes. *It could not be.* It is. *No.*

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

When MTV's program *The Real World* comes to San Francisco to cast its second season, Eggers and his friends pretend they've never seen it. However, Eggers admits in this passage that "everyone's seen the show" and that they "all despise" it even if they're also "morbidly curious" about it. He and his contemporaries at *Might* magazine are, for the most part, not interested in things considered mainstream. Because of this, he wonders why he's so "enthralled" by *The Real World*, which is very prominently in the mainstream. He posits that he's interested in the show because he secretly thinks it represents his generation. "Maybe this is indeed us," he says. And although he hates the idea that he might be similar to the cast members—who fight with one another and talk in a certain unappealing way—he can't deny that the show itself explores the same kind of ideas that he himself is interested in exploring. After all, *The Real World* tries to represent reality in an altered environment. In the same way that Eggers tries in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* to accurately tell his story while simultaneously changing a number of elements of his life, this TV show presents viewers with "real" people who often dramatize their everyday lives to make themselves more interesting. As a result, Eggers is drawn to the show, though he's reluctant to admit it.

It was overwhelmingly white, of course, but racism of any kind—at least outwardly expressed—is kind of gauche, so we basically grew up without any sense of prejudice, firsthand or even in the abstract. With the kind of wealth and isolation we had from societal sorts of issues—crime, outside of the vandalism perpetrated by me and my friends, was unheard of—the town was free to see those kinds of things as a kind of entertainment—wrestling matches being contested by other people, in other places.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Laura Folger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers says this to Laura in his interview to be on *The Real World*. Describing his hometown of Lake Forest, Illinois, he explains that he grew up in an "overwhelmingly white" environment. As a result, he claims, he never encountered bigotry. He even suggests that he and his peers "grew up without any sense of prejudice, firsthand or even in the abstract." Of course, it seems obvious that this is because they themselves never had to *face* prejudice, so they never paid attention to its existence in the larger world.

When Eggers committed petty crimes like "vandalism," no one took note of it. It's worth pointing out here that this isn't because vandalism is a nonconsequential crime, but rather because the people doing the actual vandalizing were white. If a person of color had done what Eggers and his friends did, it's quite possible the town wouldn't see it "as a kind of entertainment," but rather as a serious offense. However, Eggers maintains that such "societal issues" were perceived in his town as existing "in other places." By saying this, he reveals the naïve outlook that the absence of bigotry in an "overwhelmingly white" town blots out the very idea of bigotry itself. However, it seems in this moment that he's purposefully showcasing the flaws of this kind of thinking, since he probably wouldn't include such rhetorically unsound ideas if he didn't want to critique them.

Chapter 7 Quotes

We've reached the end of pure inspiration, and are now somewhere else, something implying routine, or doing something because people expect us to do it, going somewhere each day because we went there the day before, saying things because we have said them before, and this seems like the work of a different sort of animal, contrary to our plan, and this is very very bad.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eggers discusses what it feels like to slowly lose interest in *Might* magazine. At first, he and his friends were excited to produce something they thought might change the world. At the very least, they relished the opportunity to publish something "by and for" people like them. Now, though, they've run out of "inspiration." Worse, Eggers feels like his continued work on the magazine is nothing more than a "routine." Having fallen into a pattern, he no longer feels like the cutting-edge, optimistic young editor he always wanted to be. Instead, he feels like an entirely "different sort of animal," the kind that drifts through life without enthusiasm. And although this is unfortunate, he frames it as a natural development, suggesting that even the most thrilling ideas or endeavors can eventually lose their spark.

Chapter 9 Quotes

While the ill are ill, if you can be there you should be there. I know these things. Bizarre, self-sacrificing gestures are important. On days that you cannot possibly come visit, you must visit. When you get home one night, and Toph says, "So, are you going to pretend to be a parent tonight, or what?"—which he means as a kind of joke, because you two have been eating fast food for weeks, and you've been napping on the couch every night after dinner—you should take a breath and know that this is okay, that this sort of thing, this struggle and sacrifice, is essential, that he does not understand but someday will.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Shalini Malhotra, Toph Eggers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

Eggers writes this in relation to Shalini's accident. In the aftermath of her disaster, Eggers and his friends visit her in the hospital day in and day out. He feels this is his duty, saying, "While the ill are ill, if you can be there you should be there." He has experienced firsthand what it means to a person when someone comes to visit their ailing family

member. Unfortunately, he himself isn't in the best position to make "bizarre, self-sacrificing gestures" for Shalini, since he also has to care for Toph. Nonetheless, he commits himself to visiting his friend, so much so that even Toph notices. Once again, then, Eggers is caught between his independent life and his life as a guardian. Instead of feeling thoroughly guilty about not giving Toph the attention he wants, though, he tells himself that someday his brother will understand what it means to make these "sacrifices."

Chapter 10 Quotes

The idea, I suppose, is the emotional equivalent of a drug binge, the tossing together of as much disparate and presumably incompatible stimuli as possible, in a short span, five days, together constituting a sort of socio-familial archaeological bender, to see what comes of it, how much can be dredged up, brought back, remembered, exploited, excused, pitied, made known, made permanent.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 359

Explanation and Analysis

When Eggers returns to his hometown of Lake Forest for a wedding, he plans to revisit several places and people from his past. With a tape recorder in hand, he thinks of this experience as "the emotional equivalent of a drug binge," since he's going to encounter a number of "stimuli" that make him feel vulnerable and sad. The fact that he frames it in this way suggests that there's something that feels illicit about coming back and looking for emotionally wrought material, which he'll then put into his memoir. Indeed, he confirms this notion when he says that he will see what can be "remembered" and subsequently "exploited," an acknowledgement that he plans to take whatever he can from his past and make it "known" in his memoir. Once again, then, he finds himself wanting to write about his past while feeling guilty about publicizing his loved ones' stories and lives.

I had loved how vague it was before. *Where are they?* Well, that's a good question. *Where were they buried?* Another interesting question. That was the beauty of my father's way. We knew that he had been diagnosed, but not how sick he was. We knew that he was in the hospital, but then not how close he was. It had always felt strangely appropriate, and his departure was made complete, as was hers, by the fact that the ashes never found us in California, that we had moved, and moved again, and again, dodging, weaving.

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Beth Eggers, Eggers's Mother (Heidi Eggers), Eggers's Father (John Eggers)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 374

Explanation and Analysis

When Eggers calls Beth from Illinois and asks her about their parents' ashes, she tells him that the cremation company called her a year ago and asked if she wanted her parents' remains—and she said no. This devastates Eggers, especially because he "loved how vague" everything was before he knew what had happened to the ashes. Back then, he couldn't answer where his parents were or where they were buried, and this helped him cope with their absence. In particular, this felt like an appropriate end to his father's life, since the man was so secretive himself. When Eggers says that he and his family didn't know "how close" their father was, he's referring to the fact that none of them knew how soon he would die, since he passed away so abruptly. This kind of mysterious disappearance, Eggers feels, went nicely with the uncertainty surrounding his parents' ashes. Now, though, he has to come to terms with the fact that he'll never find his parents' remains (though this isn't actually the case, as he soon finds out).

Chapter 11 Quotes

To hear anger from him is a great relief. I had worried about his lack of anger, had worried that he and I had been too harmonious, that I hadn't given him enough friction. He needed friction, I had begun insisting to myself. After all the years of normalcy and coddling, it was time to give the boy something to be pissed about. How else would he succeed? Where would he find his motivation, if not from the desire to tread over me?

Related Characters: Dave Eggers (speaker), Toph Eggers

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 413

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after Toph has just cursed in front of Eggers for the first time, calling him an "asshole," then an "a-hole," and then a "dickhead." Unlike most guardians or parents, Eggers is "relieved" to hear Toph use such words, since he has begun to worry that his little brother doesn't have enough "anger." For Eggers, anger is a necessary part of growing up, something that helps a person define themselves. He himself has had a lot to be angry about, first and foremost the general cruelty of life, which took his parents from him at an early age and forced him to take on a responsibility he was most likely not quite ready for (though it's worth noting that he loves Toph and actually enjoys raising him). When Toph curses, readers also see how much he has grown up from the opening pages of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, when he was just a little boy playing videogames and avoiding his mother, who was sick on the couch. In turn, Eggers manages to provide one last examination of what it means to come of age, this time suggesting that adversity plays a large role in the development of a person's maturity.

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.

RULES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ENJOYMENT OF THIS BOOK

Eggers begins by saying that it isn't necessary to read the book's preface, which "exists mostly for the author." He also suggests that the acknowledgements section isn't important to the plot of the book and that it, too, can be skipped, along with the table of contents and even a stretch of pages in the middle of the text. "Matter of fact," he writes, "the first three or four chapters are all some of you might want to bother with." After that, he admits, the book is somewhat "uneven."

Right away, Eggers makes his narrative self-consciousness overwhelmingly apparent. Using a mixture of self-deprecating humor and sarcasm, he shows readers that, although this memoir may contain tragic material, it isn't necessary to approach the text with an overinflated sense of seriousness.

PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

Pointing out that *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* isn't a "work of pure nonfiction," Eggers reveals that most of the book's dialogue has been "reconstructed" by memory and reformulated by his imagination, though he maintains that the essence of the recorded conversations remain "essentially true." He notes that, oddly enough, the most "surreal dialogue" in the book is perhaps the most "true to life."

When A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius *was first published, many authors were writing memoirs. Perhaps because of the genre's sudden trendiness, Eggers goes out of his way to point out that his book isn't a purely factual recreation of reality. Instead of suggesting that his memoir is an exact account of everything that has happened to him, he embraces the faultiness of memory, asserting that something can still be "essentially true" even if it has been approximated and "reconstructed" in a semi-fictional form.*

Eggers also goes out of his way to state that although the characters in his memoir are based on real people, some of their names have been changed to preserve anonymity. The character John, for instance, isn't actually named John in real life, but Eggers's friend asked that his name be omitted from the manuscript because he didn't want "the dark portions of his life chronicled." This character, Eggers asserts, is somewhat of an "amalgam," and in order to fully keep his friend's identity a secret, he had to make other alterations, creating a "domino effect." For example, John and a character named Meredith Weiss are quite close in this book, but this isn't the case in real life—Eggers simply had Meredith play someone else's role so that no one would be able to identify John by association.

By commenting on the veracity of his story, Eggers calls readers' attention to his narrative style. Before the story has even begun, he emphasizes his role as the author—a role he believes grants him the poetic license he needs to narrate his tale without harming any of the people he's writing about. In turn, his eagerness to establish or justify this kind of narrative flexibility suggests that he feels guilty about altering the facts of reality for his own purposes, though he clearly doesn't feel bad enough about this to not do it. Instead, he decides to acknowledge the complexities that come along with writing a memoir, ultimately making these considerations part of the story itself.

Eggers admits he has compressed various timelines in order to better represent his story. He also takes a moment to make sure readers know that he had to omit a large amount of material, including several "really great sex scenes" that might embarrass the people involved. In fact, there were also a handful of other scenes Eggers had to delete from his manuscript, so he takes a moment to include these passages in the preface—the scenes themselves are largely difficult to follow, since they were originally intended to appear in the middle of the book. They detail, variously: Eggers watching his mother in the hospital while lying on an extra bed with his sister Beth and little brother Toph; Eggers's botched attempt to paint a portrait of his friend's dead father; and Eggers's fear of death, which culminates in a story about a near-death experience in the Amazon.

For the most part, Eggers's tone is glib and sarcastic in the preface. However, by including sections that didn't make it into the actual text, he foreshadows some of the book's most prominent focal points, including his mother's death, his relationship with his brother, and his own fear of death. As such, he manages to use his meta-narrative style to actually advance the story itself, surprising readers by hiding valuable thematic content in sections that might otherwise seem insubstantial.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Eggers thanks the people who have allowed him to write about them, especially Beth and Toph. Moving on, he acknowledges that there are "perhaps too many memoir-sorts of books being written at this juncture." These texts, he thinks, are "inherently vile and corrupt and wrong and evil and bad." At the same time, he reminds people that "we could all do worse, as readers and writers."

Again, it's clear that Eggers is acutely aware of the reputation memoirs have received in the years leading up to his own contribution to the genre. This, it seems, is something that embarrasses him. However, his acknowledgement of this discomfort ultimately becomes part of his project as a memoirist, since recognizing his misgivings is ultimately a form of introspection.

Eggers tells a story about running into a writer friend at a bar and telling him that he's working on a memoir, to which his friend says, "Don't tell me you've fallen into that trap!" This makes Eggers think that "maybe writing about actual events, in the first person, if not from Ireland and before you turned seventy, was *Bad*." His friend, he thinks, has a "point." However, when he asks this man what *he's* working on, the critical man replies by saying that he's writing a screenplay about William S. Burroughs and "the drug culture," and this makes Eggers feel better. Indeed, he realizes that there are worse ideas than writing a memoir.

Once more, Eggers doesn't hide the fact that he's embarrassed to have written a memoir. At the same time, he stands by his decision to examine his life, which he thinks is no worse than his friend's run-of-the-mill idea to write a screenplay about William S. Burroughs, an author who has already been written about quite a lot. By spotlighting this interaction—in which he decides to embrace the idea of writing a memoir—Eggers essentially gives himself the artistic permission he needs to tell his story despite his many hesitations.

If, Eggers says, readers dislike the idea that this book is a memoir, they should feel free to "pretend it's fiction." He even makes them an offer: if readers send him their copy of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and a check for $10.00, he will send them back a floppy disk copy of the manuscript. All the names and places, he explains, will have been changed. What's more, readers can even use their word processor's "find and replace" function to change the manuscript themselves, turning the people and places to reflect anything or anyone they want. "This can be about *you*!" he writes. "You and *your* pals!"

Although Eggers has demonstrated his misgivings about memoirs, in this moment he makes fun of anyone who categorically judges a text based on its genre. To him, it doesn't really *matter if his story is considered fiction or nonfiction—either way, it's a narrative that will unavoidably reference his life. Anyone unwilling to accept this, he suggests, is rather shallow, and he makes the tongue-in-cheek offer to send digital copies to people who might want to make the story about them and their "pals." Note also the references (for example, to floppy disks) that make the narrative seem both contemporary and dated.*

Eggers establishes that the title of his memoir is intentionally grandiose, but suggests that it was the least ridiculous option of the handful of titles he came up with for the project. He also goes out of his way to describe himself in a way that he thinks will endear him to readers, since he knows that the "success of a memoir—of any book, really—has a lot to do with how appealing its narrator is." As such, he assures readers that he is like them, that he "falls asleep shortly after he becomes drunk," that he "sometimes has sex without condoms," that he "never gave his parents a proper burial" or finished college, and that he "expects to die young" (among other descriptions).

As if it's not clear already, Eggers makes sure readers are aware of the fact that he's drawn to exaggeration and hyperbole. This is made evident by the memoir's title itself, of which Eggers appears simultaneously proud and embarrassed. What's more, he reveals his penchant for rapid escalation when he provides a list of the ways he's relatable. Of course, falling asleep "shortly after" becoming drunk is rather common, but Eggers quickly takes a darker turn when he says that he hasn't given his parents "a proper burial" and that he "expects to die young." Suddenly, his list of generalizations has become highly specific, forcing readers to leave behind the premise of his previous statement and focus solely on the attention-grabbing details of his life.

Addressing the content of the memoir itself, Eggers identifies several themes that are woven throughout the text. The first is "The Unspoken Magic of Parental Disappearance," which has to do with the seemingly "inconceivable" fact that he lost both his parents "in the space of 32 days." This loss, he suggests, is "accompanied by an undeniable but then of course guilt-inducing sense of mobility, of infinite possibility, having suddenly found oneself in a world with neither floor nor ceiling." Another salient theme, Eggers notes, is "The Brotherly / Weird Symbiosis Factor," which has to do with his relationship with his little brother, Toph. Eggers doesn't spend much time unpacking this in this section, though he does suggest that it runs throughout the book and that the love he has for his brother overshadows any kind of romantic love he might ever have.

Eggers surrounds his heartache with sarcasm and humor, but the pain of losing his parents still comes through quite strongly. So strongly, in fact, that he goes out of his way to identify "The Unspoken Magic of Parental Disappearance" as the book's most prominent concern. What's interesting, though, is that he doesn't focus solely on sadness or despair, but rather on the unexpected feeling of "infinite possibility" that came along with becoming an orphan. In turn, he's caught between feelings of freedom and "guilt" as he mourns his parents while simultaneously reveling in the fact that—now that the worst has happened—his life can seemingly only get better.

The third theme that Eggers identifies is "The Painfully, Endlessly Self-Conscious Book Aspect." This, he posits, is "probably obvious enough already," but the "point is" that Eggers doesn't have "the energy" or "skill" to hide the fact that this book merely tells people things about his life in a way that isn't "sublimated" or "narrative." As made evident by the following theme, "The Knowingness About the Book's Self-Consciousness Aspect," Eggers makes sure readers know that he's aware of his memoir's use of self-consciousness. He says that he "plans to be clearly, obviously aware of his knowingness about his self-consciousness of self-referentiality." He knows that this is a "gimmick," and as such intends to "preempt" any claim that this gimmick is "simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story."

By acknowledging his memoir's self-conscious style, Eggers creates a meta-narrative, or a storyline that is about the very act of storytelling itself. Not only does this help him examine himself (which is largely the point of this memoir), it also enables him to "preempt" any criticism readers might have about his self-consciousness—he wants everyone to know that he's in control and that he knows exactly what he's doing by commenting on his own project in this objective, removed manner. This, he says, is a purposeful technique, one that—despite its "gimmickry"—helps him deal with content that would otherwise be too painful to recount. In other words, Eggers's meta-narrative approach enables him to access "the core" of his story.

Part of the reason Eggers uses "gimmickry" is because he finds it useful to "caricature" the "rage and sorrow" that would otherwise be too intense to write about. What's more, he feels the need to tell "as many people as possible" about these difficult things—"even in caricatured or condensed form"—because he thinks doing so will "dilute the pain and bitterness." This idea dovetails with the next theme, entitled, "The Telling the World of Suffering as Means of Flushing or at Least Diluting of Pain Aspect." From this point on, the themes he provides become increasingly absurd, with long titles and hardly any explanation. On the whole, they have to do either with his desire to tell his story or his feelings of "fatalism" that emerge after his parents die, an experience that makes him feel both "chosen" for greatness and doomed to misery.

Storytelling, Eggers asserts, has the power to "dilute" pain. This, it seems, is why he has chosen to write a memoir despite his many misgivings about the genre. Furthermore, his tendency to portray things in absurd or humorous ways has to do with his feeling that turning something into a "caricature" ultimately makes it easier to write about. On another note, when he says that he feels "chosen," he's referring to the feeling of "infinite possibility" that arose for him in the wake of his parents' death. However, he admits that losing his parents also reminded him of death's inevitability, giving him the fatalistic sense that there's nothing he can do to change his future.

CHAPTER 1

It is December, and Eggers's mother is dying on the couch in their home in Lake Forest, Illinois. She has stomach cancer and can no longer walk, so she spends her time watching TV and spitting green fluid into a small "plastic receptacle," which Eggers and his sister Beth take turns emptying. The green fluid smells foul, but Eggers never comments on it. Six months ago, doctors removed his mother's stomach, though by then there "wasn't a lot left to removed." Eggers notes that he would list what they had already taken out, but he doesn't know the medical terms.

Compared to the preface and acknowledgements sections, the first chapter of A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius *is relatively straightforward. Eggers suddenly drops almost all of his self-conscious meta-narrative techniques in order to set the scene: his mother is about to die. However, as he establishes this, he subtly reminds readers of his limitations as a writer who must rely on memory, saying that he doesn't know the medical terms the doctors used when operating on his mother.*

Eggers describes the progression of his mother's illness, including the brief period after she did chemotherapy when it seemed like everything might be all right. Unfortunately, her health quickly deteriorated after this brief reprieve, and now Eggers pictures black coils of cancer cells teeming in her stomach like some "unruly, sprawling, environmentally careless citizenry with no zoning laws whatsoever." As Eggers and his mother watch a show on TV about bodybuilders competing in athletic competitions against amateur athletes, she gets a nosebleed. Because she can't pinch her nose tightly enough, Eggers reaches over and tries to stop the bleeding with his own hand, but it doesn't work.

It quickly becomes clear that Eggers is one of his mother's primary caretakers. This is a reversal of sorts, since parents are usually the ones who take care of their children. As such, Eggers shows readers the extent to which illness and tragedy can alter personal relationships, forcing responsibility on people who aren't necessarily prepared to take on such serious duties.

A month earlier, Beth woke up early and went downstairs, where she found the front door open. It was late autumn in Illinois, and cold air was coming through the open doorframe. As she got closer, she saw the shape of her father outside. He was, for some reason, kneeling at the end of the driveway.

For those who have read the acknowledgements section—in which Eggers reveals that his parents died within 32 days of one another—this moment is charged with significance, since it seems obvious that Beth is witnessing some ominous precursor to her father's death. Eggers, it seems, is dramatizing Beth's experience of finding her father after he's been struck down by his illness.

Eggers takes a moment to describe their house, explaining that his family's taste is "inconsistent." In the family room, for instance, there is a recessed part of the chimney. One day, Eggers writes, his father decided to fill this space with a fish tank. Not caring to measure the area, he miraculously bought a tank that was a perfect fit. "Hey *hey!*" he said as he slid it in, a phrase he liked to use after accomplishing small, strange feats. "Loser," his family would often respond, and he'd say, "Aw, screw you," and go make himself a large Bloody Mary.

Eggers takes a moment to give readers a better idea of what his father was like. Many sections of A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius *contain small asides like this one, which don't necessarily advance the plot as much as they help Eggers create a portrait of his life and the people around him. In this moment, he provides readers with a visual detail about the room in which his mother is dying, and he also offers up a snapshot of his father, indicating that he was a quirky man who liked to drink.*

Eggers is home from college for winter break. His older brother, Bill, has just returned to D.C., where he works for something Eggers says has to do with "eastern European economics, privatization, conversion." Beth, for her part, has been home all year because she deferred her first year of law school. Since she rarely gets the opportunity to go out, she likes it when Eggers is home. Now, while holding his mother's nose, Eggers gazes at the fishless fish tank, which is still full of gauzy water. "Would you check it?" his mother says, talking about her nose. When he lets go to look up her nostril, nothing happens for a moment, but then the blood comes. This is dangerous, because her white blood cell count is so low that her blood won't clot.

As Eggers sits with his mother and watches TV, he still acts out the habits of ordinary life even though his mother's situation is potentially quite serious. Since her blood won't clot, any kind of bleeding could be fatal. Still, though, she and Eggers simply sit there and act normal. This, Eggers suggests, is what it looks like to confront the possibility of death—rather than instantly getting worked up about all the morbid possibilities, he and his mother simply wait. After all, if they always worried right away, they would never be able to live their lives.

When his mother's oncologist told them that "any bleeding could be the end," Eggers wasn't worried. "There seemed to be precious few opportunities to draw blood," he writes, since she spent all her time on the couch. "I'll keep sharp objects out of proximity," he joked, but the doctor didn't laugh. Wondering if he heard him, Eggers contemplated adding, "No more knife fights. No more knife throwing." However, he refrained from saying this, since this doctor doesn't often joke. "It is our job to joke with the doctors and nurses," he says. "It is our job to listen to the doctors, and after listening to the doctors, Beth usually asks the doctors specific questions," he notes. He points out that he "know[s]" he "should joke in the face of adversity," since there's "always humor," but recently he's been unable to find anything funny about his mother's situation.

Eggers frames humor as something that helps people face "adversity," something that can help them maintain their strength in the midst of hardship. This is why his memoir is so full of sarcasm and scathing jokes. As he previously mentioned, turning difficult things into "caricatures" helps him confront them. However, certain things—like death and serious illness—seem to resist humor altogether, though it's worth noting that Eggers keeps trying to make jokes even when doing so proves difficult.

As Eggers holds his mother's nose again, Toph comes upstairs from the basement, where he has been playing video games. "I can't get the Sega to work," he says. Asking him if it's turned on, Eggers tells him to turn it off and on again, and Toph retreats once more into the basement. Eggers then shifts gears again, narrating the moment that Beth saw their father kneeling outside. As she watched him, she noticed how slight he looked in his work suit. "He had lost so much weight," Eggers writes. "A car went by, a gray blur. She waited for him to get up."

When Toph emerges from the basement, readers witness the difficult position Eggers has found himself in as a result of his father's death and his mother's illness. Although he's only a college student, he suddenly has to take on certain parental responsibilities, both in terms of how he cares for his mother and in terms of how he cares for Toph.

It has been ten minutes, and Egger's mother's nose has not stopped bleeding. She had another nosebleed two weeks ago, and when Beth was unable to stop the flow, she took her to the emergency room, where the doctors kept her for two days. Even though her oncologist insisted that she stay longer, she demanded to be taken home because she is "terrified" of hospitals and fed up of having to spend time in them. Now that she's home again, she has determined to never go back, and has even made Beth and Eggers promise they won't force her to return.

The urgency of Eggers's mother's situation becomes all the more apparent as her nosebleed shows no signs of slowing down. Worse, Eggers and Beth have promised they won't take her to the hospital, meaning that if her nose doesn't stop bleeding on its own, she could die. By spotlighting this dilemma, Eggers shows readers the tricky balance of taking care of someone's medical needs while also respecting their personal wishes.

"We are both distantly worried about the bleeding nose, my mother and I, but are for the time being working under the assumption that the nose will stop bleeding," Eggers writes. As he continues to hold her nose while she watches TV and spits green fluid into the small plastic receptacle, he encourages her to "talk funny, the way people talk when their nose is being held," but she refuses, telling him to "cut it out." Changing the subject, she asks him how school is going, and he lies, saying things are fine even though he has actually been dropping classes. "How's Kirsten?" she asks, referring to his girlfriend. "She's good," he says, and even though he's engaged in conversation, he feels a creeping sense of dread, sensing that "it's coming." "We know it is coming," he writes, "but are not sure when—weeks? Months?"

Once again, Eggers tries to use humor to lighten the mood. By doing so, he hopes to make it easier to deal with this difficult situation. In this case, though, he seems to seek out humor for his own sake, not his mother's. As such, she moves past his joke by asking him about his life, but this does nothing to help him take his mind off the sinister feeling that her death is "coming."

Half an hour later, Eggers stops holding his mother's nose, and for a moment it seems the bleeding has stopped, but then it flows again with a vengeance. He grasps her nose, squeezing so hard he hurts her. Meanwhile, Toph comes upstairs and announces that he's hungry, but Eggers tells him he can't feed him at the moment. "Have something from the fridge," he says. When Toph asks what they have, Eggers says, "Why don't you look? You're seven, you're perfectly capable of looking." After a moment of going back and forth like this, their mother interjects, urging Toph to come to her, but Toph goes downstairs instead, waiting until Eggers orders a pizza. "He's scared of me," their mother says.

Again readers see the difficult position Eggers is in as caretaker for both his mother and Toph. What's notable, though, is that he calls upon Toph to be independent. He doesn't pamper his little brother, but instead urges him to figure out dinner for himself. This is not a very parental move, but rather the kind of thing an older brother would do. This makes sense, of course, since Eggers is *Toph's older brother. Nonetheless, this method of caretaking is worth keeping in mind, as it foreshadows the relationship that Eggers eventually builds with Toph when they are on their own.*

Eggers asks his mother what she wants to do about her nose, which won't stop bleeding. "I think we should do something," he says, but she says she just wants to wait. Eventually, she lets him call the nurse, who tells them to apply ice. While doing this, Eggers decides to lie lengthwise on the top edge of the couch—above his mother—so that he can hold the pack to her nose while still seeing the TV. Soon, the plastic receptacle fills to the brim, and Eggers notices that the liquid has blood and bile and blots of blackness in it. At this point, Beth comes home and asks what's going on, and they tell her about the nosebleed. "Shit," she says. She and Eggers talk about the situation for a moment, and when they turn back to their mother, she says, "I'm not going back in."

Yet again, Eggers—and now Beth—are in a difficult position. On the one hand, they want to do whatever is necessary to keep their mother alive, even if this means taking her to the hospital. On the other hand, they want to respect her wishes, and they've promised they won't make her go back to the emergency room. Nonetheless, promises like this are easier to make than they are to keep, and Eggers and Beth find themselves disconcerted by the idea that honoring their word might cost their mother her life.

Six months before this episode with the bloody nose, Eggers's father called him and Beth into the living room. He sat there smoking as they came into the room, and before they had a chance to get settled in, he said, "Your mother's going to die." In retrospect, Eggers calls his father "a man of minor miracles" and thinks that his courage in this moment was "pretty incredible."

It seems clear that Eggers's father dies before his mother, based on the way Eggers has chosen to narrate their respective stories. However, readers learn in this moment that Eggers's mother seems to have been diagnosed with cancer before he or Beth knew anything about their father's illness. As such, it's logical to assume that his sickness progressed considerably faster.

Beth takes Eggers's place holding the ice to their mother's nose, and Eggers goes downstairs to tell Toph that he'll order pizza soon. When he comes back upstairs, he takes the plastic receptacle from his mother and goes to empty it, but the fluid spills down the leg of his pants, and he finds himself wondering if it will burn through the denim. Beth meets him in the kitchen, where they whisper about what they're going to do. It has been an hour since their mother's nose started bleeding, and there are no signs indicating that it'll stop anytime soon. "It could be it," they say to each other. "She wants it to be it." They then debate whether or not this is true, deciding that—like them—she's probably "scared" and not "ready" for the end.

While contemplating whether or not to take his mother into the hospital, Eggers executes several smaller, more mundane tasks, like emptying his mother's receptacle and visiting Toph in the basement, making sure that the boy is taken care of. As such, Eggers shows readers that life doesn't stop just because something terrible is happening. When he returns to the kitchen and speaks with Beth, the two siblings think about the worst-case scenario, unable to avoid the possibility that their mother might die that very night.


When Beth goes back into the living room, Eggers contemplates how long it would take for his mother to bleed to death. He wonders if there are enough towels in the house to clean up the blood she'll spill if her nose bleeds for an entire day. He thinks about calling the emergency room, posing as a high school student doing a report on "slow blood leakage," but immediately disregards this idea. He then realizes that if his mother *is* about to die, he and Beth will have to call people before she does. They'll have to call Bill and their mother's former volleyball teammates and her coworkers. How, he wonders, will they have enough time to do this? He will have to do it as a conference call, he decides, but then realizes he doesn't have the necessary equipment, so considers visiting Kmart to get the supplies.

Eggers demonstrates that the mind—and especially his *mind—often wanders in moments of stress. Faced with the difficult possibility of his mother's death, he can't help but imagine gory scenarios involving "slow blood leakage" and ruined towels. To a certain extent, these thoughts are morbid and disturbing, but in another way, they're actually quite funny. His thoughts about going to Kmart, for instance, throw his bloodier worries into sharp relief, contrasting the grotesque with the mundane in a way that invites readers to see the twisted humor inherent to these kinds of situations.*


Eggers decides against calling multiple people at once. Instead, he and his family can simply spend this time together, can "hang out, just sit there." It'll be nice, he thinks, then cuts himself off, reasoning, "Jesus, it's not going to be *nice*, not with the blood everywhere." He hears Beth's voice from the living room saying, "Mom, we should go in." Joining the conversation, he too urges their mother to visit the hospital, and she eventually says, "Look at you two, Tweedledum and Tweedledee." When they look at her in confusion, she adds, "You want to go out tonight, that's what it is." They refute this, but she says, "It's New Year's Eve. You two have plans!" After more arguing, they finally convince her to let them take her to the emergency room.

In addition to telling a story about his mother's health and the final days of her life, Eggers takes this opportunity to develop her as a character. Even in this moment of hardship, she has a cynical sense of humor, calling Eggers and Beth "Tweedledum and Tweedledee." What's more, she is suspicious of her children, thinking they just want to have fun without her. In this way, Eggers shows readers that his mother has a cutting, bitter sense of humor and a strong personality.

Eggers once again describes Beth's experience of watching their father as he knelt in the driveway. Recently, he had been falling in the kitchen and shower. When Beth realizes what she's looking at, she dashes out the door and runs to him.

By jumping back and forth between his mother's story and his father's story, Eggers reminds readers of the staggering misfortune that has befallen their family—namely, that both parents have succumbed to illness within five weeks of one another.

Back in the family room, Eggers picks up his mother and carries her to the car, promising not to let her head hit the doorframe—a promise he fails to keep. Once he loads her into the backseat, Beth comes into the garage with Toph, who sits in the station wagon's rear seat. When they're all in the car, Beth turns around, looks at her family, and says, "Road trip!"

When Beth turns around and says, "Road trip!" it's unclear who she's trying to make feel better. One might think that she's putting on an air of lightheartedness for Toph's sake, since he's only seven. However, her fake cheerfulness also might be something she's using to make herself *feel better. Since she and Eggers are now responsible for both their dying mother and Toph, it's quite likely that she needs to maintain a positive attitude in order to keep herself going.*

Eggers describes his father's funeral service, which took place in the third week of November. He remembers feeling "embarrassed," thinking that it was "all so gaudy, so gruesome," especially since the family was smiling so much and shaking hands and inviting people to watch them "in the middle of [their] disintegration." He recalls listening to the minister, who hadn't known his father because his father was a staunch atheist. Then Bill gave a eulogy, and though he was good in front of crowds, he was perhaps *too* good, too lighthearted. Afterwards, people crowded into their house and played Trivial Pursuit in the family room, though this was no fun without any alcohol (Eggers tried to hint to his friends that they should go get a case of beer, but none of them did).

It's not hard to see that Eggers doesn't like the attention that comes along with having a loved one die. Indeed, it's as if he feels like people expect him to act a certain way, but nothing he or his family does meets these expectations. For instance, Bill's eulogy is too happy and light. What's more, Eggers finds the ceremonious aspect of funerals tiresome and boring, wanting to have an actual party instead of simply going through the motions that people expect him and his family to go through. Even his friends seem to treat him differently, suddenly too timid and respectful to bring beer into his house.

At the house after the funeral, Eggers and Beth talked to their father's friend, a lawyer who carpooled with him every day. "He was the best driver I've ever seen," he says. "So smooth, so in control. He was incredible. He would see three, four moves ahead." Beth and Eggers savor these anecdotes because they've "never heard anything about [their] father" and feel like they don't know anything about him beyond what he was like at home. "I did not know that the last time I saw my father would be the last time I would see my father," Eggers says, explaining that he was put in intensive care shortly after his diagnosis, and when Eggers himself went to visit, he found him smoking a cigarette right there in the hospital, looking casual and content.

The interest that Eggers and Beth take in their father's friend's small anecdotes suggests that they weren't very close to their father. However, it also serves as a reminder that even the smallest of stories—about driving, for instance—can become meaningful in retrospect, especially after a person has died.

Eggers's mother spends the night in the emergency room, followed by a day in intensive care. She's then put in a spacious room with large windows, which Beth calls the "death room" because there's enough space for visitors. As their mother sleeps, Beth and Eggers lie on an adjacent hospital bed with Toph and talk about how disconcerting it is to hear the pauses in their mother's breathing. They also talk about how strange it is that this room doesn't have a TV.

At home, Eggers and his mother were able to forge a sense of normality by paying attention the TV even as her health rapidly deteriorated. Now, in this sterile hospital room with its large white walls and spaciousness, there's nothing to distract the family from the brutal reality of death.

After the guests left Eggers's house in the aftermath of his father's funeral, he and Kirsten snuck off to his parents' bathroom to have sex. The house was full of people, so this was the only place they where could find any privacy. "This is weird," Kirsten said as Eggers spread out a blanket. He and Kirsten met in college and dated for several months before things became serious. At first, neither of them thought the relationship would last very long, but then Eggers told her that his mother had cancer, and she revealed to him that her mother had a brain tumor. "From then on," he writes, "we were more serious."

Eggers's relationship with Kirsten is intertwined with what's happening in his family. His experience of watching his mother die and his experience of dating Kirsten are inseparable, especially since she herself knows what it's like to have a sick parent. By drawing attention to the development of his first adult relationship, Eggers reminds readers that, despite his elevated sense of responsibility, he is still growing up and coming of age.

While sitting with Eggers and Toph in the hospital, Beth remembers with a start that the next day is their mother's birthday. She reminds Eggers, and they decide to go to the gift shop to buy flowers and a card.

Eggers shows readers that life goes on like normal even in the sterile confines of a hospital. In this case, this means that he and Beth have to find a way to mark their mother's birthday—just because she's sick doesn't mean they shouldn't try to celebrate.

Telling the story of his mother's final days, Eggers switches to the future tense, saying, "We'll get her out in a few days." He explains that he and Beth will take her home and install her in a hospital bed in the living room. They'll also have a full-time nurse come to take care of her. Just before it's too late, they will pay for her sister—their aunt—to fly out, and her appearance will make their mother smile and sit up for the first time in days. There will be "an endless stream of visitors" and a priest who delivers mass in the living room while Eggers cooks a frozen pizza in the kitchen and listens. He and Beth will stay up late with their mother, doing anything they can to make her comfortable, but she'll eventually begin speaking "incomprehensibly," filled with a strange paranoia.

Eggers's use of the future tense in this section helps readers understand the dread that he and his family surely felt when his mother was on the cusp of death. By saying that all of these things "will" happen, he instills in his readers a sense of inevitability, ultimately enabling them to better understand what it's like to watch a parent slowly succumb to illness.

"There will be morphine," Eggers writes. Soon enough, the doses won't be enough to soothe his mother, so he and Beth will order more and they will obtain permission to choose the dosage amount. They'll give her a steady flow of the drug "every time she moans," and this will stop the moaning. "We will leave while they take her away and when we come back the bed will be gone, too," Eggers writes. Not long after she's gone, he will take Toph to watch the Chicago Bulls practice, and they will sign his baseball cards. Eggers and Beth will randomly take him out of school sometimes just to make him happy. Beth will take care of all the legal worries, but everyone knows that Eggers will be the one to take Toph.

The buildup to Eggers's mother's death is fairly lengthy, but his actual narration of her death is vague. In fact, he essentially skips over the specifics of her last moments, using the future tense to speed ahead. Indeed, he informs readers that his mother has died by saying, "We will leave while they take her away and when we come back the bed will be gone, too." In turn, his focus on what's still to come emphasizes his feeling of possibility and change—although he's sad that his mother has died, he is perhaps also relieved that she's no longer suffering. What's more, he can now forge ahead in his life.

Still using the future tense, Eggers explains that he and Beth will sell the family house a week after their mother dies. Toph will finish third grade while he himself drops classes. Eggers won't earn his college diploma, but he will walk at graduation, and then he, Beth, and Toph will move to Berkeley, California, "where Beth will start law school." For now, though, Eggers sits by his mother in the hospital and watches her sleep. He stands to whisper "Happy birthday" into her ear, and when she doesn't stir, he sits in a chair and looks at Toph, who wakes up under his gaze. "He gets up and comes to me as I am sitting in the chair," he writes, "and I take his hand and we go through the window and fly up and over the quickly sketched trees and then to California."

Having rushed past his mother's death using the future tense, Eggers momentarily loops back to the night that he, Beth, and Toph spent together in the hospital. However, he quickly returns to his forward-looking outlook by turning to Toph and flying out the window to California, an act of imagination that represents his eagerness to leave behind all his woe and hardships. In this moment, readers watch as Eggers embraces the idea of youthful possibility; without having to care for his parents anymore, he feels as if the world has opened for him.

CHAPTER 2

Eggers and Toph speed along Highway 1 in California, winding along the coast and listening to loud music. He feels as if he and his little brother are "collecting on what's coming" to them, since he's convinced that life "owes" them "with interest," which is why they are "expecting everything, everything." They have nowhere to be, he notes, so they're driving and singing as loud as they can. As they drive, Toph makes faces at people in passing cars, and Eggers lets him steer as he takes off his sweatshirt, feeling all the while that Toph has now become his "twenty-four-hour classroom," his "captive audience, forced to ingest everything [he] deem[s] worthwhile." "We have been *chosen*, you see, chosen," he says, "and have been given this, it being owed to us, earned by us, all of this."

Having watched his parents die, Eggers feels oddly free. After all, he has dealt with something terrible, and now he has his whole life ahead of him. He's only twenty-one, has money from the house that he and Beth sold, and can spend his days driving scenic routes with Toph. Of course, all of this is undercut by hardship, but Eggers chooses to assume an optimistic worldview, one in which he and Toph "have been given" the opportunity to make their lives anew. This, he believes, is "owed" to them because of all they have just experienced.

Eggers and Toph live with Kirsten, Beth, and Beth's friend in a sublet overlooking the Bay. Their lease only extends until the end of summer, but Eggers has decided there's no rush to find a job. Instead, he spends time with Toph, trying to make life seem fun and happy. Despite this positive attitude, though, he can't help but imagine disaster scenarios. For instance, when they drive down Highway 1, he feels like each oncoming car could kill them. "The possibilities leap into my head," he writes. "We could be driven off the cliff and down and into the ocean. But fuck, we'd make it, Toph and I, given our cunning, our agility, our presence of mind." He imagines sailing off the cliff and, in perfect coordination with Toph, opening the doors, standing on the roof of the car, and jumping off right as the car splashes into the water.

It's unsurprising that Eggers often imagines disastrous situations, given that he has actually experienced what many people would consider a worst-case scenario: the nearly simultaneous death of both his parents. However, the way he thinks about these possibilities is worth examining. For example, when he imagines his car being "driven off the cliff," his fears take on a comic-book style grandeur, becoming caricatures of real life. Indeed, by rendering his fears in this absurd manner, he finds it easier to recognize how unlikely it is that they'll actually happen. Further, he often finds himself capable of subverting these fears, as when he imagines Toph and himself surviving this crash like a couple of action movie stars.

Toph joins a Little League baseball team, so Eggers spends many of his afternoons sitting on the sidelines and watching him play. As he does so, he becomes sharply aware of the fact that he doesn't fit in with the mothers who are watching their sons. "I do not know how to interact with the mothers," he writes. "*Am I them?*" Sometimes they make an effort to include him, but mostly he sits off to the side and smiles at their jokes. "Fuck it," he thinks. "I don't want to be friends with these women, anyway. Why would I care? I am not them. They are the old model and we are the new."

As a twenty-one-year-old responsible for a seven-year-old, Eggers is in an interesting position. He's not Toph's parent, but he finds himself in situations in which he must act like he is. Moreover, he intuits that people don't know what to make of him. In turn, he questions himself, here wondering if he belongs at baseball games among the other players' middle-aged mothers. He doesn't beat himself up about his inability to integrate into the social world of parenthood. Instead, he chooses to celebrate the fact that he's a nonconventional guardian, declaring that he and Toph are the "new model" of a family.

Eggers explains that he, Beth, and Toph left Chicago quickly, selling almost everything in the house. Now, everyone living in the sublet is "vibrating with the stress of the sundry adjustments, new schools and jobs," such that they all "quickly begin to snip and snap and complain." This tension makes its way into Eggers and Kirsten's relationship, especially because Kirsten—who doesn't, like Eggers, have money from selling a house—refuses to let him help her financially, instead opting to find a job. Meanwhile, Eggers and Toph have fun, going to beaches to play Frisbee, a sport for which they have remarkable talent. People stop to watch them play, floored by their tricks. "Senior citizens sit and shake their heads, gasping. Religious people fall to their knees. No one has ever seen anything quite like it," Eggers writes.

Despite the stress of surviving in a new city as a young adult, Eggers concentrates on cultivating a fun, lighthearted, happy environment for Toph. While Kirsten worries about getting a job, Eggers plays games with his little brother, and though this might seem immature, it's worth bearing in mind that he's trying to make this transition easier on Toph. As such, one might argue that he's displaying a remarkable amount of responsibility, even if it seems like he's just goofing around and not taking life seriously.

CHAPTER 3

The summer ends and Eggers tries to find a new place to live with Toph. This is harder than he expected, because real estate agents are quick to judge him. "Where do you work?" they ask, and Eggers admits that he hasn't found a job yet. "And this is your...son?" they ask, and when he tells them Toph is his brother, it becomes clear they won't rent their property to such an untraditional pair. Slowly, Eggers begins to accept the grim reality that they won't be able to live anywhere as glamorous as the sublet. Because he and Kirsten need time apart and neither he nor Beth want to live together anymore, he's on his own in this hunt for an apartment. And although he has always envisioned living in a loft, he realizes this simply isn't an option.

For perhaps the first time, Eggers finds himself inhibited by his responsibility as Toph's caretaker. Whereas the summer was easygoing and fun, now reality is beginning to intrude upon his sense that he and Toph are "owed" by the world because of the hardships they've already endured. In effect, this means giving up dreams of having a bachelor-style loft. Worse, he finds it hard to overcome the ways in which people judge him, since in this case their judgements affect whether or not he and Toph will find good housing. Unlike his experience with the mothers at Toph's baseball games, now it's harder to disregard the fact that people don't know what to make of him as a guardian.

Finally, in August, Eggers finds a small single-story house in Berkeley. "I'm worried about your lack of a job," the landlord says, but Eggers says he can pay the entire year's rent upfront, and this seals the deal. This, Eggers recognizes, is not a financially savvy move, but he is desperate to find a place. Plus, he and Beth have decided that they will no longer feel guilty about spending money. Whereas their parents were "tight-fisted" with their earnings, Eggers and Beth have decided that they're "done sacrificing."

Eggers and Beth are in a unique position. Having watched their parents raise them, they've internalized their worldviews and can now (ostensibly) choose which ones they want to actually use while raising Toph. By spotlighting their decision to disregard the "tight-fisted" financial mentality of their parents, Eggers shows readers that the finer details of parenthood are like traditions that people can either uphold or cast aside.

Toph and Eggers repaint the house, making each room a different color. "The place is ours now," he writes, "but it's a mess." Neither he nor Toph ever clean, so the coffee table is strewn with trash, there are packages of half-eaten food on the floor, and sports equipment is littered throughout the house. Eggers has vague worries about health inspectors paying them a visit and taking Toph away, but this doesn't motivate him to do any actual cleaning. Instead, he tries to convince Toph to clean, but this only devolves into an argument about who "sucks" more. Because they're more interested in goofing around with one another, it feels like an incredible feat when they actually do something, like make sure Toph arrives at school on time, which almost never happens.

Eggers isn't afraid to present himself as a somewhat irresponsible guardian. In many ways, he does almost nothing that might resemble traditional parenthood. This is, of course, because he isn't Toph's parent—he's his older brother. At the same time, though, he's responsible for Toph. As such, he displays the tension between his two identities: he's both a guardian with a huge responsibility and a young bachelor who wants to have fun. By not shying away from portraying himself as the latter, Eggers suggests that a person doesn't have to conform to conventional notions of guardianship to successfully raise a child.

Eggers has been working for a temp agency that sends him to various companies for two- or three-day assignments. Beth—who is in her first year of law school—picks Toph up every day and brings him to her apartment until Eggers can retrieve him, at which point the two brothers go home and cook one of their eight go-to meals. These dishes are mostly combinations of pre-cooked foods and easy recipes, but they like them nonetheless. As they cook, they often have "sword fights using wooden spoons or sticks." Recently, they have taken to spitting water at one another. "There is a voice inside me, a very excited, chirpy voice, that urges me to keep things merry, madcap even, the mood buoyant," Eggers writes. Beth, on the other hand, frequently cries and makes Toph look at photo albums so that he remembers what their parents look like.

Once again, Eggers makes it clear that he wants to cultivate a happy, optimistic environment for Toph. Fearing that his brother will become depressed because of the loss of their parents, he fills their life with goofy boyishness, constantly roughhousing and playing with Toph. And while this might not seem like a valid way of taking on responsibility, it's worth noting that Eggers does this for the sake of his brother's mental health.

Toph and Eggers arrive late to the open house at Toph's school. Eggers curses, blaming Toph for their tardiness despite the fact that he was the one whose nap ran too long. He tells Toph to go get changed, but when his brother emerges in a stained sweatshirt, he instructs him to wear something nicer. When they finally get to the school, though, they're both overdressed. "This is our first open house," Eggers writes, "and people are not sure what to make of us." Children and parents stare at them, trying to figure them out. "They are scared," Eggers writes. "They are jealous." Then, with a change of heart, he adds, "We are pathetic. We are stars. We are either sad and sickly or we are glamorous and new." As they make their way through the crowd, Eggers thinks about how they are "disadvantaged but young and virile."

Again, Eggers is sensitive to the ways in which he and Toph are different than other families. These differences are on display at the open house, especially since he and Toph are overdressed. Still, Eggers manages to maintain his optimism and his youthful pride, though he oscillates between feeling out of place and feeling "glamorous." This, it seems, is the dynamic that will follow him throughout his years as Toph's guardian.

Thinking about his own youth, Eggers is appalled to see how old and boring the parents are at the open house. He and Toph, on the other hand, are "great-looking." "We are new and everyone else is old," he notes. "We are the chosen ones, obviously." All of the other adults at the open house, he suggests, are "crinkly and no longer have random sex, as only [Eggers] among them [is] still capable of."

Rather than wallowing and feeling isolated as a young person in a sea of middle-aged parents, Eggers chooses to exalt his youth, celebrating the fact that he can still enjoy the life of a bachelor while also serving as Toph's guardian. Once again, he insinuates that a person doesn't need to adhere to the conventions of traditional parenthood in order to raise a child.

A woman approaches Eggers at the open house and begins a conversation that he has had so many times that he decides to represent it in his book as a play script. Fumbling through the initial questions ("This is…your son?"), this woman eventually learns that Toph and Eggers are brothers. "You go to school at Cal?" she asks, and when he says that he already finished school, she asks if he lives with his "folks." He informs her that he and Toph live alone, and she says, "But…where are your parents?" Eggers tries to think of a vague response, something like "They're not here." Instead, he says, "Oh, they died a few years ago." Hearing this, the woman grabs his forearm and says, "Oh, I'm sorry."

For Eggers, part of serving as Toph's guardian means having to deal with what other people think of their situation. In this moment, he shows readers that sympathy from strangers rarely does much to soothe a person. In fact, it often is more of a burden than anything else, since conversations like the one Eggers has at the open house force him to talk about painful memories in undesirable circumstances.

Once this mother has learned the details of Eggers and Toph's living arrangement, she asks how their parents died. Eggers considers telling her something outrageous just to entertain himself and Toph, as he has done before, but he's never sure whether or not Toph finds this funny. "Cancer," he says. "But…at the same time?" asks the mother, to which Eggers says, "About five weeks apart." When she asks how long ago this happened, he's pleased to be able to say, "A few winters ago," since this is a "new line" that puts a "comfortable distance" between him and the tragic events. At this point, the mother says the line that everyone seems to say at this point in the conversation: "What a good brother you are!" Although this phrase annoys Eggers, he simply shrugs and says, "Well, what are you gonna do?"

The worst part about these superficial conversations is that they force Eggers to say vapid things that ultimately trivialize his experience. When this mother at the open house says, "What a good brother you are!" he has no choice but to shrug and say, "Well, what are you gonna do?" In turn, he ends up talking about this very difficult experience like it's a mere inconvenience. By showcasing the ways in which conversations like these aren't appropriate for discussing such serious matters, Eggers illustrates the gulf of misunderstanding between someone like him and someone like this mother. Although she means well, she does nothing but annoy Eggers, forcing him to be polite as he talks about the hardest thing he's ever experienced in his life.

CHAPTER 4

It's Friday night, and Eggers thinks about how he'd like to go out. Unfortunately, he knows he can't, since he and Beth aren't yet comfortable leaving Toph with a babysitter. This has made it hard for him to date, though even when he *does* meet people, he's mercilessly critical of them. To him, everyone must act perfectly, especially since he and Beth have decided they won't bring anyone home who hasn't first proved him- or herself. If Eggers does something with a date that he thinks Toph might enjoy, he brings him, and if his date doesn't like this, then he begins to dislike her, thinking she must be "self-centered." This is only one of many tests. Others have to do with how his dates respond to the fact that both of his parents are dead, and how they react upon entering his and Toph's dirty house.

One of the hardest things about raising Toph as a twenty-one-year-old is the fact that caring for a child greatly curtails Eggers's romantic life. Worse, he and Beth refuse to get babysitters. This is most likely because they're afraid Toph will feel abandoned by them. As such, readers see how their parents' deaths still influence them in very practical everyday ways. Trying to raise Toph while also maintaining a healthy social life, Eggers once again finds himself straddled between two identities: that of a responsible parent and that of a young bachelor.

Toph gets out of school on Fridays at noon, so Eggers takes work off to spend the afternoon with him. On days like these, they play basketball, have dinner, and eat ice cream. Each night, Eggers reads aloud until Toph falls asleep. Tonight, he turns around before slipping out of the room and says, "So. Big day, huh?" "Yeah," Toph replies, delivering a brief summary of everything they did, which includes the open house described in the previous chapter. "I mean," Toph continues, "it was almost as if it was too much to happen in one day, as if a number of days had been spliced together to quickly paint a picture of an entire period of time, to create a whole-seeming idea of how we are living, without having to stoop (or rise) to actually pacing the story out."

This is the first time since the book's acknowledgements section that Eggers allows himself to leave the primary narrative and explicitly comment on the way he's telling the story. However, he does this by couching his meta-narrative analysis in the story itself, having Toph deliver the critique as if they're having an ordinary conversation. In this way, he enables himself to acknowledge the fact that he has "spliced together" "a number of days" in order to better tell his story. Once again, then, readers see Eggers's self-consciousness regarding his own manipulation of reality.

Defending himself against Toph's criticism, Eggers claims that they've had "plenty of days like" the one he has just described. He then points out how difficult and frustrating it is to try to "adequately relate even five minutes of internal thought-making," let alone entire periods of time. "So you're reduced to complaining about it," Toph says. "Or worse, doing little tricks out of frustration." Toph calls these tricks "gimmicks, bells, whistles."

Eggers uses Toph to voice his own misgivings about his authorial practices. Most of all, he's sensitive about his use of "gimmicks" to tell his story, which he thinks he would fail to accurately portray without "bells and whistles." Of course, he is in this moment also using Toph as a "gimmick," one that enables him to address his overuse of gimmicks in the first place. As such, he makes good on the promise he made in the acknowledgements section to be upfront about his use of self-conscious narration.

Continuing his critique of Eggers's narrative style, Toph suggests that the problem doesn't have to do with "form," but rather with the fact that Eggers is "completely paralyzed with guilt about relating all this in the first place." He posits that Eggers feels "somehow obligated" to tell his story even though he knows their parents would strongly disapprove. Having said that, though, he concedes that Beth would probably say that this guilt is very "middlebrow, middle-class, [and] midwestern," something both Catholic and "unique to the home in which" Eggers grew up. Toph points out that Eggers hasn't even told many of his closest friends the stories he's now putting out into the world in the most public way possible. "For instance," he says, "your father being in AA was not to be spoken of, ever, while he was in and after he stopped attending."

What's most interesting about Eggers's meta-narrative technique is that he doesn't only use it as a way of superimposing a new layer of thought onto his memoir, he also uses it as a way of advancing story. Indeed, he analyzes his own writing while also setting forth new information, like the fact that his father was in AA. Until this point, Eggers has only hinted that his father liked to drink. Now, though, he makes it clear that his father had an actual drinking problem. In turn, he allows the story to maintain its forward movement even as he takes a moment to examine its finer details. Toph also brings up an important point about how Eggers feels about telling his parents' stories. Suggesting that Eggers has to fight against a sense of "guilt," he confirms that his brother is uneasy about his decision to narrate stories about other people.

Toph suggests that Eggers thinks of himself as quite "open" but that, in reality, this isn't necessarily the case. "You believe that you and me are the New Model, that because of our circumstances, you can toss away all the old rules, can make it up as we go along," he says. "But at the same time, so far you've been very priggish and controlling, and for all your bluster you end up maintaining most of their customs, the rules imposed by our parents." Continuing, Toph points out that Eggers is very unforgiving, recounting a conversation he had the other day with his friend Marny, who—after Toph failed to call home to tell Eggers he would be late—urged Eggers not to ground him. Eggers did not respond well to this, saying that Marny had no right to critique his style of raising Toph.

Again, Eggers manages to continue producing new narrative material even as he takes a detour to analyze his writing. Referencing Eggers's harsh parenting style, Toph sets forth a story about a conversation his brother had with Marny, one in which Eggers was too sensitive. Although Toph's point is a good one, readers can't help but understand why Eggers might become defensive in this moment. After all, people are constantly looking at him strangely and judging his caretaking abilities because of his age. As such, it's unsurprising that he might explode at a friend for deigning to give him advice, even if that friend only intended to help him.

Toph says that Eggers is driven by anger, which is perhaps the result of having grown up in a "loud, semi-violent alcoholic household." Eggers, he says, clearly sees his guardianship role as a chance to "right the wrongs of [his] own upbringing." Expounding upon this, he says that Eggers has the "opportunity" to "do everything better." Although this chance to "show up one's own parents" is something everyone can eventually to do with their children, in Eggers's case this notion is more pronounced, since he's now bringing up Toph, who is also his parents' "progeny." "It's like finishing a project that someone else could not, gave up on, gave to you, the one who could save the day," Toph adds.

When Toph says that Eggers has the chance to "right the wrongs of [his] own upbringing," readers might recall the idea that Eggers and Beth can decide which of their parents' traditions and customs they'd like to keep alive and which they'd like to cast aside. In a strange way, then, it's almost as if Eggers has become his own parent, since Toph was raised in the same context as him but is now his responsibility, giving him the chance to take care of a younger version of himself.

Toph says that Eggers likes to pretend they're "lower class" because they receive "Social Security and live in a messy house with ants and holes in the floorboards." He says that Eggers likes this "underdog stance" because it increases his "leverage with other people." When their conversation finally ends, Eggers shuts Toph's door and putters around the house instead of writing. He adjusts the rug and the cover on the couch, then gets a popsicle from the freezer and steps outside onto the back porch. Next door, his neighbors are having a small get-together, and although they kindly invite him to join, they are older and he's uninterested in socializing with them, so he makes up an excuse about waiting for a phone call before sliding back inside, where he looks nostalgically at all the furniture they took from Illinois to California.

Eggers's relationship with his class identity is worth noting. Lake Forest, Illinois is a very affluent town, and although Eggers makes it clear that his family was financially "tight-fisted," there's no denying the fact that he has never been economically disadvantaged. When Toph points out that he likes to pretend he's "lower class," he lampoons him for romanticizing the idea of poverty in order to create a more interesting story. Indeed, the only way Eggers could be conceived of as disadvantaged has to do with the fact that he lost both parents before fully coming of age. This, of course, has nothing to do with being "lower class."

CHAPTER 5

One night, a man wearing a poncho and sandals rings Eggers's doorbell, and although Eggers is closer to the door, he makes Toph answer. "I'm not here," he instructs his little brother, thinking that the man must be petitioning the neighborhood or trying to collect donations. When Toph opens the door, though, Eggers remembers that the man is Stephen, Toph's new babysitter. A Berkeley student from England, Scotland, or Ireland—Eggers can't remember—Stephen is a quiet man who "bores Toph to tears." Nonetheless, Eggers is excited for a night of freedom, and tells Stephen he'll be home by one in the morning, though he could be earlier. "Depends on what happens," he says.

The chapters in A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius *aren't dated, so Eggers relies upon his story itself to communicate the passage of time. Given that he and Beth didn't feel comfortable getting a babysitter for Toph when they first moved to California, readers can reasonably assume that time has passed and that, after a period of committing himself fully to being Toph's guardian, Eggers is tired of this kind of isolation and is ready to branch out and try to have a social life again.*

Just as Eggers is driving around the corner, his excitement about going out turns into terror. "I become convinced, in a flash of pure truth-seeing—it happens every time I leave him anywhere—that Toph will be killed," he writes. In his head, he runs through all the signs that Stephen is a sick, twisted murderer. "If something happens it'll be my fault," he notes. "The possibilities snap through my head like pedophilia flashcards—handcuffs, floorboards, clown suits, leather, videotape, duct tape, knives, bathtubs, refrigerators." He contemplates turning around, but then he feels as if he *has* to keep going, thinking that "the risk is worth it."

Once again, Eggers finds himself imagining the worst-case scenario. This time, his worries conflict with his desire to gain a modicum of "freedom" by going out for the evening. Of course, his fears are largely absurd, so much so that they almost take on a comedic element. As he pictures "clown suits" and the extremes of torture, readers are invited to see his worries for what they are: unrealistic projections.

Eggers thinks about being held accountable for leaving Toph with a murder. He imagines the questions he'd be asked in trial, providing a prospective transcript in which a questioner asks things like, "*How did you come to meet this man, this baby-sitter?*" and, "*How long did your interview of him take?*" He envisions himself saying, "Oh, you know, I just wanted to be *out*. I didn't care much what we did. You have to understand that at that point I was getting out once a week, tops, maybe once every ten days." He explains to the imagined jury his eagerness to hang out with friends, saying that normally the night would start at his friend Moodie's apartment, where he would sit on the couch "savoring every minute, not knowing when it would come again." Meanwhile, his friends would have "no idea what it meant to [him]" to be out.

As Eggers grapples with his guilt about leaving Toph behind, he considers the fact that his friends don't understand what it means to him to be out with them. For him, even sitting on a couch with a beer and some friends is a thrilling luxury, something he's rarely free to do. This is why he's willing to put up with his fears about leaving Toph with a babysitter—his desire to socialize is so strong that he's okay with putting himself in a stressful emotional state in order to go out and live the life of a young man in his twenties.

At the bar Eggers sits with his friends, most of whom he's known since high school. More and more of his friends move to San Francisco each month, everyone wanting to be in the city "for no particular reason." Eggers likes that his friends are here, since they are the "only ties" he and Toph—whom they've all known for a long time—have to Illinois. As such, Eggers tries to get them to come out to his house in Berkeley as often as possible, and many of them actually do visit quite frequently. Moodie, for example, sleeps on his couch roughly three nights per week. He and Eggers have been best friends since high school, having run a successful fake ID company. These days, they've started a freelance graphic design company in one of the rooms in Eggers's house.

During this period, many young people moved to San Francisco, attracted to the city's reputation as a vibrant and diverse place teeming with people in their twenties. Although Eggers relishes going out with his friends and experiencing what it feels like to be young in a city full of other young people, these outings no doubt make his life as someone with true responsibility feel all the more pronounced. Indeed, going out with friends provides a sharp contrast to his otherwise domestic life.

Eggers's friend John gets him a beer. "John is broken and I've known him forever," Eggers writes. Their parents were friends in Illinois, which is why they've always been close. But there's also something else that ties them together: John's parents are also dead. His mother died of cancer when he was in high school, and his father died when he was in college. Since then, John has been depressed. Now, in the bar, he asks Eggers how Toph is doing. "Fine," Eggers replies, thinking of "pliers" and "handcuffs" and other terrifying possibilities. "Where is he?" John asks, and Eggers explains that he's at home with Stephen. After this conversation, Eggers begins to feel disappointed in the night, thinking, "*I've risked everything for this?*"

John is someone who can relate to Eggers on a certain level. At the same time, though, their experiences with parental death are still quite different, since John's parents didn't die within 32 days of one another, and John doesn't have to care for a younger sibling. On another note, Eggers's disappointment that the night isn't more rewarding is a testament to just how much he looks forward to evenings like this one. Although he and his friend are having what seems to be a perfectly good time, his expectations for such activities are unrealistically high because of how rarely he gets to leave the house.

Eggers wants something "huge" to happen, thinking, "We should all be armed and taking over small countries. Or rioting. Or no: an orgy. There should be an orgy." This, he thinks, would make the night "worthwhile." Instead, though, everyone just stands around, which Eggers finds "obscene." As he thinks this, another friend approaches and asks him about Toph, saying, "Where is he, anyway?" Eggers wonders why he has been asked this question twice in the same night. It has, he realizes, become "a sort of required question, but with no internal logic." Why, he wonders, do his friends want to ask him about where his brother is when he's "out trying to drink and incite orgies"?

For the most part, Eggers's friends most likely ask him where Toph is because it's one of the only questions about his brother they can think to ask. The question itself is pointless and requires no external knowledge or the ability to understand what it's like to raise a child. This is why his friends constantly ask it—they want to appear sensitive to Eggers's situation as a guardian, but they don't know how to relate to this experience.

To escape his friend's annoying question, Eggers goes to the bathroom, where he shuts himself in a stall to avoid a man who's peeing in the sink. He then finds himself staring at a sticker he made, which has been pasted to the stall's door: "SCREW THOSE IDIOTS" it says at the top. Underneath this line, it reads: "MIGHT MAGAZINE." Moodie and Eggers designed these stickers and gave them to their friends last month as a way of promoting their new magazine. Now, though, Eggers realizes the phrasing makes it seem like the sticker is instructing people to "screw" *Might* magazine itself. Eggers is mortified—they've already printed 500 of these stickers.

This is the first instance in which Eggers mentions Might *magazine, an irreverent independent publication that he founded and that ran for several years in the mid 1990s. His involvement with the magazine is important to track as* A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius *progresses, since it showcases his attempt to establish his professional identity, which is often at odds with itself. In this moment, it's evident that Eggers and Moodie want to project an anti-establishment ethos, one that suggests that anyone not involved with* Might *is an "idiot."*

When Eggers returns from the bathroom, another friend approaches him and asks about Toph. This friend doesn't know Toph quite as well, asking what his name is and then—predictably—asking where he is. Fed up, Eggers tells her he hasn't seen Toph "in weeks" because he "took off one day" to hitchhike "around the country." His friend is shocked. "Yeah, it's fucked up," Eggers says. "It's partly my fault, I guess," he adds, going on to say that he shouldn't have let Toph bring a gun to school. He says that he told Toph he could play with his gun in the house and in the neighborhood, but that he couldn't bring it to school. "Wait," his friend interrupts. "He has a gun?" "Of course, sure," Eggers replies, pushing on to tell her that Toph shot another kid.

When Eggers tells this ridiculous story to this unwitting woman, it's clear that he's tired of his friends treating him differently because he's a guardian. He feels like no one else has to field such banal questions while drinking at bars, so he resents having to answer these questions himself. Of course, his friends only want to show him that they're interested in his life, but the way they talk about Toph feels similar to the conversation Eggers had with the overly concerned mother at the open house. As such, he finally decides to have some fun by spinning an absurd tale that makes him seem like a terrible caretaker.

"Naturally I took away Toph's gun privileges," Eggers continues, "and of course beat him within an inch of his life, so zealously that something snapped in his leg somewhere, a tendon maybe, and he fell to the floor, squealed like a pig, couldn't get up, had to be taken to the emergency room." He tells his friend that the police arrived and questioned him about Toph's leg, and as she listens with wide eyes, he says, "You wouldn't believe what people will believe once they know our story. They're ready for anything, basically—will believe anything, because they've been thrown off-balance, are still wondering if any of this is true, our story in general, but aren't sure and are terrified of offending us." His friend doesn't pick up on what he's saying, so he concludes his story, saying that Toph took off as soon as he got off crutches.

At the end of this conversation, Eggers puts his finger on why his friends' questions about Toph annoy him so much. They aren't genuine questions, he suggests, because he could answer with anything and his friends would still believe him without hesitation. As such, the conversations he has with them about Toph are essentially pointless. Everyone, he notes, is too afraid of "offending" him, so they treat him delicately. And because he resents this special treatment—which reminds him that he's different than everyone else his age—he has decided to trick this woman into believing a ludicrous story.

Finding the bar boring, Eggers drives to a friend's house, hoping she'll invite him in. When he arrives, though, her house is dark, so he drives to a bar where another female friend works, but he doesn't have his ID so the bouncer doesn't let him in. As such, he calls his friend Meredith and asks if she wants to meet up. She accepts his invitation and they go to a club where they drink heavily and dance, eventually feeling attracted to one another even though they've always just been friends.

In this section, Eggers tries to get rid of his restless feeling, wanting badly to make his night out worth the stress and worry that comes along with leaving Toph. More specifically, he seems to want to spend time with a woman, most likely hoping to have a sexual experience. This kind of physical connection with someone his own age is what he most lacks because of his role as a guardian.

Leaving the club, Eggers and Meredith go to the beach, where they sit in the sand and talk about their ambitions. Meredith works in film production and wants to be "making movies" and "producing more and better" material. Her excitement about her job inspires Eggers to talk about *Might* magazine, which he frames as something that will "tear the world down to its foundations" and then build it up again. They both speak with great enthusiasm about making the world more "just and equal." Eggers claims that *Might* will "inspire millions to greatness," and they both start describing the ideal project, using words like "raceless," "genderless," "youth," "strength," "rebirth," "oceans," "fire," "sex," and then—all at once—they're kissing and leaning backward onto the cold sand, feeling that sex will make them "more powerful."

When Eggers and Meredith talk about their ambitions, they find themselves enticed by their own idealistic ideas. This is a mark of their youthfulness, since it's not uncommon for people in their early twenties to want to reimagine and rebuild the world. Many people in their twenties are smart enough and ambitious enough to recognize the things in the world that need improvement, but they haven't yet been discouraged by failure and apathy. For Eggers and Meredith, this kind of talk turns pointedly sexual, as they both revel in their youthful worldviews.

As Eggers and Meredith start having sex, a group of teenagers approaches them. "Because I'm stupid I assume they're from Mexico," Eggers notes. Surrounded, he can't tell how many people are in this group. "Where's your pants, stud?" one says. Wrapping himself in a towel, Eggers stands, but someone whips a handful of sand in his eyes. As he stumbles, several girls push Meredith as she sits there trying to cover up her body. "Get the fuck away!" Eggers yells. The group laughs, but then Meredith says, "Why don't you just leave us the fuck alone?" After a pause, one of them says, "Okay, let's go." As the group retreats, one of them—a short guy who seems to be the leader of the group—turns around and says, "Hey listen, man, we was just goofing around. Sorry."

At this point in A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, *the way Eggers handles the issue of identity is worth examining. At the outset of this scene, he states that he assumes this group of rowdy teenagers is "from Mexico" because he's "stupid." This suggests that he's aware of the unfortunate fact that he has made an assumption about them based on very little information. Indeed, there's no denying that Eggers's initial reaction is to jump to conclusions about these teenagers' nationality. Worse, it seems likely that his generalization is based on a negative stereotype he associates with Mexicans, since he seems to associate their nationality with the fact that he feels threatened by them.*

The teenagers walk away, but Eggers can't find his **wallet**, so he chases them and accuses them of stealing. They insist they didn't rob him, but he says, "Before you came and started fucking with us, I had a fucking wallet. Then you come and start fucking with us, and now I don't have a fucking wallet. And that's all the fucking cops need to know." There's a pause, and Eggers thinks, "The cops. *My* cops." He then forces the teenagers to come back and help him look in the sand for his wallet. As they do so, the short one says again that they didn't do anything. "Who do you think the cops are gonna believe?" Eggers asks. "Two regular people sitting on the beach, or you people?" He adds: "I don't know what your status is with green cards and everything, but this could get really fucking ugly."

When Eggers thinks about the police, he feels as if they exist to help him, not these teenagers. Having categorized them based on a broad and negative conception of what it means to be Mexican, Eggers makes unfair assumptions about these teens. If they were white, it seems, he would be less likely to treat them with such animosity. This is made painfully obvious when he references their "status" with "green cards," a comment indicating that he wants to use their immigration statuses against them, though for all he knows these teenagers could be lifelong American citizens.

Finally, Eggers decides to "throw out [his] last ace," saying, "This was my goddamn dad's **wallet** you stole. And my dad just died. It's all I have of his." This, Eggers notes, is true. Even so, the teenagers don't find the wallet, and the short one reiterates that they didn't take it. As such, Eggers marches them back to the parking lot to what he thinks is a payphone, though he discovers it's only a box on a telephone pole. He tells the teenagers to follow him as they cross the highway and walk until they find a phone, but suddenly they surround him. They take swings at him, but he dodges them until one of them kicks him in the crotch and he falls to the ground while they run away, jumping into two cars and speeding away while he tries to memorize their license plates.

Eggers's comment about his father is an example of how he leverages the tragedy of his past. Although he normally doesn't like it when people treat him differently just because both his parents are dead, in this moment of anger he uses this to his advantage, trying to guilt these teenagers—who were, it seems, only horsing around—into confessing to a crime they most likely didn't commit. This is an important moment to remember as A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius *progresses, as Eggers becomes increasingly aware—and self-conscious—of how he exploits his tragic story in order to get what he wants.*

Eggers and Meredith find a pay phone and call the police, who come and listen to Eggers's repeat what he thinks has happened. He emphasizes that the teenagers were Mexican and that they took his **wallet**. Within four minutes, the police officer tells them that another officer has stopped a car that might belong to the suspects. He drives Eggers and Meredith to identify the driver and passengers, but they aren't even remotely similar to the teenagers. Not only is their car not the same, but they don't look at all like the teens. "I'm positive they were Mexican. This's definitely not the right car," Eggers says.

Unfortunately, Eggers can't let go of the idea that the teenagers who bothered him and Meredith were Mexican. What started as a mere assumption has now become, in Eggers mind, a fact, as he confidently informs the police that the kids were Mexican. Of course, readers should note that there is a degree of self-awareness in Eggers's depiction of this story, though it's difficult to say how much he's in control of the ways he approaches his implicit biases. Nonetheless, the simple fact that he relates this story—which makes him look racist or, at the very least, insensitive—without hesitation suggests that it is part of his project to examine himself in a critical, honest manner.

Meredith and Eggers are relatively silent on the way home. Eggers drops her off and then makes his way back to Berkeley, nodding off several times as he drives and thinking about how much he wants to take revenge on the group of teenagers. As he approaches his house, he thinks again about all the terrible things Stephen has probably done to Toph. Inside, though, he finds Toph asleep on the couch. After he sends Stephen home, Eggers goes into his bedroom and finds his **wallet** sitting on the dresser.

The conclusion of Eggers's night out shows him that his worries are rarely rational. First, he sees that Toph is safe and that his projections of the worst-case scenario were unfounded. Second, he realizes that his assumption that the group of teenagers stole his wallet was completely unfair. In this case, his worry was based on nothing but an unexamined prejudice of Latino teenagers.

CHAPTER 6

MTV's show *The Real World* announces that its next season will take place in San Francisco, and puts out a call for cast members. Eggers and his friends make fun of the show, though they're all secretly "morbidly curious" about it. In the first issue of *Might* magazine, they run a short joke letter to the producers, a letter in which one of their contributors acts like he desperately wants to be on the show. Eggers laughs with everyone else, but worries that this joke is "making fun of [him] in particular."

Part of the identity Eggers has cultivated as a young person in San Francisco includes a certain anti-establishment, subversive mentality. As such, he feels obligated to scoff at something as mainstream as The Real World. *However, it makes perfect sense that he also would be "morbidly curious" about it—after all,* The Real World *is a show that claims to depict reality while actually presenting a strange, hyper-aware version of life that is more performative than honest. This aligns with Eggers's interest in self-examination as an act that can include overblown, hyperbolic, and even fictive elements of storytelling.*

The *Might* team consists of Eggers and Moodie—the founding editors—as well as Marny and a handful of other old friends. Their office is in "a filthy corner of a shaky warehouse" that costs $250 per month. The rest of the building is full of like-minded young people putting out publications like *Wired*, which started on the same floor as *Might* and has now moved two floors up. Also on *Might*'s floor is a woman named Shalini, who works for an "ecotravel magazine" while also producing her own publication, *Hum*, which is "dedicated to uniting and speaking for/to/from twentysomethings of the South Asian American persuasion." There are also several other magazines in the building, all of them devoted to documenting and changing the way young people live.

When Eggers starts working on Might *in an environment swarming with people his age, it becomes clear that he and his contemporaries are interested in mining the experience of being young. Even the language they use to describe their endeavors speaks to this sense of youthful excitement. For instance, Shalini's magazine is intended to reach "twentysomethings," a word that Eggers himself will use in the coming years as a way of describing the purpose of* Might.

Might positions itself as a publication that isn't part of a particular scene, despite the fact that Eggers and his team are thoroughly entrenched in their generation's anti-consumerist, contrarian, independent spirit. They put ads in other magazines declaring what they "are" and what they're "not" about, declaring that *Might* "will be created *by and for us twentysomethings*." They write this "listing-manifesto," and within days of putting it into the world, they receive an onslaught of applications from interns and contributors willing to work for free because the concept of the magazine appeals to them.

Again, it's obvious that Eggers and his friends are buzzing with excitement, and this excitement has to do with the fact that they're young. They want to speak to their own generation, creating a publication "by and for" "twentysomethings." This fascination with youth has become part of their collective identity. At least in Eggers's case, this is unsurprising—as someone who doesn't get to fully experience the life of a young "twentysomething" in the city because of his caretaking responsibilities, he's all the more eager to participate in his generation's cultural and creative production.

In the first issue, *Might* runs an opening essay that says: "Could a bunch of people under twenty-five put out a national magazine with no corporate backing and no clue about marketing? With actual views about actual issues? With a sense of purpose and a sense of humor? With guts and goals and hope? Who would read a magazine like that? You might." They align themselves with causes, though mainly to access the organizations' mailing lists. In essence, they try as hard as they can to establish themselves as a fresh, new presence in the media world. They even choose a picture of a man running naked on the beach as the first issue's cover, and decide that the inside cover should show a huge group frolicking in the nude, too. When they photograph this, though, only four people agree to pose, including Eggers, Moodie, and Marny.

As a publication, Might *is obsessed with putting forth an image of youthful possibility that also feels cutting edge. Eggers and his co-editors want to push the envelope of what's accepted in popular culture. In doing so, they seek to prove the fact that they have some sort of new and youthful perspective that is valuable in and of itself, without "corporate backing" and "marketing" and all the other trappings of traditional media outlets.*

Meanwhile, Eggers and Moodie do freelance design work for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and Marny waitresses four nights per week. Eggers and Moodie feel as if working for the *Chronicle* is a flagrant "misuse of [their] creative powers," but they have no choice but to keep producing work for the publication. Still, they feel strapped for money and desperate to get the word out about *Might*, so they decide to apply to be on *The Real World*, thinking that being on the show will give the magazine fantastic exposure. After sending in a strange but oddly captivating audition tape, Eggers receives a call from a producer named Laura, who invites him to come do a videotaped interview.

It's rather convenient that Eggers is able to frame his interest in The Real World *in terms of his desire to promote* Might. *While this probably does have something to do with why he wants to be on the show, it's also clear that he's simply drawn to the program. Again, this is unsurprising, since the show's odd blend of reality, entertainment, and performance so closely aligns with the goals and self-conscious interests of* A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

When Eggers arrives at MTV's San Francisco headquarters, Laura sits him down and asks him questions. Reproducing their conversation in the form of an interview transcript, Eggers talks about growing up in Lake Forest, which Laura points out is "one of the wealthiest towns in America." Eggers acknowledges this but insists he wasn't rich. He talks about his parents, explaining that his mother was a teacher and his father a lawyer, and when Laura asks if their family had much money when he was growing up, he reiterates that they weren't rich, though he also makes it clear that they weren't necessarily poor, either.

At this point in his memoir, Eggers has examined several aspects of his identity. He has contemplated his role as a guardian, his identity as a young bachelor, his professional persona, and even his position as a white man with unexamined racial biases. Now, in his conversation with Laura about his upbringing, he considers his socioeconomic status. As Laura urges him to talk about his family's financial standing, he makes a point of establishing that he wasn't rich, as if he's embarrassed to have grown up in an affluent town like Lake Forest. As such, he hopes to obscure his relatively comfortable upbringing by emphasizing the fact that his family wasn't wealthy.

Laura asks if Eggers felt like Lake Forest was divided based on wealth, wondering if he felt different from the rest of the town. As he answers, he tells her that he and his friends used to call the rich private high school "Country Gay" instead of "Country Day." "This was a fairly intolerant town," Laura replies. "Homogenous, yes; intolerant, no," Eggers says. "It was overwhelmingly white, of course, but racism of any kind—at least outwardly expressed—is kind of gauche, so we basically grew up without a sense of prejudice, firsthand or even in the abstract." He then tells a long story about a kid in his neighborhood who hung a Confederate flag in his window and convinced a bunch of other students to become bigots like him.

In this moment, it becomes increasingly obvious that Eggers wants to publicly examine the things he has taken for granted throughout his life. When he tells Laura that he and his friends used to call the rich high school in their town "Country Gay," he fails to see why she finds this an insensitive thing to say. Or, rather, he doesn't necessarily fail to see why she would find this "intolerant," but he's capable of ignoring the harmfulness of this joke because he has never been on the receiving end of this kind of quip. For him, "intolerance" wasn't worth considering as a kid, since he grew up "without a sense of prejudice, firsthand or even in the abstract." Of course, this is simply because he himself never had to experience prejudice. This doesn't mean that prejudice didn't exist in his town—he just never had to deal with it. Having said that, readers should keep in mind that this is Eggers's memoir, meaning that he can present himself any way he wants. As such, the fact that he willingly reveals his naïve ideas about prejudice suggest that he recognizes them as problematic and wants to unpack them.

When Laura asks about whether or not there were many African American people in Lake Forest—or in Eggers's high school—Eggers says that everyone in his school except four or five kids were white. One of the black kids, he notes, was Mr. T's daughter, since Mr. T moved to Lake Forest and bought a mansion. He then tells a story about how the town got extremely upset when Mr. T cut down the trees bordering his house because they cast too much shade onto his property. Eggers's father, for his part, thought it was hilarious how angry all these white people got about a black celebrity coming into town and cutting down their precious trees.

Again, Eggers reveals the sheltered and quietly racist quality of his hometown. This time, though, he seems more in touch with the fact that his community emanated a certain kind of low-level—though no less harmful—form of prejudice, which was directed at Mr. T because he was black and because he was an outsider in the town.

Eggers's interview with Laura begins to spiral out into a vast overview of his entire childhood, tying in random stories like one time when his childhood best friend's dad committed suicide by lighting himself on fire in his front yard. Eventually, Laura asks him why he's telling her these stories, and he says, "These are the stories I tell. Isn't that what you're looking for? These terrible deaths tearing through this pristine community, all the more strange and tragic given the context, the incongruity—" Before he can finish, she interjects, saying, "So tell me something: This isn't really a transcript of the interview, is it?" He admits that it's not, and she suggests that it's just a "device," a "catchall for a bunch of anecdotes that would be too awkward to force together otherwise."

Once more, Eggers uses an actual conversation in A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius *to comment on the very means by which he's telling his story. In this case, he has found a way to tell "a bunch of anecdotes" that wouldn't otherwise fit into the narrative of his tale. And although these "anecdotes" don't necessarily advance the plot in the way that Eggers's meta-narrative conversations with John or Toph sometimes do, they ultimately help him develop the central themes of the book, expounding upon his examinations of identity, death, tragedy, and coming of age.*

Eggers launches into an "anecdote" about Sarah, a girl two years older than him who was on his swim team. Eggers always admired her but never actually talked to until he saw her at a crowded bar shortly after his father died (but before his mother died). He and Sarah hit it off, and she took him back to her parents' house, where they had sex and he slept in her bed. In the morning, she snuck him out and drove him home. Eggers wanted to tell her that what they'd done was a mistake because he was dating Kirsten, but when they got to his house he saw his mother through the window. Not wanting to tell her who Sarah was, he simply kissed Sarah and went inside.

In this "anecdote," Eggers highlights the fact that his experience as a young caretaker in California isn't the first time he has been straddled between two identities. Indeed, when his mother was dying, he was torn between being a young college student and a dutiful son. When he actually did the things a normal young person might do, he found himself feeling guilty, rushing back home and trying to hide his separate life from his mother.

Laura asks Eggers what he thinks he can offer *The Real World*, and he says he can serve as the "Tragic Guy." Plus, he says, he has *Might*, which makes him unique. When she asks about the magazine's name, he tells her it's a "double entendre," since "might" can mean both "*power* and *possibility*." Making his case for why he should be on the show, he points out that Laura will need to cast a diverse set of people. He says she'll need to find one or two black people, a couple of "really great-looking" but rather stupid people, a homosexual person, an Asian, Latino, or Native American, and—finally—a "tragic" white guy. He suggests that once viewers get to know him, his "struggles" will become "universal and inspiring."

Eggers believes that, although his past is tragic and extraordinary, his struggle is ultimately relatable. This belief makes sense, considering that he's writing a memoir about his experiences, an act that suggests he believes his life story might add something to the world. On another note, he again reveals his obsession with the idea of youth and opportunity, suggesting that his magazine represents both "power" and "possibility." He also continues his examination of identity by referencing the fact that Laura will want to cast a diverse set of people for the show.

Laura asks Eggers why he wants to be on *The Real World*, and he says he wants people to "witness" his "youth." He also says he wants to share his "suffering," since "by sharing it [he] will dilute it," though Laura says she thinks this will only "amplify" it. He disagrees, arguing that by going on the show he will add to his "lattice," which is a term he uses to refer to "everyone else," everyone in his life. "I see us as one, as a vast matrix, an army, a whole, each one of us responsible to one another, because no one else is," he says. As he continues to speak, he talks about his various neuroses, and Laura asks him if he's sure he wants to tell her this intimate information, but he maintains that telling his stories doesn't do anything to deplete his experiences.

When Eggers references his "lattice," he uncovers something about his obsession with youth. Believing that his generation is full of "power" and "possibility," he sees his contemporaries as a support network, a "lattice" that helps lift each other up. This is interesting, since he has previously felt like his friends have no idea what kind of life he leads as Toph's guardian. Nonetheless, he feels a strong sense of connection to his community in this moment. He also comments on the nature of storytelling, maintaining that spreading his tale will help him manage his pain. This, he says, will only help him face his harrowing memories.

Transitioning to a conversation about death, Laura asks about the concept of dying with dignity, and Eggers says, "You will die, and when you die, you will know a profound lack of [dignity]. It's never dignified, always brutal." He then adds that dignity is nothing but "an affectation" that is "fleeting" and "mercurial." He also reveals that he and Beth never gave their parents a "proper burial." They were cremated, he explains, so he and Beth decided not to give them gravestones. In fact, they don't even know where their parents' remains are, since the company that cremated them hasn't yet sent them their **ashes**, perhaps because the company doesn't know where to send them. Eggers and Beth periodically discuss trying to track down the remains, but they never get around to doing so. Sometimes, he explains, it seems better this way.

Once again, a meta-narrative section has managed to advance new information, this time regarding the remains of Eggers's parents. Since the first chapter of the book uses the future tense to skip the details of Eggers's mother's death, there is still quite a bit that readers don't yet know about what happened after she died. Using this interview with Laura to examine his insecurities, Eggers shows readers that there are still things that haven't been resolved regarding his parents' deaths.

Eggers tells Laura that he rarely dreams of his parents. He has, however, dreamt about his father. In the dream, it occurred to him that perhaps his father is actually still alive, that his death was just "another deception." When Laura asks what he means by "another deception," he says, "Well, like all people who drink, and do so while successfully keeping a family and a job, he was an extraordinary magician." He then explains that his father used to have AA meetings at the house even when he was drunk. Another trick he used to pull was drinking clear liquors out of tall water glasses because no one ever suspects that someone's drinking alcohol out of a water glass. After a while, his mother stopped trying to get his father to quit, instead deciding to allow it as long as he stuck to beer or wine in the house.

Until now, there have only been two indications that Eggers's father was an alcoholic: Eggers's mention that his father would make a large Bloody Mary when he felt underappreciated by his family, and the meta-narrative conversation with Toph stating that their father "being in AA was not to be spoken of, ever." Now, these references make more sense, as Eggers finally makes it clear that his father had a drinking problem. Interestingly, he includes this information in his meta-narrative conversation with Laura, as if telling the story of his father's alcoholism would be too difficult to do using conventional narrative techniques.

Eggers recalls his father chasing him through the house, drunkenly trying to hit him. Once, when he hid in his bedroom, he tried to fashion a rope out of a bedsheet, hoping to use it to rappel out the window. Before he could do this, though, his father broke the door off its hinges. "So this was a child abuse situation?" asks Laura, but Eggers claims that his father never spanked him very hard once he got ahold of him. In fact, it was his mother who used to hit them rather hard, often smacking them over the head. At some point, though, Bill started laughing when she did this, ducking away and turning it into a joke. The rest of the children followed suit, and this effectively calmed things down, such that even Eggers's mother would laugh.

Eggers feels guilty about revealing unflattering things about his parents. When Laura states the obvious—suggesting that his father was abusive—he immediately reframes his father's actions, trying to make them sound less intense than they seemingly were. This sense of guilt is also why Eggers chooses to reveal these difficult stories in a section relying upon meta-narrative techniques. Telling these stories about "abuse" in a straightforward manner would most likely make them seem too disturbing, and Eggers would therefore feel shameful about speaking badly about his deceased parents. As a result, he decides to soften these anecdotes by couching them in a section that draws attention to its glib use of meta-narration.

Wrapping up their conversation, Eggers makes one more attempt to show Laura that he's a "tragic" person who deserves to have his story told. "Can you not see that we're extraordinary?" he asks her, referring to himself and Toph. "That we were meant for something else, something more?" He tells her he wants to be "the heart pumping blood to everyone." "And will that heal you?" she asks. "Yes!" he replies. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

When Eggers says he wants to be "the heart pumping blood to everyone," he tries to frame his story as something vital and important, something that will enhance the world if only he has the chance to tell it. And although this might be true, readers also know that the main reason he wants to make his story known is that he thinks doing so will dilute" his pain, a notion Laura intuits when she asks him if telling the world about his life will "heal" him.

CHAPTER 7

Eggers isn't chosen for *The Real World*. Instead, the show casts a cartoonist named Judd. "Fuck it," Eggers thinks. "Stupid show." He decides that *Might* doesn't need *The Real World*. Nonetheless, he receives a submission from Judd several weeks later, and although he and Moodie agree the cartoons aren't a good fit for the magazine, they invite Judd to come into the office, hoping he'll bring the camera crew along. "In the month or so since that first issue," Eggers notes, "*Might* has become something different. We are much less inspired than we were then, and going through with another one seems, on a certain level, more dutiful than impassioned." The entire operation has started to feel like a job, which is exactly what he and Moodie always wanted to avoid.

Eggers and Moodie want to publish Might *because they're interested in participating in the current cultural moment, a period during which young people are doing exciting and seemingly subversive things. Eggers wants to establish himself as a creative individual, but now he realizes that doing this will require a lot of grunt work. As such, his youthful idealism—the feeling that anything is possible—wavers for the first time in his life.*


Might begins "a pattern of almost immediate opinion-reversal and self-devouring." If the magazine praised someone or something in its first issue, chances are it will ridicule that same person or thing in a later issue. Meanwhile, they try to attract advertisers by placing odd fake ads in their pages. When Judd visits with his portfolio, Eggers and Moodie make a point of dressing carelessly. This is a very self-aware attempt to look overly casual, since they both want to make sure people don't think they actually care about *The Real World*. As the cameras circle around them and Judd shows them his drawings, they try to act serious but aloof, smart but slightly bored. In the end, the entire conversation airs as an eight-second clip in the second episode of the season, and although it's so short, dozens of people call Eggers to say they saw him on TV.

Might *magazine's "pattern of almost immediate opinion-reversal" is nothing but an attempt to maintain its identity as a cutting-edge, contrarian publication. This is a way of combatting the fact that Eggers and Moodie feel "less inspired" than they did at the outset of their project. By publishing scathing critical articles, they simulate the youthful idealism they had when they first started the project. Meanwhile, they work hard to make it seem like they don't care about what they're doing, since this is also essential to their goal of appearing young and unbound by convention.*



One of the people who sees Eggers and Moodie on *The Real World* is Shalini, who loves MTV. They become good friends with her and help her design her magazine in exchange for "her thrillingly frequent, unbelievable, semi-erotic during-work backrubs." They ask her to be part of their next photoshoot, but she declines because they're looking for people to pose in the nude. Their idea is to publish a spread comprised of hundreds of pictures of people without their clothes on to "demonstrate what people's bodies actually look like." As they scramble to gather models, they try to find people of color and people with different body types, though this is an awkward thing to do, since they have to ask if anybody has nonwhite friends, male friends, flat-chested friends, friends with big penises, etc.

Eggers's and Moodie's idea to publish a collection of nude pictures showing "what people's bodies actually look like" is in keeping with their desire to position Might *as a fresh and uninhibited publication with new and challenging perspectives. In this case, their attempt to do this forces them to reckon with the fact that, although they might like to champion the* idea *of diversity, they are themselves a fairly homogenous cast of people. As a result, they feel uncomfortable when they try to portray themselves as diverse and inclusive, since doing this makes them tokenize other people based on race, gender, or a number of other identity-related attributes.*

Judd, who has agreed to be part of Eggers's and Moodie's nude photoshoot, promises to bring a friend from the *Real World* cast. This excites Eggers, who assumes the cameras will also come and thus thinks the world will finally see that *Might* is doing something "sociologically huge." When Judd arrives with his friend, though, the cameras aren't with them, and he explains that the film crew is with another cast member. Later, when Eggers and Moodie look at the results of the photoshoot, they're surprised to see that they can't tell who is who (the pictures are from the neck down). Eggers discovers that even Kirsten, who volunteered to take part in the semi-nude shoot (they decided it'd be easier to sell if it wasn't fully nude), is hard to pick out amongst the many, many bodies.

In this situation, Eggers reveals his desire for attention, wanting badly to be noticed for the work he's doing at Might. *When this doesn't come to fruition, he's thoroughly disappointed, though it's worth noting that this photoshoot—which was perhaps originally conceived of as a way of getting noticed—actually produces something interesting, since even Eggers can't recognize people once he looks at the final results. This, of course, is the whole point of the photoshoot: to force people to look at bodies differently. As such, Eggers's project succeeds even as he finds himself disappointed about its lack of media coverage.*

Eggers goes to the park with Toph, who is now eleven. They play Frisbee for a while, attracting attention with their fancy throwing and catching tricks. When they finish playing, they lounge about and begin to wrestle, but just when they start to really get going, Eggers notices older parents watching them with questioning eyes, so he rolls off Toph and they decide to head home. Upon arriving, Eggers receives a call from Meredith, who tells him their friend John has "been talking to her about ingesting the pills he has next to him." Frantic and scared, Eggers tells Toph to stay inside and lock the door. He then speeds off in his car, worrying the whole way that he'll be too late, that John will have already taken a handful of pills.

Having spent time considering Might *magazine and his career, Eggers briefly circles back to Toph. He talks about playing games with his younger brother, showing readers that their relationship remains intact even as Toph grows older and they have to face new problems, like the fact that people are suspicious of them when they wrestle, since this isn't something a parent would necessarily do in public with an eleven-year-old boy. As Eggers begins narrating this story about John, it's important to bear in mind that John has, like Eggers, lost both parents. In this way, he represents the kind of person Eggers might have been if he hadn't needed to throw all his energy into raising Toph.*

"Maybe he will do it," Eggers thinks, considering whether or not John is serious about committing suicide. "Maybe this is it. Cannot b*elieve* this is me again. I'll have a dead friend. Do I want a dead friend? Maybe I want a dead friend. There could be so many uses…No, I don't want a dead friend. Maybe I want a dead friend *without having a friend who dies*." Eggers arrives at John's to find him sitting on the couch drinking wine. "What the fuck are you doing?" he asks, but John just smiles. "I hate this guy," Eggers thinks. "Did you already do it?" he asks, still worked up from the drive. "Did you already do it? Fuck you if you did, you fucking cocksucker." Next to John on a small table there is a smattering of loose pills. When Eggers asks what they are, John just shrugs.

When Eggers asks himself if he "want[s]a dead friend," he recognizes that he has in some ways benefited from tragedy in the past—for instance, he's writing a book about his parents' deaths. As such, he wonders if it would be "useful" in a similar way if he also had a dead friend, but then he realizes how morbid this thought is and decides that, although the idea of having a dead friend might be attractive, the reality of that kind of tragedy would outweigh all other considerations.

Eggers threatens to call the police, but when he picks up the phone, John tells him in a strange voice to relax. Eggers asks why he's talking "like an asshole," and John indicates that he's been drinking (accidentally spilling his glass of wine on himself as he does so). "Aw, fuck you, I'm calling anyway," Eggers says, and dials 911. After, he stomps around John's apartment looking for "more clues." "I half expect to find anything now," he writes, "guns, drugs, gold bullion. This is fiction now, it's fucking fiction."

Eggers again calls attention to the ways in which he's telling this story, this time admitting that his account of John's possible suicide attempt has turned into "fiction." In this moment, readers see how Eggers has worked himself up into this narrative, slowly becoming more entrenched in the creation of his story until, at a certain point, he's forced to admit that he's spun himself into something fictive, though it's worth considering that this tale may still be at least vaguely representative of what happened in real life.

Sitting down, Eggers asks why John's so upset, guessing that it's because he's just been dumped by his girlfriend. John says it's not his relationship that's the problem, but rather his head. He points to it, rolling it forward drunkenly. "They're dead," he says, but doesn't clarify whom he's talking about. When the police come, they ask him what's the matter, and John gives them the same shrug he gave Eggers. The police say he's going to have to go to the hospital either way, and then he dives for the side table, grabs the pills, and shoves them into his mouth. "Now they'll definitely pump your stomach!" Eggers says.

When John says, "They're dead" without offering an explanation of whom he's talking about, readers are reminded that he, like Eggers, lost his parents at a young age. Considering that this account is, by Eggers's own admission, at least partially fictitious, it seems significant that he has chosen to give John this line about losing his parents, as if trying to communicate that they share the same struggle to overcome their difficult pasts. The difference between them, though, is that Eggers has chosen to adopt an optimistic worldview that enables him to care for Toph, whereas John finds it hard to move beyond his misfortune.

Eggers follows John's ambulance to the hospital, where he sits in the waiting room and watches Conan O'Brien on TV. Before long, he wishes he had a pen and paper so that he could write down the details of his experience, since it occurs to him that this might make a good short story or novel section. However, he stops himself from going to fetch a pen from his car, since he thinks doing so would be "crass." Instead, he decides to "revel in the simultaneous living of an experience and its dozen or so echoes in art and media," since he knows that stories about waiting in hospitals are cliché and thus have already been told.

As he waits in the hospital, Eggers once again contemplates the act of storytelling. This time, though, he considers not just a style of narration, but the validity of telling a story in the first place. This is what causes him to think that getting a pen from his car would be "crass," since the story he would write would inevitably borrow heavily from John's life even as that life (or death) is taking place in real time. However, it's obvious that he's moved past this conviction, since this story appears in his memoir. The way he has decided to approach the fact that he's stealing John's story is by acknowledging his misgivings, once again using a meta-narrative technique to deal with material he otherwise wouldn't feel comfortable handling.

Eggers contemplates his desire to write about this odd experience, considering the ways that his self-conscious style will help him create an effective narrative. "I could be aware of the dangers of the self-consciousness," he writes, "but at the same time, I'll be plowing through the fog of all these echoes, plowing through mixed metaphors, noise, and will try to show the core, which is still there, as a core, and is valid, despite the fog. The core is the core is the core. There is always the core, that can't be articulated. Only caricatured." When he's finally allowed to visit John, he finds him lying on a bed with tubes coming out of his mouth and nose.

This is the second time Eggers has used the word "core" in relation to storytelling. The first time is in the acknowledgements section, when he says that the "gimmicks" he uses as a writer help him access the "core" of a story, which might otherwise be too painful to write about. He sets forth the same idea in the hospital, as he reiterates that certain stories can only be "caricatured" because they're otherwise too painful or complex to address.

Eggers watches John sleep and remembers what he was like as a kid. Then, suddenly, John stands up and pulls the tubes out of himself. "Fuck it," he says. Eggers asks what he's doing, and he says he's leaving. "Screw it," he says, "I'm not going to be a fucking anecdote in your stupid book." Eggers tries to stop him, saying he's "supposed to stay overnight" while he—Eggers—stays until 3 in the morning. "Then I come in tomorrow and visit you in the psychiatric ward, and then—" he says, but John cuts him off, saying that he doesn't want to be in Eggers's story. "Find someone else to be symbolic of, you know, youth wasted or whatever." "Listen, John," Eggers says, prompting him to ask why he's calling him John. "That was my dad's name," Eggers says. "So I'm your dad, too," John replies.

Eggers again has his characters transcend the world he has built for them, enabling them to comment on the choices he has made as an author. When he tells John what is "supposed" to happen, he manages to provide a meta-narrative layer to the text while still advancing the plot, since he's explaining what will happen in the follow pages, assuming John doesn't get up and run away from the story. What's more, he reveals that John is a symbolic amalgamation of multiple things. Not only does he represent "youth wasted," but he also symbolizes Eggers's father, though he doesn't quite make it clear how this is the case, other than that he has given this character his father's name.

Eggers convinces John that he deserves to be able to tell his story. After all, he claims, John's decisions influence his life, too, and this gives him permission to tell the story. "This is mine," he says. "You've given it to me. We're trading. I gave you the attention you wanted, I bail you out, when you spend three days in the psyche ward, and say how you're still thinking of doing it, I'm the one who comes in and sits on your bed and gives you the big pep talk." Now, Eggers maintains, he "get[s] this." After a moment, John relents, agreeing to get back in the bed so that Eggers can resume his story. "Listen," Eggers says as he helps him replace the tubes, "I really appreciate this."

Although it's true that Eggers steals the stories of his friends and loved ones in order to write this book, it's also the case that the stories partially belong to him. After all, he's not narrating the entirety of John's life, but only the parts that involve him (Eggers). As such, he has a point when he suggests that this episode in the hospital also belongs to him, though this idea does invite readers to question the notion of ownership when it comes to storytelling—a question that Eggers poses but doesn't answer, perhaps because he himself is conflicted about the issue.

John spends three days in a psychiatric ward. When Eggers visits him, he admits he still might kill himself, though he isn't sure. He then rolls over on his bed, and Eggers realizes he's expecting a speech. Eggers resents John for making him deliver a cliché monologue about the fact that people care about him. Using various lines he has heard in movies, he says "nothing but the most rapturous and positive things," although he himself doesn't believe anything he's saying.

Once more, Eggers is uncomfortable doing something that might be considered cliché. In the same way that he is self-conscious about writing a memoir because it has become a trendy genre, he now resents John for forcing him to speak in a manner that doesn't feel genuine. As such, readers see that Eggers is very particular about how he uses language, never wanting to appear inauthentic or conventional, an aversion that possibly arises from his desire to be seen as a creative and unique individual.

CHAPTER 8

The warehouse Eggers works in is condemned, but *Might* stays in the building because they never receive an official order to vacate. The magazine itself still doesn't make enough money to do more than barely sustain itself, and Marny and Moodie both seem to be perpetually sick. Eggers find a person named Lance Crapo to handle the business side of the publication, and they also find an overzealous intern named Zev Borow, who comes to work for them for free after graduating from Syracuse. Eventually, Eggers and Moodie decide to relocate the office, moving to a "glassy office box in the middle of the city." They manage to get this space because the *San Francisco Chronicle* agrees to rent it to them cheap so that they'll be closer and thus able to do freelance design at a quicker pace. "The grind has begun," Eggers notes, calling this "very bad."

Not for the first time, Eggers bristles at the idea of Might *becoming an actual job. When he starts coming into a conventional office in a "glassy" building, he no longer feels as if he's working on a creative, cutting-edge project. Rather, he feels like his life has become a "grind."*

One evening, Eggers and Toph walk by a restaurant where, they discover, Bill Clinton is eating. Excited, they line up outside and wait for him to emerge. As the crowd grows, Eggers tells Toph to take off his hat and jockeys for space, trying to box out other people who are also trying to catch a glimpse of the president. When Clinton emerges, he waves to the crowd, and then he makes his way toward Eggers and Toph. The crowd bunches around them, threatening to squeeze them out, but Eggers lifts Toph up at the exact right moment and forces his hand forward just as Clinton extends his own hand. Perfectly timed, they shake hands, and Eggers feels immensely proud, wishing that someone had taken a picture.

This scene is an example of the ways in which Eggers sometimes transitions into the standard role of a parent. Although he normally exists as an unconventional cross between Toph's older brother, his roommate, and his guardian, his pride in this moment is the kind of pride a parent feels upon seeing something good happen to their child.

By this point, Eggers and Kirsten have been in an on-again, off-again relationship for a year and a half, but now they decide to finally break up once and for all. Strangely enough, though, Kirsten chooses to move in with Beth, who has just finished her second year of law school and decided to move to San Francisco. This is tricky, since she has up until this point lived in Berkeley, meaning that she has always been close to Eggers and Toph. As such, Eggers feels stranded in the suburbs, so he decides that he and Toph must also relocate. After another depressing period of apartment-hunting—in which they are once more unfairly judged by landlords—they find a place in "a quiet neighborhood" near Toph's new school.

At this point, it has been several years since Eggers's parents died. As a result, he and Toph have fallen into a pattern of life which they've become accustomed to. Because they're both young, though, their lives are still in flux. When they suddenly find themselves having to relocate, they are reminded once more that they aren't fully established in their new lives.

Toph is getting older. Eggers hates the fact that he is the only person in his new school who lives in an apartment, but this doesn't stop his little brother from becoming popular. One night, he returns from hanging out with a group of girls and reports that he played Spin the Bottle but that he didn't actually kiss anybody. It takes all of Eggers's restraint to keep himself from joking around, but he's able to coax more information from Toph by asking harmless, straightforward questions. He's delighted that Toph is finally opening up to him about girls, since he normally talks to Beth about such matters.

The fact that Eggers is interested in Toph's early experiences with girls is another way in which he resembles a traditional parent. Like most parents, he wants badly to know about Toph's private life, but he also doesn't want to embarrass him or be perceived as prying. Since he is otherwise such a nontraditional guardian, these moments—in which he acts like a conventional adult caretaker—are significant.

One day while working at *Might*—which has become "depressing" and "routine"—Eggers feels as if he's been "kicked from inside." He tries to work through the pain, but it gets worse, and soon he's on the floor. No one sees him as he wiggles toward a couch. He wonders if he's been shot, but rules out this as a possibility. Still, he's convinced he's dying. Finally, people notice him and crowd around, and Shalini helps him up and takes him to the hospital. On the way, he feels a strong sense of affection for her, but he can't focus on this because he's in such excruciating pain. "Can AIDS kill like this?" he wonders. When he arrives at the hospital, he learns that he has a kidney stone. Afterwards, when he's recovering at home, Toph goes to the grocery store, buys ingredients, and makes dinner.

Kidney stones are excruciatingly painful, but they're also fairly common, and their symptoms are more or less easily identifiable. Nonetheless, Eggers characteristically jumps to the worst-case scenario, assuming that he must be dying of AIDS, an assumption that is admittedly less unlikely than his first thought, which is that he has been shot. The entire experience is important because it suddenly puts him in an unfamiliar position. Although he's accustomed to tragedy and hardship, he isn't used to being the one who actually needs physical help from others. Toph proves his maturity and responsibility when he makes dinner for Eggers, a sign of just how much he has grown up since the opening of the book, when he wasn't old enough to even open the fridge to see for himself what there was to eat.

CHAPTER 9

At *Might*, Eggers and Moodie decide to run a fake celebrity obituary. They want to find someone willing to go along with their idea, but the people they contact refuse. Finally, Adam Rich—the former child star of *Eight is Enough*—agrees, and Eggers is ecstatic to have the opportunity to satirize celebrity eulogies. Toph, on the other hand, isn't so sure. "To tell you the truth," he says, "I think it's kind of sick." He suggests that Eggers is using Adam Rich to make a point. "You think he's vapid, dim-witted, with his stupidity arising, first and foremost, from the fact that he is famous and you guys are not," Toph says. "You're breaking out of character again," Eggers replies. Ignoring this, Toph accuses him of not being able to "stand the fact that this silly person, this Adam Rich person," "has the *gall* to be a household name."

In this scene, Eggers uses Toph as a vehicle to critique his own professional decisions. This, in turn, gives him the chance to voice his misgivings about the way he conducts himself at Might. *While he and Moodie want to think of themselves as intellectually above someone like Adam Rich, the fictionalized version of Toph—and thus Eggers—is aware of the fact that they don't actually believe this. Rather, their desire to make fun of celebrities in this way arises from their own insecurities and frustrations. After all, readers already know Eggers craves the attention that comes from being on TV, since he tried so hard to be on* The Real World.

Toph reminds Eggers of the time he and the other *Might* editors went to New York to interview "budding celebrities" so that they could "make fun of them" in print. He also brings up what Eggers did to Sari Locker, the sexologist he interviewed about her book *Mindblowing Sex in the Real World*. Apparently, Eggers went to dinner with Sari and talked to her about her book, all the while planning to make fun of her, "recording her words to later use against her." At the same time, he also found himself attracted to Sari and tried to "get invited back to her apartment." As Toph recounts this story, Eggers chimes in, saying that he *almost* went home with her. "And then you still went back and wrote a bitchy little thing about her," Toph says.

Eggers does not shy away from publicly examining his flaws. Using Toph to talk about how poorly he treated Sari Locker, he presents himself as callous and imperfect. This is one of the reasons he employs meta-narrative techniques in his memoir, so that he can examine himself with an air of objectivity, making it easier to recognize even the most problematic parts of his personality.

Eggers insists that Sari wasn't offended by what he wrote, and Toph suggests that she's probably just used to such things. "But don't you see this is a kind of cannibalism?" he says. "That you're just grabbing at people, toys from a box, dressing them up, taking them apart, ripping their heads off, discarding them—" Before Toph can finish, Eggers tells him that Sari is coming back to town and that he's going to get together with her.

Although Toph doesn't get to finish his point about Eggers engaging in a "kind of cannibalism," the idea is worth keeping in mind, since Eggers—as a memoirist—consumes other peoples' stories and uses them for his own narrative purposes. This is an idea that resurfaces later, especially regarding the guilt Eggers feels in writing about his friends and loved ones.

Several days later, Toph comes home with school pictures. When he reveals them, Eggers is appalled—Toph is looking at the camera with a helpless, strange expression on his face, as if he's desperately unhappy. To Eggers, the expression screams: *"Look at my sad life, you people, you viewers of junior-high pictures! Class, teachers, see my eyes, which have seen too much! [...] Save me from him because every night before dinner he's asleep on the couch and so dead to the world, and when he can't get up he tugs on my shirt and begs, he makes me cook for us and then later, once awake, he's so tense, staring at the screen, writing something he won't let me see, and he falls asleep in my bed and I have to push him out [...]."*

Eggers's reaction to Toph's school pictures reflects his insecurities as an unconventional guardian. He constantly worries that people will judge him for not treating Toph the way a middle-aged parent might treat him. Of course, everyone has bad pictures taken of them at some point, but Eggers is so concerned about what other people think that he can't see past what he believes is Toph's unhappy facial expression.

Around the same time that Eggers sees Toph's school picture, Marny calls and tells him Shalini has been in an accident. "You know that deck that collapsed in Pacific Heights?" she asks. "She's in a coma. She fell four stories and landed on her head. They don't know if she's going to make it." Eggers rushes out of the house, worrying someone will do something to Toph in his absence. He picks up Marny and meets Moodie at the hospital, where they sit in the hallway and watch Shalini's family come and go. Over the next few days, they come to know her mother. Every time they visit, they make sure to follow the unspoken code of visiting the sick: "We are not to smile, not to laugh, at anything, unless the family smiles or laughs first," Eggers notes. "Most important, we too must suffer."

Eggers is well-acquainted with the unspoken rules of visiting people in hospitals and interacting with their stressed, grieving families. Combined with John's suicide scare, this event is a reminder to Eggers that terrible things are always possible. These occurrences only exacerbate his tendency to envision the worst-case scenario, forcing him to constantly consider that death is inevitable.

While Shalini is still in her coma, Eggers decides to bring her a teddy bear that he has kept in his car since his mother died. He believes "there is something of [his mother] in this bear," and he can still hear the voice she used when she pretended to speak as the bear when he was a child. Taking it to Shalini, he wedges it between her arm and torso and steps back to look at her holding it, thinking that maybe this bear "will be magic" and "bring [her] back."

Despite his frequent thoughts that death is always lurking around the corner, Eggers manages to show some optimism by believing in a certain kind of "magic." This "magic" is laced with sentimentality, suggesting that the most powerful way to interact with a sick person is to lend them a sense of hope and empathy.

On Sari Locker's last night in town, Eggers drops Toph off at a bar mitzvah, then goes to the office to put the final touches on the Adam Rich story, which will include his "final interview" (an interview written by the *Might* staff). When he goes to pick up Toph from the downtown hotel—where the bar mitzvah was held—he can't find him. He gets out of the car and runs inside, angry because he's already late for his date with Sari. Apparently, Sari has to fly out later that night, so Eggers is extra frantic as he runs through the lobby and searches for Toph, going upstairs and downstairs multiple times before finally, after a long time, finding him in the lobby, of all places. Furious, he drops his little brother off at Beth's and calls Sari from the lobby of her hotel.

Once more, Eggers shows readers the extent to which his role as Toph's guardian clashes with his life as a young man hoping to maintain an active social (and love) life. Though Toph has reached a point where he's able to take on certain responsibilities—like cooking or staying home by himself—he still depends on Eggers.

Sari has to leave soon, but she agrees to meet Eggers in the lobby. As he waits for her, he feels bad about the fact that he "exploded" in the car, yelling at Toph and sounding like his parents used to when they were angry at him. When Sari arrives, they decide to go straight to Eggers's house, where they start kissing and making their way to his bedroom. Just as they're about to fall onto the bed, though, the door opens. "Oop," Toph says, and backs out of the room. "What are you doing here?" Eggers asks, and Toph explains that Beth didn't have any food, so she sent him back. In relative silence, Eggers drives Sari to the airport.

As Toph gets older, Eggers finds himself having to navigate a confusing dynamic. On the one hand, Toph is responsible enough to be on his own and independent enough to have his own plans, freeing Eggers to pursue a more active social life. On the other hand, he can't fully adopt an active love life, since doing so would still require him to have more autonomy than he actually has. As such, he finds himself torn between two poles, still straddling his life as a guardian and as a young "twentysomething."

Eggers and the other *Might* editors continue working on the cover story about Adam Rich's death. Meanwhile, Lance recruits a young actress named Skye Basset to represent the magazine in New York by taking meetings and planning east coast parties. Apparently, Skye was in the movie *Dangerous Minds*, though now she works almost full-time as a waitress while also going to auditions and—somehow—helping *Might*. "She is one of us, and with her, and with this Adam Rich thing, it really seems like we might be turning a corner here," Eggers writes.

Eggers has already established that his work with Might *magazine is beginning to fatigue him, but in this moment he seems to adopt a renewed vigor for the project. Indeed, he works to keep producing the magazine, branching out in ways that fuel the publication's growth while still servicing his desire to remain a young, contrarian media outlet.*

Around this time, Marny and Eggers visit Shalini in the hospital and find her sitting up with her eyes open. The doctors tell them that she's still technically in a coma, but they don't let this curtail their joy. Sitting in the parking lot after the visit, Eggers asks Marny if she'd like to have sex—he feels fantastic and alive and hopeful, and suddenly sex is the only thing he can think about. "I think we should get back to the office," she says. "She is right," Eggers notes. "She is good. She never gets upset when I do this. It was a dumb idea, a revolting idea. All wrong. Bad!" Instead, he asks for a hug, and as they hug, he again thinks that they should have sex, but she releases him after a moment and they drive back to the office.

Again, Eggers doesn't shy away from putting his embarrassing whims on display. For him, the fantastic news about Shalini waking up is cause for celebration, and this inspires him to proposition Marny. It's worth noting that he asks her if she'd like to have sex while sitting in a car in the middle of the day—this isn't the kind of situation that usually leads to random sex, but Eggers's sudden urge is perhaps the result of his inability to have sexual encounters in the evenings, since Toph might walk in on him.

Adam Rich agrees to visit San Francisco for the launch of his death story. The story has already attracted quite a lot of attention, since Eggers and Moodie sent a press release to the *National Enquirer*. Somehow, other publications got ahold of this press release, and Eggers and Moodie were unexpectedly flooded with media inquiries, reporters asking them about the specific details of Adam's death (the cover story claims that he was murdered). Eventually, they have to admit to a producer that the story is a "hoax." Still, the gossip spreads, and an AP reporter even visits Adam's father. "Listen you guys," Adam says. "This is way out of control. My relatives are fucking freaking out." When the media discovers that it's all a joke, they sink their teeth into Adam, accusing him of wanting attention.

In keeping with Toph's notion that Eggers and Moodie are treating Adam Rich unfairly, the primary consequences of their cover story rain down not on them, but on Adam himself. While Might *magazine gets to finally enjoy a moment of widespread attention, Adam has to endure mean-spirited accusations from media outlets that don't actually care about him.*

CHAPTER 10

Eggers revisits Lake Forest for a friend's wedding. He's not thrilled about attending a wedding, and hopes it'll be a traditional affair—at Beth's wedding, which happened recently, almost nothing was conventional, and Eggers felt embarrassed by the entire thing (Beth walked down the aisle to a KISS song). With Toph staying in LA with Bill, Eggers will remain in Illinois for a few extra days to excavate his past. He plans to visit the funeral home that at one point held his parents before they were cremated. He doesn't think he'll be able to track down their remains, though he does have a slight hope that something like this might happen. He also plans to revisit his childhood home and talk to people he hasn't seen for years. "This trip is about the fact that things have been much too calm in San Francisco," he writes.

Eggers's life in San Francisco has lost its excitement. It's clear he's no longer thrilled by the idea of being part of the city's youth culture. Rather, he has grown tired of working at Might, *so he goes searching for more information about his parents and his past. In other words, his boredom inspires him to dig up information he might have previously avoided. Having largely ignored the whereabouts of his parents' remains for years, he suddenly decides to look into the matter. There's also a self-conscious element to this endeavor, since the research he plans to do in Lake Forest will clearly fuel the autobiographical project that is* A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

Staying with two high school friends who are now roommates, Eggers sets out on his first day with a list, upon which he has written the places and people he wants to visit: the funeral home, his old house, his father's friend, Sarah, and several others. "The idea, I suppose, is the emotional equivalent of a drug binge," he admits, "the tossing together of as much disparate and presumably incompatible stimuli as possible, in a short span, five days, together constituting a sort of socio-familial archaeological bender, to see what comes of it, how much can be dredged up, brought back, remembered, exploited, excused, pitied, made known, made permanent." He wonders if he should spend the majority of his time drunk out of his mind, thinking that this might add something valuable to the experience, though he realizes it would also make it hard for him to drive.

By comparing his trip to Illinois as a "drug binge," Eggers frames his desire to "dredge up" his family history as something that is both compulsive and shameful, as if he's guilty about what he's doing but can't keep himself from doing it. This feeling most likely arises from the fact that he plans to use whatever information he finds to write about his parents and their deaths, "exploit[ing]" their experiences for the purpose of writing A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

Outside his childhood home, Eggers writes a note and puts it in the mailbox. The note explains that he used to live here and that he'd love to come inside. If, he writes, the current residents are amenable to this idea, they should feel free to call him. To his surprise, seeing his house makes him feel absolutely nothing. Afterwards, he finds a pay phone and calls Sarah, asking her if she'd like to have lunch or coffee in the coming days. "She says any night is fine," he writes.

Eggers returns to Lake Forest expecting to have profound experiences that are so intense that they feel like a "drug binge." When he actually sees his house, though, he feels nothing, indicating that merely visiting the place where he grew up won't necessarily instantly evoke the pain he experienced when his parents died.

At the wedding—which is, to his great relief, exceedingly normal—people ask Eggers about Toph and about *Might*, which he says probably won't be going for much longer. "We're all exhausted," he notes, explaining that everyone is "tired of having other jobs" and will either need to get significant funding or else move the entire operation to New York. Most of the editors are thinking of moving anyway. As Eggers stands around talking to his friends, he watches older wedding guests dance and feels an acute dislike for them, since he thinks they have taken over "this wedding of two young people."

Because his parents died when he was still young, Eggers isn't used to being around middle-aged adults. As a result, he finds himself unable to connect with them, and even resents them for encroaching upon what he sees as his and his friends' party. Interestingly enough, though, he himself has aged and changed in a way that he might not have foreseen several years ago. Indeed, he no longer feels the idealistic sense of infinite possibility that he experienced when he first started Might.

The next day, Eggers returns to his childhood home, which the current residents have invited him to tour. Inside, he's shocked to see that they've completely changed the house's layout. They refer to what he thinks of as the family room as the living room, and they've even taken down the wallpaper in his room, which he picked out with his mother. As he walks from room to room, he finds himself asking pointed technical questions, like, "Is this new molding? Is this drywall?" Before entering the house, he had felt as if the family made a mistake letting him in, since he sees his interest as no more than a morbid curiosity. As he surveys the house, though, he merely feels like "a friendly neighbor with an interest in decorating."

Eggers expect to feel a rush of emotion when he enters his childhood home. Instead, he feels nothing, and all he can think to do is comment on the remodeling the current residents have done. In a way, this is part of his self-conscious narration, since he's aware of the ways in which real life isn't conforming to the narrative he expects to tell.

Eggers goes to Lake Michigan despite the cold and uses the payphone to call Beth. "You know about those **ashes**?" he says, asking if the cremation service ever called her. "Yeah they did," she says, revealing that they called a year ago saying they had their parents' ashes. When Eggers asks how she responded, she tells him she said they didn't want the remains. "What do we want with some stupid ashes?" she adds. Eggers can't believe she would do this without consulting him or Bill, and this makes Beth so angry that she hangs up. "This is just too—I had loved how vague it was before," Eggers writes. "But now, knowing that Beth knew, and that they're really gone, discarded, that we had a chance—" He never finishes this sentence. "Oh," he writes, "we are monsters."

Eggers liked the fact that he and his siblings didn't know what happened to their parents remains, because this "vague[ness]" allowed for the possibility that they still might track down the ashes. As such, finding out that "they're really gone" is a devastating emotional blow, one that makes him feel like he's a "monster" for not caring enough about his parents.

Eggers calls his father's friend and speaks to his wife, who tells him that her husband is in the hospital with an infection. However, she insists that it's not serious and urges Eggers to go visit him. As such, Eggers makes its way to the same hospital his mother stayed in periodically throughout her final months. When he arrives, he's shocked to see that his father's friend is in much worse shape than his wife indicated, but he still asks the man questions about his father.

Eggers's trip to the hospital is another part of his mission to excavate his past. Hoping to gain clarity about the man his father was, he wants to speak to his friend. The fact that this man is in the same hospital in which his mother often stayed only adds to the "archaeological bender" of this trip to Lake Forest.

This conversation throws Eggers into the memory of his father's hospitalization. Apparently, it was quite unexpected, since he'd just recently been diagnosed. Nonetheless, the doctors told Eggers's mother that his situation was worse than expected and that he could die at any time. She then rushed to visit him and found him smoking in his room. "He's not going to go today," she said, driving home and adding that it wouldn't happen anytime soon. An hour later, though, he was dead. Now, his friend lies in the hospital and tells Eggers how good his father was at driving. Eggers asks him if he thinks his father "felt alone when he died." Unfortunately, the phone rings, and when his father's friend finishes the call, he pretends to have forgotten the question.

The fact that Eggers's father died so suddenly—despite his mother's assessment—once again reminds Eggers that death is not only unavoidable, it is also unpredictable. Hoping to get a better sense of his dad's emotional life, he wonders if his friend can shed any light on what Mr. Eggers must have been feeling before he passed away. This is a difficult and unanswerable question, though, so it makes sense that he doesn't receive a response.

The following day, Eggers visits the funeral home and asks the young man working there if he has any paperwork documenting where his parents' bodies were sent. When the employee produces a file, Eggers asks if he can have a copy of it, so the man goes downstairs to the photocopier. Coming back upstairs, he gives Eggers **a cardboard box marked Heidi Eggers**. "You mean this is…" Eggers says, and the employee confirms that the box holds his mother's remains. Not knowing what to do, Eggers leaves and puts the box on the passenger's seat, knowing that his mother would be furious if he put her in the trunk. "The box is my mother, only smaller," he writes. "The box is not my mother. Is the box my mother? No." He then imagines her face on the box and feels like a "monster" for "looking for bad things."

Yet again, Eggers feels guilty about the fact that he's "looking for bad things." Of course, it isn't necessarily the case that he's doing a "bad" thing by trying to investigate his past, but because this involves telling his parents' stories, he feels like a "monster" who is overstepping his rights. These feelings are only exacerbated when he actually finds his mother's remains, a reminder that he has allowed them to languish in this funeral home for years.

At his friends' apartment that night, Eggers receives a call from Meredith, who tells him that John is "threatening" suicide again. Distracted by the fact that his **mother's remains** are sitting outside in the car, Eggers calls John and says, "What's the problem?" After listening to John complain about being a burden, Eggers changes the subject by telling John about finding his mother's ashes. He also talks about how he "spent the night driving around the frozen, broken South Side of Chicago" after visiting the funeral home. He was, he tells John, "looking for something to happen" as he drove around speaking into a tape recorder. He says that he imagined a "black man in an army jacket" breaking his car window and forcing him to drive at gunpoint until they reached Lake Michigan, where the man would shoot him.

Eggers is able to distract John from his suicidal thoughts by telling him about his own troubles. This ultimately suggests that what John needs most is someone to commiserate with—after all, he and Eggers both know what it's like to have lost parents at an early age. On another note, the twisted story Eggers imagines about a "black man in an army jacket" murdering him not only circles back to his tendency to think about death and the worst-case scenario, but also his habit of prescribing to negative stereotypes. In this case, he assumes his killer would be a black man, yet another indication that he has unexamined racial prejudices.

John loves hearing Eggers talk about his morbid fears. Eggers continues, saying, "The thing I was most worried about when I was down there, in the South Side, driving around and talking into the tape recorder? I was worried that after I was shot near the lake, that the murderer, who really only wanted the car, would for some reason find and play the tape, the one where I'm describing my imagining someone like him killing me, and all this stuff about finding the box, and that this murderer would think I'm this racist weirdo." Enthralled, John has completely forgotten about his own problems. "By now he's more worried about me than himself," Eggers reflects. Before hanging up, he tells John he's planning on seeing Sarah the next day. "Oh man," John says. "You have to tell me how it goes."

What's odd about the situation Eggers imagines is that it acknowledges his own racial prejudices. He recognizes that if this imaginary black man killed him and listened to his tape recorder, he would discover that Eggers is a "racist weirdo." Nonetheless, he doesn't stop himself from including this section in his memoir, suggesting that he wants to publicly scrutinize his implicit biases, even if this is uncomfortable and unflattering.

Eggers and Sarah enjoy an evening of drinking and talking about what it was like to grow up in Lake Forest. At one point, they go out to a bar, but they feel uncomfortable seeing people they both know, so they leave and go back to her apartment, where they start kissing on her couch. As things progress, Eggers finds himself "unsettled" by the fact that Sarah's eyes are open. "She knows I have my **mother's box** in the rental car," he thinks, wondering if she can sense it.

Eggers again feels guilty about his desire to mine the past. In this moment, his guilt about the way he has handled his parents' deaths makes its way into his relationship with Sarah, and he imagines that she must know about his mother's ashes—a ridiculous suspicion that only illustrates the extent to which he can't stop thinking about his decision to investigate his own painful history.

Eggers's thoughts about his mother lead to a whirlwind of worries, including that Sarah can sense that he heard Sari Locker on the radio earlier that day. He also wonders if she knows—somehow—that he visited the medical school where his parents' bodies were examined, and that when he finally found the doctor's name who studied them, he opened the door, saw him sitting there, said "Oop, sorry!" and turned around. Despite these distractions, he and Sarah make their way into the bedroom. The next morning, Eggers feels wonderful in her bed. He even sleeps late as she moves around the apartment, but then it becomes clear she wants him to wake up. He suggests they go out to breakfast, but she makes up an excuse and then, suddenly, he's putting on his shoes and she's saying "Happy New Year!" and sending him out the door.

For Eggers, visiting Sarah is a way of returning to a time just after his father died, when they first had sex. For Sarah, though, seeing Eggers is just a pleasant occurrence, one that has very little to do with painful memories or complicated ideas about personal history. As a result, their experiences don't sync up, which is why Eggers is so surprised when Sarah rushes him out of her house as if it's no big deal.

The next day, which is New Year's Day, Eggers goes to Lake Michigan. He's returning to California that evening, but before he leaves he plans to spread **his mother's ashes**. He opens the box and finds a small golden container—like a cookie tin—inside. When he opens that, he's surprised to see that the ashes look more like multi-colored pebbles than he expected, and he wonders what each color is. For instance, are the white pieces bone? Scared of accidentally inhaling the remains, he walks over to the water and imagines his mother watching him, suddenly feeling "stupid." This gesture, he realizes, is "ridiculous, small, [and] tacky." He decides that he should spread his mother's ashes in the actual ocean, thinking that maybe he should travel to Cape Cod, though this would require asking Bill to keep Toph longer, and then he'd have to tell the family what he's doing.

Eggers's decision to spread his mother's ashes in Lake Michigan effectively helps him gain closure. And although it's evident that he feels guilty about not telling Bill or Beth what he's doing, it's worth remembering that Beth also didn't consult him before she told the cremation company that they didn't want their parents' ashes. Judging by this, it seems she simply wanted to be finished with the entire ordeal, so bringing this matter up with her would most likely only cause her stress.

Deciding that spreading **his mother's ashes** in Cape Cod is unrealistic, Eggers realizes that today is also his mother's birthday. This, he thinks, is a sign that he's doing the right thing by releasing her into Lake Michigan, a place she loved. He takes a handful of ashes and scatters them, surprised at how light they are. He hates that they keep falling on the ground, so he kicks at them, though he then feels uncomfortable about kicking his mother's ashes. "Oh this is so plain, disgraceful, pathetic," he thinks. "Or beautiful and loving and glorious! Yes, beautiful and loving and glorious!" He finally decides that this is a good act, something she'd love.

Unsurprisingly, Eggers immediately second-guesses his decision to scatter his mother's ashes. This is characteristic of him, since he often wonders if what he's doing is right, asking himself if he's behaving how he should behave. When he eventually decides that spreading his mother's ashes in Lake Michigan is the right thing to do, he finally manages to let go of his doubts and any sense of guilt that might come along with this otherwise emotionally healthy act.

CHAPTER 11

Back in California, Eggers and Toph drive to Black Sands Beach, which is a secluded spot only ten minutes outside of San Francisco. As they drive, Toph says "Mooooooooooooo" at pedestrians out the window, and he and Eggers lose themselves in laughter. They have just realized that they've forgotten to go to a standardized test Toph was supposed to take in order to get into a certain high school. Even though Eggers jumped through hoops to sign Toph up for the test—having to prove that he is his guardian—he doesn't mind that Toph is going to miss it. "Forget it," he says. "Doesn't matter now." He feels this way because they have decided to move to New York. "I think it's good to move around, see stuff, not get stuck," Toph says, and Eggers notes that he "love[s] him for saying that," even if he doesn't truly mean it.

Toph's eager willingness to move to New York relieves Eggers, who has clearly lost all desire to live in California. This, of course, has been coming for quite some time, considering how much Eggers has talked about the fact that working at Might *no longer excites him. Still, Toph's flexibility is remarkable, a sign that he wants to make Eggers happy. As a result, readers see that Eggers and Toph have a symbiotic relationship in which they both take care of one another.*

Eggers and Toph ease onto a dirt road that winds along hills overlooking the Bay. Eggers takes his hands off the steering wheel to scare Toph. "Don't, asshole," Toph says. Eggers tells him he can't call him an asshole, so Toph calls him an "A-hole," and when Eggers says that this is also unacceptable, Toph settles on "dickhead," which Eggers says is "fine." This, Eggers writes, is the first time he has heard Toph curse, and though he finds it "distressing," he also thinks it's somewhat "thrilling." Similarly, Toph is getting stronger, such that when they wrestle, he actually puts up a respectable fight. Eggers loves this.

As Eggers nears the end of A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, *he makes a point to show readers how much Toph has grown up. This, it seems, is a testament to his style of guardianship, which is a mixture of brotherly love and parental protection. Although he allows Toph to say words like "dickhead," which other parents probably wouldn't permit, there's no denying that he has done a good job raising his little brother, who is clearly happy.*

In recent months, Eggers has tried half-heartedly to secure funding for *Might*. Lance even set up meetings for him and Moodie with rich people. When they spoke to the founders of *Wired*, though, Eggers found himself "woefully underprepared." The *Wired* founders asked for "numbers and plans," and so he and Moodie "fumbled and joked and did [their] best to sound confident, ambitious still, disguising [their] exhaustion, gesturing to each other." In this way, they promised that they would be getting a new design team, "would stop making fun of advertisers," would launch "TV shows and a Web site," and would perhaps even put celebrities on the cover. When they left the meeting, they "both knew it was over" and realized they didn't care.

What began as a fervent effort to produce an independent, contrarian magazine has now become nothing more than a burden, something that has made Eggers and Moodie feel "exhausted." Eggers has lost his ambition to pursue his lofty ideals, so he agrees to a number of mainstream, commercial concessions that ultimately contradict the very premise of Might *magazine. Although this message is bleak, the apathy he shows here suggests that he, like Toph, has also grown up, since part of adulthood means understanding the ways in which the world places limitations on creative endeavors. Rather than ruining* Might*'s legacy, the adult thing to do is to walk away from the project before it becomes something it was never meant to be.*

In the final issue of *Might*, the editors run an essay about death. Right before sending it to print, they look at it again and worry that it sounds "glib" and "callous," since they recently got word that Skye Bassett has died. After a trip to New York, Lance nervously paced in the office until people started to look at him. "Skye died," he said. "It was a virus and it attacked her heart. She was there just for a few days." In the end, they decide to dedicate the last issue to her.

Once again, Eggers is reminded of death's unavoidability and unpredictability. No matter where he goes, he can't get away from events that will recall his parents' deaths.

John's depression takes a turn for the worse. He has started vanishing for weeks at a time before calling from somewhere random and asking for money. Finally, he realizes he should go back to rehab, and because he has no money, he asks Eggers to foot the bill. Eggers obliges, driving to pick him up "from some place in the Oakland hills." In the car, Eggers says, "There's a part of me that wants to let you out of the car right now, on the fucking bridge." In response, John says, "Then let me out." Eggers then tells him that his story of addiction and depression is a cliché, saying that he's boring. When John references Eggers's own problems, Eggers says, "We're not talking about me," but John says, "Yes we are, of course we are. We always are."

Eggers's frustration with John is somewhat complicated, since he's already made it clear that John represents "youth wasted." as well as (in some way) his father. This is possibly why he is so exasperated by John's constant desire to end his life—he realizes he can't protect John, and he resents him for reminding him of the fact that he can't control the safety of his loved ones. Of course, this is in some way a selfish worry, which John picks up on when he points out that Eggers is—at least in this book—always talking about himself.

"How much do you really care about me, outside of my usefulness as some kind of cautionary tale," John says, "a stand-in for someone else, for your dad, for these people who disappoint you—" Eggers interrupts to say that he *is* like his father, but John insists that he "can't be reduced" like that. He then says that he's just one of many people whose stories Eggers has appropriated. He points out that Shalini isn't even one of Eggers's closest friends. He then says that he feels sorry for Toph, who probably didn't have "much say" in "this whole process." Eggers objects to this, saying that his project is an example of "enlightenment," "inspiration," and "proof." "No," John replies. "You know what it is? It's entertainment."

In this meta-narrative conversation, Eggers finally reveals the link between John and his father, making it clear that they are both people who "disappoint" him. However, he also grapples with the idea that he has reduced his characters and used them for his own purposes. If this is the case, he reasons, at least he has done this to create a work that is "inspirational." He doesn't let himself off the hook so easily, however, as John points out a less flattering interpretation by suggesting that the painful stories Eggers has laced throughout the book are nothing more than "entertainment."

Eggers insists to John that he's "allowed" to tell these stories. "I am owed," he says. "You're not," John says. "See—you're just not. You're like a…a cannibal or something. Don't you see how this is just flesh-eating?" Accepting this metaphor, Eggers says that he would do it for John. "I would feed myself to you," he says.

When John says that Eggers is a "cannibal," readers will recall that Toph said the same thing when he was having a meta-narrative conversation with Eggers about Eggers's treatment of people like Sari Locker and Adam Rich. This time, though, Eggers complicates the idea by insisting that the kind of "cannibalism" that comes from consuming and then retelling other peoples' stories is actually normal, and even something he would have no problem subjecting himself to.

Eggers attends a party celebrating Shalini's birthday and recovery. She has fully healed, except for the fact that her short-term memory often fails her. As such, she asks what the party is "for," and Eggers tells her it's her birthday and that there are so many guests because everyone's excited that she has made a recovery. At this, she looks at him in confusion, and he and her sister tell her that she fell off a deck, went into a coma, and survived. "That is incredible," she says.

Although Shalini's story reminds Eggers of the many strange ways that life can go wrong, her recovery proves to him that not everything always ends in tragedy. Indeed, she has narrowly escaped death and, though she'll never be quite the same, she can still lead a relatively normal life.

Most of Eggers's friends have moved away. Moodie has gone to New York, as have Kirsten and Zev. And now Eggers and Toph are going, too, "because going to work every day is starting to tear [Eggers] into little pieces." As he sits on Black Sands Beach with Toph, he can't help but think of their mother, remembering how—in her last months—she used to come with him and Toph to the beach and sit in the car watching them play Frisbee. Putting this out of his mind for the moment, he concentrates on tossing the Frisbee with Toph, who has learned a slew of new tricks. Eggers watches his little brother and simultaneously remembers his mother's final days, thinking about her morphine drip even as Toph catches the Frisbee in triumphant, elaborate ways.

Even though Eggers is rather happy by the end of A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, *readers should note that he still can't help but recall his hardships. Tossing the Frisbee on the beach, he thinks of his mother's death, possibly reminded of her because it wasn't so long ago that he spread her ashes into a large body of water. Now, though, he has the future to think about, concentrating on moving away from San Francisco to start the next chapter of his life.*


In the middle of a description of how good he and Toph are at Frisbee, Eggers writes, "Oh I'm not going to fix you, John, or any of you people. I tried about a million times to fix you, but it was so wrong for me to want to save you because I only wanted to eat you to make me stronger, I only wanted to devour all of you, I was a cancer—Oh but I do this for you." He watches Toph leap along the beach, "blond and perfect," and he thinks about how he's "connected" to "millions" of people, standing before them and offering himself. "Don't you know that I'm trying to pump blood to you, that this is for you, that I hate you people, so many of you motherfuckers[?]"

When Eggers thinks about how he's connected to millions of people, he again transcends the boundaries of his story, this time acknowledging readers and imagining them reading about his life. By saying that he's "trying to pump blood" to his audience, he recalls his earlier belief that he has something valuable to contribute—a belief he expressed to Laura in his Real World *interview. This book, he suggests, is for his readers, whom he "hate[s]," perhaps because he knows they'll never truly understand his experience regardless of how hard he tries.*

Having turned on his readers, Eggers writes, "What the fuck does it take to show you motherfuckers, what does it fucking take what do you want how much do you want because I am willing and I'll stand before you and I'll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait, and I've been so old for so long, for you, for you, I want it fast and right through me—Oh do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it do it you fuckers finally, finally, finally."

In this final passage, Eggers tries to prove his earlier assertion that he would gladly sacrifice himself by giving other people his life story. He wonders "how much" of his life readers need (or want) before they'll feel satisfied that they understand him. However, he seems to know that nothing will ever be enough, that no matter how much of himself he gives over to this book, no one will fully understand his experience. He knows this because he has spent pages upon pages trying to consume other peoples' stories himself, and he's left feeling incomplete and guilty, as if he hasn't succeeded in fully capturing or portraying the people he has written about. In the face of this failure, he offers himself up as a sacrifice of sorts, declaring that he is willing to undergo the same kind of "cannibalism" to which he has subjected his loved ones.



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