

# Flyboys



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TOBIAS WOLFF

Tobias Wolff was born to Rosemary and Arthur Wolff in Alabama in 1945. Wolff's parents divorced when he was five, after which he lived in many places with his mother (and later his stepfather), including Seattle and Washington's North Cascade mountains. During this time, he lived apart from his older brother and father, who remained on the east coast. Wolff was admitted to The Hill School in Philadelphia after high school, but he was later expelled when the college discovered his records had been falsified. Wolff then joined the military, serving in the Army Special Forces in Vietnam until 1968. Upon returning, Wolff received his degree in English from Hertford College, and his MA from Stanford University in 1975. Six years later, his first collection of short stories, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, was published. He joined the English faculty at Syracuse alongside Raymond Carver shortly after, and many contemporary American writers such as George Saunders and Alice Sebold studied under his instruction. He published widely in this time, including his second collection of short stories, *Back in the World*, and his first memoir, *This Boy's Life*, and he received the O. Henry Award for his writing three times between 1981 and 1985. In 1997, Wolff returned to Stanford and continues to teach Creative Writing at the university.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The American Realism movement grew in the postmodern era after the end of World War 2. At the time, culture in the United States was shifting rapidly in light of a freshly booming economy, the expansion of the middle class, and mass-migration to suburban areas. In response, writers in the American Realism movement focus on the intimate, mundane realities of life, writing critically about the classism and conformity that cloak individual identity and truth.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

During the second half of the 20th century, the short story rose to prominence, with many fiction writers working almost exclusively in that form. Wolff's minimalist realism and his sparse prose have been compared to other short story writers such as John Cheever, Raymond Carver, and Andre Dubus. While Wolff and his peers have been criticized for cynicism, their shared examination of the new realities of suburban American life in the postmodern world is balanced by intimate, compassionate portrayals of their characters.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Flyboys
- **When Published:** 1996
- **Literary Period:** American Realism
- **Genre:** Fiction (Short Story)
- **Setting:** A small town in the North Cascade Mountains of Washington State
- **Climax:** Clark asks the narrator if they should include their classmate Freddy in their existing plans to design and build a jet plane, but the narrator requests that they exclude Freddy and keep their plans between the two of them.
- **Point of View:** First-person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Return to Fiction.** After publishing several novels and collections of short stories, Wolff shifted his writing focus. For nearly a decade Wolff favored nonfiction, publishing a memoir about his childhood after his parents' divorce, *This Boy's Life*, in 1989 and a memoir about his time in the military, *In Pharaoh's Army*, in 1994. *The Night in Question* (1997), the short story collection in which "Flyboys" was originally published, marked Wolff's return to the fiction genre.

**Family Business.** Tobias Wolff's brother, Geoffrey Wolff, is also a notable writer and has received fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the American Academy in Berlin. Ten years before Tobias Wolff's award-winning memoir, *This Boy's Life*, Geoffrey Wolff published his own memoir about the boys' biological father in 1979.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Tobias Wolff's "Flyboys" tells the story of the narrator and his friend Clark's plans to build a **plane**. The project largely takes place in Clark's bedroom, where the boys spend weeks designing their aircraft. Clark does most of the actual drawing of the plans because he thinks the narrator works too slowly, which leaves the narrator on his own to roam the otherwise empty house. He grows jealous when looking at the family's photo albums, which gives him the impression that Clark has a lucky, happy family who lack nothing. The narrator returns to observe Clark's progress and considers the different strengths they bring to their project. While Clark is stubborn and particular, he is also willing to consider any idea that will make their design better. The narrator admits he takes advantage of this, bossing Clark around and throwing out wild ideas,

believing in his own genius.

When the design portion of their plane becomes boring, the boys begin discussing how they will construct it. Clark has a lead on a canopy they can use but won't tell the narrator where in case he reveals their secret to others. Instead, the narrator is forced to follow Clark through town after school until they approach a home that the narrator recognizes. It's the house of one of their classmates, Freddy, who the narrator used to be close friends with. When the boys go inside to talk to Freddy about the canopy, Clark is surprised to find the narrator knows Freddy and Freddy's mother so well. The narrator reflects to himself that very little has changed there, recalling both the happy times he spent there, as well as Freddy's family's lack of luck. In particular the narrator remembers how he couldn't bear the grief that filled Freddy's home after Freddy's older brother, Tanker, died in a motorcycle crash, and how he suddenly ran home and was too embarrassed to interact with Freddy again. Still, he now slips easily back into the word games he and Freddy used to play, and Freddy and the narrator animatedly exchange gruesome stories while Clark observes quietly, eating cookies.

Freddy's stepfather Ivan then enters the kitchen where his wife and the boys are sitting, explaining that Tanker's old pickup truck has gotten stuck in the **mud**. The boys go outside to find the truck loaded with felled trees from the property, and the narrator mourns the loss of the woods that he and Freddy used to make believe in. Ivan asks them to unload the wood so the truck can be freed from the muck. Though his late stepson's truck no longer works well, Ivan nearly cries when considering selling it. Clark is hesitant to move so much wood and instead suggests they dig ruts and lay down wood to give the tires more purchase. Freddy and the narrator go to get shovels for the job, and as they do the narrator finds himself confessing that he believes his family will soon be moving. Freddy says he hopes they stay, but the two break into their word game, deflecting the emotional conversation.

Back at the truck, Clark directs their efforts, at first trying not to get muddy, though he gives in to get the work done. Digging out the tires and wedging logs under the treads is difficult, but eventually, Ivan is able to drive the truck out of the mud, leaving the three boys caked up to their necks. Next they head to the barn, where Freddy shows them a pristine airplane canopy. It is smaller than the design accounted for, but the narrator believes with a few adjustments, their plane is as good as built. Afterwards, the narrator accepts Freddy's mom's offer to let them shower; Clark declines.

The narrator and Clark then walk home, the narrator feeling empowered by wearing Tanker's old clothes. Clark is still covered in mud and asks the narrator to join him for dinner to offset how angry his mother will be about his dirty clothes. Clark also tells the narrator that Freddy asked to join their plane project while he was in the shower and asks his opinion,

saying the narrator knows Freddy better than he does. The narrator agrees Freddy is great, but he'd prefer they keep the plane between the two of them. Clark agrees. They walk the rest of their way through town, and the narrator notices that Clark is taking more time than normal. When they get to Clark's front door, Clark pauses to hear what music is playing inside. Clark says, with relief, that the choice of music means his mother is in a good mood.



## CHARACTERS

**Narrator** – The protagonist and narrator of “Flyboys” is an unnamed boy, likely in his pre-teen or early teen years. He is the current friend of classmate Clark, with whom he is designing a jet **plane**, and former best friend of Freddy. His relationship with Clark is defined by contrast; Clark is well-off, self-assured, and pragmatic, while the narrator is imaginative, delighted by stories of adventure, and eager to share his inspired (and perhaps foolish) ideas. The narrator admits that Clark gets frustrated by his lack of familiarity with actual design work and also views the narrator, correctly, as loose-lipped about their supposedly secret plans for the jet. His friendship with Freddy, on the other hand, is based on more commonality than the narrator would like to admit. He easily connects with Freddy's family, but he is also overwhelmed by the emotion and hardship they are constantly experiencing, worried it is somehow contagious. The narrator feels a lot of guilt for his failure to remain friends with Freddy in light of this, though he understands that his desire to run from Freddy's complicated home life is related to his own need to ignore his own personal family strife. Interestingly, the narrator's family is not included in the story, aside from a mention that they are on precarious ground and likely to move away soon. Instead of focusing on his own family—a sign that he would like to escape from his problems—the narrator spends his time assessing Clark and Freddy's families based on their class and adherence to social expectations. Over the course of the story, though, the narrator learns that things are not always how they appear, and that no one escapes from familial strife and tension.

**Clark** – Clark is the classmate and friend with whom the narrator is designing a **plane**. He is a pragmatic person who is deeply dedicated to realizing their vision, putting their end goal before his own instincts or feelings. He is nonjudgmental as well, both when he takes in Freddy's more modest home without the pity the narrator feels and when he accepts the narrator's request to leave Freddy out of the jet plane plans without comment. Clark's exceptional composure, wariness of getting **mud** on his clothes, and his self-assurance in formulating a plan to free the stuck truck can be taken as indicating his self-sufficiency, but it also points to his being burdened by expectations more fitting of an adult than a child. This is likely connected to the fact that Clark's family is largely

absent; his mother is never home and his father travels for work. The narrator's perception of Clark's home-life is influenced by Clark's family's wealth and numerous possessions, many of which are tools that the boys use to create films or build contraptions. Because Clark's family appears wealthy and happy, the narrator does not question it. But Clark's usual calm is disturbed at the end of the story, when his fear over his mother's mood and reaction to his dirty clothing hints that things in what the narrator thought was a perfect household are far more volatile than the narrator realized.

**Freddy** – Freddy is a classmate of Clark and the narrator. He was formerly the narrator's best friend, and in the past the two boys would tell outrageous stories, go camping with Freddy's older brother Tanker, and spend hours making believe in the woods on Freddy's property. Freddy is far less fortunate than the other boys, both in wealth and luck. The narrator has seen Freddy's family endure constant hardship, ranging from cars constantly breaking down to Tanker's tragic death. Not long after Tanker's passing, Freddy also undergoes a severe asthma attack that lands him in the hospital. In the face of this struggle and grief, the narrator flees from Freddy's house one day and then completely abandons his friendship with Freddy, uncomfortable with the ever-present sadness. Even so, Freddy's home remains filled with the love of his mother and Ivan. Freddy too remains soft-spoken and kind, accepting the narrator's return without a grudge even after the narrator abandoned him. He is eager to please the narrator and Clark, happily recounting the story from the book he just read and proudly showing the other boys the pristine, dusted canopy he will give them, asking for nothing in return. Freddy has and continues to experience pain and trauma, but he lives through it, and continues to be open to and connect with others.

**Freddy's Mom** – Freddy's mom is a woman who has endured much hardship. Her family is not well-off, her son Tanker has died in a motorcycle accident, and her husband Ivan is unreliable. The narrator pities her, as he sees her trying to overcome her pain and failing to do so. Still, like Freddy, she tries her best to remain present and hopeful. She spends time with the boys when they are over, joking and listening to their stories with rapt attention. She is also the only present mother in the story, making sandwiches, putting out cookies, and neatly wrapping the narrator's dirty clothes in butcher paper. While, for the narrator, her life seems to suggest that things won't always work out—an idea he finds intolerable—within the broader story she serves as a model for what survival looks like, even when sadness is insurmountable.

**Tanker** – Tanker is Freddy's brother. Prior to the time of the story, Tanker died in a motorcycle accident, which has left Freddy's family burdened with grief. When Tanker was alive, he served as a positive male role model for Freddy and the narrator. He was the only one who could call Ivan out on his

hair-brained schemes because Ivan had such a soft spot for his stepson. In fact, Tanker had a way of pulling not only his stepfather in, but everyone. The narrator has fond memories of Ivan taking him and Freddy on camping trips and how he used to carve woodland creatures into the wood of the dining table when he would regale them with stories about his life. In his tales, he would make embarrassing or difficult experiences seem vital, showing them how to be vulnerable in front of others.

**Ivan** – Ivan is Freddy's stepfather. In the story, Ivan often gets the family into trouble, engaging in foolish money-making attempts or illegally dumping garbage. He is not always brave, either—he runs away when Tanker dies, and he has been known to shirk responsibility. He fails his family, but he is never ill-intentioned, and he always comes back. The narrator sees Ivan as a screw-up, not recognizing how deeply Ivan cares for his stepsons and engages meaningfully with their friends. While Ivan may not be a model for success or stability, he is the only present father in the story.



## 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.



### FEAR OF EMOTION

In "Flyboys," the narrator is afraid of emotion. This is particularly evident in his reactions to Clark and Freddy: he's comfortable in Clark's big, empty house that's devoid of life and emotion, but he can't stand being in Freddy's house, because it feels so full of emotion—both good emotion (love and fun) and bad emotion (grief). The narrator is clearly more personally suited to being among Freddy's family, which shares his imaginative love of storytelling and his desire to play with language, but outweighing this sense of belonging is the narrator's inability to be around their big emotions. For instance, he's horrified by Freddy's mother's failure to overcome her grief over losing Tanker, and he panics when Freddy's stepfather Ivan nearly cries about the idea of selling Tanker's beat-up pickup.

The narrator's fear of emotion results from his desire to repress his own family's strife. His family is largely absent from the story, but the narrator gives plenty of clues that his own house is full of uncomfortable emotion and is likely about to split apart. For this reason, being around other families' strong emotions makes him feel vulnerable and afraid—it's likely that he associates emotion with anger and instability, making him panic. The narrator's fear of stirring up his own vulnerable

emotions explains his attraction to Clark, who he views as a pragmatic, objective person with a stable, lucky family. But it's also clear that choosing Clark over Freddy, while perhaps more comfortable, isn't serving the narrator—the friendship does nothing to change or help him cope with his awful home life, and the two boys don't share as deep an emotional connection as the narrator and Freddy did. In this way, it seems that the narrator's fear of emotion is stunting his growth to some degree. Eventually, he will need to cope with the emotions he's so desperate to repress.



### FAMILY AND CLASS

The narrator evaluates his current friend Clark and his former friend Freddy based more on their families' wealth than on their personal

characteristics. From Clark's big house and the family photo albums showing boats and cars, the narrator gets a positive impression of Clark's family: he assumes that they are great, lucky people who have never been troubled by hardship. Freddy's family, on the other hand, is perpetually plagued by bad luck. They live in a small, dingy home, and Freddy's stepfather Ivan is often getting the family into financial and legal trouble. All of this leads the narrator to form a dim opinion of Freddy's family, seemingly feeling that they deserve their lot in life because they've made bad choices.

But the narrator's judgment of Clark and Freddy's families conspicuously overlooks one thing: love. While he notices that Clark's parents are never around, the narrator doesn't interpret this fact at all—rather than seeing their home as bizarrely devoid of love, care, and connection, he focuses on their wealth to make the assumption that everything is great in their family. Likewise, in forming a negative opinion of Freddy's family, the narrator overlooks how much they seem to love and care for one another, and how they've stuck by one another in the midst of horrible grief.

But the story's ending shows how silly the narrator's assumptions have been. After he and Clark get their clothes muddy, Clark asks the narrator to come over for dinner—Clark knows that his mom will be furious about his clothes, and he wants the narrator there to buffer her anger. He dawdles on the walk home, showing how much he's dreading encountering his family, and he lingers outside for a moment trying to figure out based on the music that is playing whether or not his mother is in a good mood. All of this shows that Clark's wealth has no bearing on his family's happiness—despite having everything, his family still has problems of its own. This final revelation about Clark's fear of his mother's mood demonstrates that misfortune and pain are more universal than the narrator wants to believe, not simply a result of financial struggle.



### IMAGINATION, RATIONALITY, AND ESCAPE

The narrator and Clark are trying to build a **plane**, which seems—for both of them—like an attempt to escape the dreariness of their families. The narrator's family is implied to be on the brink of divorce, while Clark's home seems loveless and empty, and his mother has issues with anger. The plane's symbolism itself is one of escape: it's a machine on which they could fly away from their problems. But the actual process of designing and building it is another kind of escape, because they can immerse themselves in the project and forget their problems at home.

A source of strife between Clark and the narrator is that their mental escapes are very different. Clark is obsessively rational, pragmatic, and closed-off, while the narrator is imaginative, passionate, and creative. The narrator is the idea man, whereas Clark is the workhorse, burying himself in logistics and details. The narrator knows that his own imaginative nature hasn't helped him escape the strife of his family, and his friendship with Clark seems to be based not on any particular affection between the boys, but on his subconscious belief that Clark's rationality has allowed him to escape family strife. (The narrator falsely believes that Clark's family is perfect.) Perhaps the narrator thinks that surrounding himself with rationality might help him escape, too.

But the narrator is wrong that rationality is a way to escape emotion and strife—the story's ending reveals that Clark's family is troubled, too. Neither rationality nor imagination can allow someone to fully escape a difficult reality. There's no implied solution, but it's meaningful that the only time in the story when the narrator experiences true joy is with his former friend, Freddy, who embraces the narrator's imaginative, creative side. When the boys tell stories and play language games with idioms, the narrator seems finally happy and at ease. And while he doesn't choose to remain friends with Freddy, his logic seems faulty—his most credible “escape” from the bad feelings of his family life isn't enduring a joyless friendship with Clark, but embracing the moments of real happiness he feels with Freddy, even as they also bring pain.



### SYMBOLS

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



### THE PLANE

For the narrator, the jet plane he is making with Clark symbolizes his desire to escape his troubling reality. The time spent working with Clark on the design routinely takes him away from his own house—and the tension



and possible divorce the story implies is affecting his family. The project also sparks his imagination, not only in the design process but also in his daydreaming on his way home, when he fantasizes so vividly about flying above the town that he can feel the g-force in his arms and the wind whipping his face.

The plane's symbolic escapism also explains why the narrator decides he wants to keep the project between him and Clark, despite the pleasant afternoon they spent at Freddy's. Freddy and the narrator clearly still have the same common interests and connection, but the narrator chooses to exclude Freddy for the same reason he ran from the house the year before. Witnessing the hardships experienced by Freddy's family make it harder for the narrator to ignore the problems within his own, especially seeing Freddy's mom fail to recover, which demonstrates for him that things do not always, in fact, work out. The narrator wants—really, *needs*—to believe that the jet plane will come to fruition. Having Freddy around will make it harder for him to keep believing, so he cuts him off. His partnership with Clark is filled with tension, but the narrator sticks with Clark because he views Clark as a fortunate person from a lucky family who is more likely to help him make his escape.

While the plane symbolizes escape for the narrator, in the story more broadly it actually signifies the impossibility of any such escape. While the narrator believes that he and Clark will soon build a working jet plane, the reader always understands that two school kids have essentially no chance of success in this project. The jet plane is a pipe dream, and that such a pipe dream is the narrator's way of escaping implies that the family tensions he is trying to escape can't, in fact, be escaped—a fact further further supported by the realization at the end of the story that Clark, who the narrator wants to work with because he sees him as living in a perfect family, himself is worried about tension at home.



## MUD

In contrast to the plane, which symbolizes the narrator's desire to fly above his problems, mud functions as a symbol of those problems. It's no coincidence that it is Freddy's stepfather Ivan, who is continually finding himself in trouble (often of his own making), who first gets the old pickup truck mired in the mud and has to ask the narrator, Freddy, and Clark outside to help him get it free.

The boys' approach to handling the mud also symbolizes the way they approach life problems. Ivan just wants everyone to get in and push, but the practical Clark comes up with a strategy: to dig out ruts so they can lay down wood to provide traction for the tires. When Clark approaches the truck, he then tries to tip toe through the muck to stay clean. But before long, he realizes there is no escaping the mess, and soon he is up to his ankles in the thick mud. The other boys follow suit,

even kneeling in mud to gain traction in their digging. By the end of the process, they are completely covered. In this way, the mud is an equalizer for the three boys. No matter how they choose to approach the messy task at hand, they all get caked in muck.

To get the work done and get unstuck, they all must lean into the mud. The same is true of pain. No one gets through life unscathed, regardless of their principles, status, or background. The narrator learns this in the final scene of the story when he walks Clark home. Throughout the story, he has thought of Clark as lucky and happy, but he observes his friend's fear over his mother's wrath at his muddied clothing when Clark begs him to come to dinner to deflect her anger. He also sees the depth of Clark's apprehension in the way he drags slowly through town, drawing out the walk home. Just like himself and Freddy, the narrator finally understands that wealth and appearance have not preserved Clark from his own problems; life is messy for everyone.



## SANDWICHES

In "Flyboys," sandwiches serve as a symbol of domestic care and presence—or lack thereof. The initial mention of sandwiches occurs when the narrator is at Clark's house, where he takes a break from working on the plane design to wander the house. No one else is home, so the narrator makes himself a sandwich in the kitchen, which he eats as he flips through the family's photo albums. At Clark's house, all the ingredients to make a sandwich are there, but there is no adult present to put it together. In the same way, Clark has grown up with an abundance of possessions and privilege, but the utter lack of parental presence in his home has left him to figure out how to function and sustain himself on his own.

At Freddy's house, however, even when Freddy's mom is in the throes of crippling grief over Tanker's death, the narrator remembers how she used to come out every once and a while to offer the boys a sandwich. Despite the difficult hand she has been dealt, she still makes every effort to show care and support, both feeding and supporting her son with the little she has.

Sandwiches are not mentioned in relation to the narrator's mother, but this reflects the underlying trauma that the narrator experiences in his home life, though that home life is never actually shown in the story. Whatever is or is not lacking in his home, the narrator goes to other peoples' home to be fed. This is true both literally and figuratively—he never eats, let alone engages with a member of his own family in the story, instead spending his time observing other families. The implication is that the narrator understands, mostly subconsciously, that his family is on the verge of collapsing and that they may leave town soon—that the sustenance he needs can't be found at the moment in his family.



## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage Books edition of *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories* published in 2009.

## Flyboys Quotes

“ I formed the habit of making myself a sandwich and settling back in the leather chair in the den, where I listened to old records and studied the family photo albums. They were lucky people, Clark’s parents, lucky and unsurprised by their luck. You could see in the pictures that they took it all in stride, the big spreads behind them, the boats and cars, and their relaxed handsome families who, it was clear, did not get laid off, or come down with migraines, or lock each other out of the houses. I pondered each picture as if it were a door I might enter, until something turned in me and I grew irritable. Then I put the albums away and went back to Clark’s room to inspect his work and demand revisions.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Clark

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 145

## Explanation and Analysis

The narrator’s assessment of his friend Clark’s family is that their status and good looks afford them a free pass from hardship, pain, and conflict. The narrator’s assumptions about the correlation between wealth and happiness have a large influence on who he believes Clark to be and how he values his friendship with Clark.

This description of Clark’s family not only helps characterize his relationship to Clark, but it also implies a great deal about the narrator and his feelings toward his own family. The list of things he imagines his friend’s family is free from are probably situations he has witnessed elsewhere or may have even experienced in his own home. His desire to be a part of the happy, easy lives he perceives in those photos—and the frustration that arises when he can’t—suggest that things in the narrator’s home are not so ideal.


The first use of sandwiches as a symbol also occurs here. The narrator explains his routine of making himself a sandwich at Clark’s and snooping through the family’s pictures. While he notices that Clark’s parents are rarely

home, he doesn’t ascribe much meaning to it. The things he is most envious of are all present: a comfy leather chair, plenty of food in the fridge, and cheery family photos depicting the trappings of wealth. That his friend is there all alone doesn’t register as a concern at all.

“ Clark was stubborn but there was no meanness in him. He wouldn’t turn on you; he was the same one day as the next, earnest and practical. Though his family had money and spent it freely, he wasn’t spoiled or interested in possessions except as instruments of his projects. In the eight or nine months we’d been friends we had shot two horror movies with his dad’s 8mm camera, built a catapult that worked so well his parents made us take it apart, and fashioned a monstrous, unsteerable sled out of a bed frame and five wooden skis we found in his neighbor’s trash.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Clark

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 146

## Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator returns to Clark’s room, he considers his friend and the things they have built together while watching him work on their current design. While he dislikes Clark’s stubbornness and exacting nature, he admits that Clark is the reason their projects have had such success.



For the narrator, his friendship with Clark is less about connection than it is about what he makes possible for the narrator. Without Clark’s tools, supplies, and dedication, it is unlikely their plans would have come to fruition. In this way, the narrator’s resentment toward Clark’s family wealth is partially offset by the access their friendship gives him to resources otherwise beyond him.


The narrator’s description of Clark also furthers the story’s theme of fear of emotion. What the narrator likes best about his friend is his steadfast, pragmatic nature. It is implied that Clark’s stability functions as a kind of reprieve for the narrator—a reprieve from what exactly is unknown at this point in the story, but it is later revealed that the narrator’s family life is fairly turbulent. Considering this, if the boys can execute the construction of their jet, the respite the narrator feels when working with Clark would

be far overshadowed by the ultimate freedom the plane would provide. On some level, the narrator is using Clark as a means to this end of escaping his problems.

☞ They became an airplane, a jet—my jet. And through all the long run home I was in the cockpit, skimming sawtooth peaks, weaving through steep valleys, buzzing fishermen in the sound and tearing over the city in such a storm of flash and thunder that football games stopped in midplay, cheerleaders gaping up at me, legs still flexed under their plaid skirts.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 146

### Explanation and Analysis


While Clark supplies the pragmatism, work ethic, and means, the narrator asserts himself as the spark of genius in their plans. And it is clear he believes that his visionary ideas are the most vital piece of their process. To him, imagination is a powerful and rare skill he is proud to possess, but the reverie conjured by that same imagination on his walk home from Clark's shows the childlike longing and hope at its heart.

The narrator's daydream enforces the symbolism of the jet plane as an escape for him, albeit one that will be nearly impossible to achieve (whether the narrator realizes it or not at this point). He fully envisions the experience of flying above town, from to the feeling of g-force in his body to the look of surprise on the faces of the cheerleaders he imagines soaring past. Of course, his reverie is impractical—even comical—but he needs to believe that it is possible. The narrator is in denial about how stuck on the ground he is, just as he is in denial about his inability to escape his home life.

☞ Freddy lived at the dead end of the street. As Clark and I got closer I could hear the snarl of a chain saw from the woods behind the house. Freddy and I used to lose ourselves all day in there. I hung back while Clark went up to the house and knocked.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Clark, Freddy

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 148

### Explanation and Analysis

As Clark leads the narrator to show him the plane canopy he has sourced, the narrator quickly realizes that they are heading toward a place very familiar to him—the home of a classmate, Freddy.

They walk up to the house, and the difference between where Freddy and Clark's families stand socially is readily apparent. While Clark lives in a nice house at the center of town, Freddy lives all the way down a dead-end road on the edge of the city, deep in woods that are disturbed by grating noise of a chainsaw. Clark's wealth situates him at the center of social respectability, while Freddy's family lingers on the outskirts of society.

The narrator's relationship with the other boys is clearly contrasting, too. Up to this point, the descriptions of his time with Clark are colored by an underlying tension in the way they approach the world, while he and Freddy have a significant bond, having shared many old adventures. Whereas Clark and the narrator's friendship is recent and untroubled by emotion, the narrator and Freddy have complicated history (yet to be revealed) that compels the narrator to hang back while Clark knocks on the door.


☞ She turned to me, her eyes so sad I had to force myself not to look away. "I can't get over how you've grown," she said. "Freddy, hasn't he grown?"


"Like a weed," Freddy said.

"By leaps and bounds," I said, falling into our old game in spite of myself.

Clark looked back and forth between us.

**Related Characters:** Narrator, Freddy's Mom, Freddy (speaker), Clark

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 149

### Explanation and Analysis



At Freddy's house, the narrator and Clark are welcomed by Freddy's mom, who brings them into the kitchen where Freddy is reading. A significant amount of time has passed since the narrator last visited. He feels guilty for this, and that guilt is only exacerbated by Freddy's mom's exclamation at how he has grown. Still, the narrator falls back into the rhythm of their old banter.


This scene establishes the bond the narrator used to have with Freddy's family—and how easily that bond resurfaces. Almost immediately upon reuniting, the narrator, Freddy, and his mom slip back into an old game they used play, exchanging idioms. That creative, playful spark that the narrator so values in himself is mirrored in his reunion with Freddy and his mom.

The narrator's reaction to Freddy's mom's sadness also shows that emotion is not something the narrator can handle easily—it takes all his focus to not turn away from the grieving woman before him, even though she is the only maternal presence in the story and once meant a great deal to him.

☛ It was grisly stuff, and he didn't scrimp on details or try to hide his pleasure in them, or in the starchy phrases he'd picked up from whatever book he was reading. That was Freddy for you. Gentle as a lamb, but very big on Vikings and Aztecs and Genghis Khan and the Crusaders, all the great old disembowlers and eyeball gougers. So was I. It was an interest we shared. Clark listened, looking a little stunned.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Freddy, Clark

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 150

### Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator and Clark sit down at the table, Freddy's mom prompts her son to share what he has been reading with the other boys. The story he tells is gruesome and exciting, reminding the narrator that they have always had shared interests.

This excerpt further emphasizes the divergent relationships the narrator has with Clark and Freddy. Clark is all practicality—he and the narrator spend their time constructing and executing their plans, working toward a common goal. Freddy and the narrator, on the other hand,


are joined by common interest and connection. They love make believe, history, and adventure, and the time they used to spend together was without goal aside from mutual enjoyment.

While the reason for Freddy and the narrator's estrangement hasn't been revealed yet, it is apparent that the narrator has chosen a very different kind of friend in Clark. Watching these two friends interact, and more importantly, seeing Clark react to Freddy's story, the narrator feels a hint of embarrassment at how he used to spend his time. This dynamic reveals the narrator's desire to appear respectable to his new friend, furthering the theme of family and class.

☛ This was a very unlucky family. Bats took over their attic. Their cars laid transmissions like eggs. They got caught switching license plates and dumping garbage illegally and owing back taxes, or at least Ivan did. Ivan was Freddy's stepfather and a world of bad luck all by himself. He wasn't vicious or evil, just full of cute ideas that got him in trouble and make things even worse than they already were...Tanker was the only one who could stand up to Ivan, and not just because he was bigger and more competent. Ivan had a soft spot for him. After the accident he took to his bed for almost a week, then vanished.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Ivan, Tanker

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 150

### Explanation and Analysis

Sitting at the kitchen table, the narrator continues to recall his history with Freddy's family, including all the misfortune that he's seen them experience, both before and after the death of Freddy's brother, Tanker.

All this hardship is something that the family can't seem to shake, and the narrator's criticism of it is striking in comparison to his view of Clark's family. The narrator recounts a full litany of the problems at Freddy's, but he has not picked up on any issues at all at Clark's house. His family has money and the appearance of happiness, so the narrator doesn't look much beyond that veneer. Status deeply affects the narrator's perception of the other boys, and he seems to believe that poverty is a direct result of poor choices by




Ivan, while Clark's wealth is based in good luck.

Ivan, like Freddy's mom, may be struggling, but he is the only paternal figure left in story after Tanker's passing. Again, the narrator doesn't see the love and commitment it took for Ivan to return after his grief-caused absence. Instead, he can only see Ivan's missteps and shortcomings. In his mind, Freddy's family is unlucky and cash-strapped, which far outweighs the (often messy) love in their home.

☛ Sometimes she came out to offer us a sandwich and ask us questions about our day, but I wished she wouldn't. I had never seen such sorrow; it appalled me. And I was even more appalled by her attempts to overcome it, because they so plainly, pathetically failed, and in failing opened up the view of a world I had only begun to suspect, where wounds did not heal, and things did not work out for the best.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Freddy's Mom, Tanker

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 151

### Explanation and Analysis

In the narrator's recollection of the last few times he spent at Freddy's before their friendship sputtered out, the narrator witnessed Freddy's mom's debilitating grief over her son Tanker's death.



Witnessing this mourning mother causes the narrator extreme discomfort, not only because her pain is severe and he cares for her, but also because it begins to shift his understanding of the world. Things in his own house are turbulent, so the narrator needs desperately to believe that things can get better—but he can see that some pains cannot be fixed. Instead of bearing through that grief together, the narrator wants Freddy's mom to keep it locked away in her room. Later, it becomes too much for him to bear and he runs away, both from the literal house and his friendship with Freddy.


Alongside her grief, though, Freddy's mom tries her best to remain present. Her offer to make the boys sandwiches is meaningful in its comparison to the earlier mention of sandwiches at Clark's house. There, where there is no present mother, sandwiches are something the narrator helps himself to. Freddy's mom, on the other hand, shows up

and takes care of the boys even when she is drowning in sadness. In the same way, love coexists alongside pain and grief in Freddy's household. Love is not weighted as heavily by the narrator, however—he only takes notice of the stability he assumes the wealthy (Clark) have and the poor (Freddy) do not.

☛ Such panic...where did it come from? It couldn't have been just the situation at Freddy's. The shakiness of my own family was becoming more and more apparent. At the time I didn't admit to this knowledge, not for a moment, but it was always there, lingering in the gut: a sourness of foreboding, a cramp of alarm at any sign of misfortune or weakness in others, as if such things were catching.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Freddy

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 152



### Explanation and Analysis


The narrator finally recounts the day he and Freddy's friendship ended; it was a direct result of the overwhelming emotion of grief the narrator witnessed at Freddy's after Tanker's death. Their pain is particularly poignant because Freddy's family does not hide their emotions—something that the narrator struggles to handle. On this day, it became too much for him to take, and he ran from their house all the way home.

Yet, he knows that the emotions coloring Freddy's home life were not fully responsible for driving him away. The narrator acknowledges that, at that time, the instability of his own family was becoming exceedingly difficult to ignore. While there is no connection between the two families' issues, the narrator knows the hardship he observed at Freddy's house exacerbated his feelings of dread about his own family. In seeing their inability to escape their grief, the narrator becomes less certain he will be able to escape his own problems.

☝ “Past her prime—has been for years.”  
 “Yessir,” Freddy said. “She’s long in the tooth and that’s a fact.”  
 “Ready for the pasture,” I said.  
 “Over the hill,” Freddy said.  
 “That’s it exactly,” Ivan said. “I just can’t bring myself to sell her.”  
 His jaw started quaking and I thought with horror that he was about to cry. But he didn’t. He caught his lower lip under his teeth, sucked it musingly, and pushed it out again.

**Related Characters:** Ivan, Freddy, Narrator (speaker), Tanker

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis

Back in the present time of the story, Ivan calls the three boys outside to help him with the truck. In the yard, they find that the old pickup is filled with felled trees and stuck deep in the mud. Though the truck does not work well anymore, Ivan is attached to it because it used to belong to his late stepson, Tanker.


At first, he, Ivan, and Freddy toss in their own idioms describing the truck’s old age. The narrator enjoys this kind of playfulness that he is able to share with Freddy’s family, but he is taken aback when the tone abruptly shifts. The narrator freezes in response to Ivan’s emotion, fearing he is about to cry. This proves to be the narrator’s main issue with Freddy and his family; their affection and their grief are equally apparent, and both make him uncomfortable.

In this excerpt, mud is first established as a metaphor for the hardships of life. It is a literal problem the boys must help Ivan solve, but it also symbolizes the messy reality of pain, fear, and loss.

☝ It was impossible to dig and keep your feet, especially as we got deeper, Finally I gave up and knelt down to work—I got more leverage that way—and Clark and Freddy followed suit. I was sheathed in mud up to my waist and elbows. My condition was hopeless, so I stopped trying to spare myself and just let go. I surrendered to the spirit of the mud. It’s fair to say I wallowed.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Clark, Freddy

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 155

### Explanation and Analysis

Following Clark’s plan to dig trenches around the tires rather than unloading the truck to get it free, the three boys throw themselves into their work. Before long, they are completely covered in mud. Even Clark forgets his initial tactic of tiptoeing through the muck, trying to keep his clothes clean, and kneels down in it for better grip.

In this story, mud is an equalizer, covering all three boys. In the same way, they all have their own problems and complicated family lives—all of them are dealing with a mess of some kind. Throughout the story, the narrator has been trying to outrun or build a plane to fly away from the pain and conflict he encounters. Building a jet to escape in isn’t a realistic solution. Just like the pickup truck stuck in the mud, the only real way to work through problems is to submit to mess and emotion until you can find your footing.


☝ “He seems okay. You know him better than I do.”  
 “Freddy’s great, it’s just...”

Clark waited for me to finish. When it was clear that I wasn’t going to, he said, “Whatever you want.”

I told him that all things considered, I’d just as soon keep it to the two of us.

**Related Characters:** Clark, Narrator (speaker), Freddy

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

After their task is complete, Clark and the narrator part ways with Freddy. Clark reveals to the narrator on their way home that Freddy asked to join them in building the plane. Clark is open to the idea, but he is just as willing to keep it between the two of them when the narrator says that’s his preference.

This is surprising after such a pleasant afternoon. Freddy and the narrator picked up their mutual interests and easy

banter right where they left off. But the narrator's initial reason for running away from Freddy came back too—their house is filled with an inescapable grief and their bad luck feels contagious to him.


Because the narrator (mostly subconsciously) views the jet plane as a kind of escape from his own troubled family, the last thing he wants is to risk its success by inviting that kind of instability to the project. In contrast, Clark is respectable and lucky. His dedication, practicality, and abundant resources seem to the narrator like his best shot at achieving his goal, because he still believes that Clark is immune to the kind of hardship he and Freddy have both experienced.

●● As we crossed the park he asked me to have dinner at his place so he wouldn't get skinned alive about his clothes...Clark took his time on the walk home, looking in shopwindows and inspecting cars in the lots we passed. When we finally got to the house it was all lit up and music was playing. Even with the windows closed we could hear strains of it from the bottom of the sidewalk.

Clark stopped. He stood there, listening. "*South Pacific*," he said. "Good. She's happy."

**Related Characters:** Narrator, Clark (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

When the two boys walk home, the narrator sees that Clark is taking extra time on their journey, almost as if he is delaying his return home. When they arrive and Clark affirms that the music means his mother is happy, his relief shows how anxious he had been about seeing his mother. Clark's initial effort to avoid getting muddy at Freddy's, his invitation for the narrator to come for dinner to deflect from his clothes, and his extra slow pace on their walk is cast in a different light—clearly, Clark's life is not as carefree as the narrator thought. He seems terrified of his mother's anger.

Before, the narrator believed that Clark's rationality was a result of a happy, secure family. But this scene shows that Clark's exacting personality is likely just another way of coping with an uncertain home life (including an absent father and a reactive mother), just as Freddy buries himself in the fantastical or the narrator tries to run from uncomfortable emotions.

The narrator's decision to exclude Freddy from the plane project and continue with Clark was based on an unfounded assumption. Clark is no more exempt from struggle because of his class than Freddy. Freddy's family is not any more broken than the others—they are just more open about it. Like the mud, all three boys are elbow-deep in their own hardships and emotions, and no plane can fly them away from that reality.



## 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.

## FLYBOYS

The narrator and his friend Clark decide they will build a jet **plane**, which they painstakingly design together at Clark's house. Though Clark occasionally allows the narrator to handle the tools, Clark finds the narrator slow, so he's usually the one doing the work. While Clark works, the narrator fools around with Clark's samurai sword or wanders the house.

Clark's mom isn't home very much, so the narrator has free reign to make a **sandwich**, listen to records, and peruse photo albums while Clark works upstairs. In the photos, he sees a family that has been blessed with luck and wealth, never having to endure hardships like layoffs or illness or fighting. He longs to belong to a family like this, which frustrates him and makes him return to Clark's room.

While Clark takes the lead in the hands-on drafting of the jet **plane**, the narrator takes the lead in the design choices for their project. He becomes domineering and at times mocks his friend's suggestions, but Clark implements the narrator's demands without seeming to register his condescension. The narrator believes it is Clark's dedication to the project that allows him to prioritize the design over his pride. Clark's devotion to the plane project also means that he rejects some of the narrator's less helpful suggestions, and no amount of convincing can change his mind. This makes the narrator resentful, and he imagines whacking off Clark's head with the samurai sword.

*While the boys are working together, on their project, it is Clark who takes the lead. This is in part because the tools belong to him and he has more experience, but really, it has more to do with the boys' differing approaches to the work. They seem to have quite different demeanors, and they seem a bit disconnected as friends, since they don't interact much while they spend together.*



*The narrator makes himself right at home in Clark's empty house. That he must make his sandwich himself speaks to the lack of parental presence in the house. Still, the space is comfortable and the family he sees in the photos looks perfect to him. The narrator's desire to step permanently into their world of wealth and good fortune speaks to what is lacking in his own home, and it emphasizes a class difference between his and Clark's family which will continue to play into the events of the story.*



*Because Clark and the narrator have such different personalities and views on their project, there is a significant amount of tension that develops—mostly on the narrator's side. This passage establishes the narrator's flair for the dramatic and wild creativity, both in his design techniques and in the way he imagines lobbing off his friend's head with the blade in his hand. The narrator often uses his imagination to cope with difficult situations or challenging emotions.*

The narrator finds Clark practical and stubborn without being unkind. His temperament is consistent day-to-day. Though Clark's family is wealthy and lives lavishly in comparison to the narrator, the only possessions that Clark cares about are the tools he uses to make things. Together, the narrator and Clark have made films, crafted a bed-sized sled, and written a radio mystery that they entered into a local station's competition. While the narrator's imagination ran wild in planning these projects, it was Clark's patience and dedication that ensured their dreaming came to fruition.

*The class difference between the boys plays a large role in the way the narrator views Clark (and later Freddy). Though the narrator gets frustrated with Clark, it is also apparent that he admires Clark's consistency and the way he uses his family wealth to create things rather than simply possess things. More importantly, it also means that the narrator has access to the kind of resources that it is implied would otherwise be beyond his family's means. He knows that those resources, paired with Clark's dogged commitment, drive the completion of their projects, so the narrator remains friends with Clark even though they are very different people.*



While the narrator is aware that Clark does all the real work, he believes that he himself supplies all the genius in their relationship. At the end of each day of designing the jet **plane**, the precise and real blueprints Clark creates turn into a real plane in the narrator's imagination. As he heads home, he imagines himself in the cockpit soaring over their town. He feels the g-force in his body and the plane shaking as he climbs higher in the sky than he thinks is possible.

*Clark seems to avoid his problems by throwing himself into the work, while the narrator's main mode of escape continues to be his imagination. In his reverie on the walk home, the plane functions as an emotional escape that allows him to soar far above the town and his problems. With Clark's help and the narrator's creativity, he believes that his vivid daydream about flying can become a reality.*



After many months of working on the design of the **plane**, the planning process grows stagnant. Then one day at recess, Clark tells the narrator he has found them a canopy so they can begin construction. The narrator is frustrated when Clark won't share the details with him out of fear that the narrator will divulge their secret plans. Instead, the narrator follows Clark as they walk through town after school, annoyed at how fast he needs to hustle to keep up with Clark. They pass a construction site where the narrator was once chased by older boys, cross the bridge over Flint Creek, and end up in a place that narrator knows well, having been there many times.

*Here, the unbalanced dynamic between the boys continues. Clark not only has more wealth and access to materials than the narrator, but he also seems to have more control in most situations. Clark is the one who sets the pace, deciding to begin construction, withholding information (however justified), and even walking far faster than the narrator can keep up with. However, the dynamic is about to shift with the introduction of a new character, with whom the narrator has a very different relationship.*



The boys are heading to the house of a classmate, Freddy. The narrator tells Clark he does not remember Freddy having an airplane canopy, but Clark assures him he does. When the narrator asks Clark why he told Freddy about the **plane** in the first place when Clark had asked him to keep things quiet, Clark replies that he didn't. Another classmate, Sandra, told Freddy about their project. At this, the narrator goes quiet, since he was the one who told Sandra behind Clark's back.

*Because the three boys are all classmates, Clark would have assumed the narrator and Freddy knew each other, but he is completely unaware of how much history the other two have. The narrator does not share this information once he realizes where they are going. His silence is partially in response to being chastised for blabbing about the project in the first place, but there is also a twinge of embarrassment that is not explained until later.*





Walking up to the house, the narrator hears a chainsaw tearing through the trees in the woods beyond the house. He remembers the times when he and Freddy used to spend all day out there. The narrator chooses to hang behind Clark as he knocks on the door, which Freddy's mother answers. She tells them Freddy is in the kitchen, and Clark goes inside. After hesitating, the narrator follows. When he passes Freddy's mother, she ruffles his hair and tells the narrator he is "a sight for sore eyes." Though he knows her greeting is earnest, he still hears it as a reproach.

In the kitchen, Freddy is sitting at the table reading. When the boys enter, he closes his book and greets them. The narrator says hi back and is hit with a flood of emotions. He and Freddy have not spoken in nearly a year, not since Freddy had to go to the hospital. Freddy's mom follows them in and tells her son to fix a plate of cookies.

Clark says he can't stay long, but when no one responds he settles in at the table. On the tabletop are images of animals and fish that were carved by Freddy's brother, Tanker. He used to drink beer and tell them stories while he worked the wood with his knife. The narrator reflects that if Tanker had not died, the table would be fully covered in carvings by now.

Freddy's home is full of things that are familiar to the narrator. The house smells like laundry and the windows are fogged, and Freddy brings over oreos on a dingy but clean plate. The narrator watches Clark as he grabs a fistful of oreos, noting that Clark is unaware of the pre-existing dynamic going on around him.

Freddy's mother nibbles an oreo. She is a frail woman, who looks at the narrator with sad eyes. He wants to look away, but he makes himself look back at her. Freddy's mother remarks that the narrator has grown a good deal since he last visited, asking Freddy if he noticed. Freddy responds, "like a weed," and the narrator echoes, "by leaps and bounds." This sharing of colloquialisms is a game that the three used to play when the narrator spent time there. Clark is confused by the exchange.

*The house the two boys walk up to is very different than Clark's, which is at the center of town. Freddy's is on the edge of town in the woods, which showcases the characters' different class backgrounds. The narrator's memories of his and Freddy's time playing in the woods speaks to their closeness, and his hesitancy in approaching the house and interacting with Freddy's mom foreshadows the complicated, abrupt ending to their relationship.*



*Freddy's mom is the first parental figure to appear in the story, and she is both warm and nurturing. Rather than finding this comforting, the narrator feels awkward and guilty for not coming over for more than a year.*



*The narrator's memories of Tanker demonstrate the kind of love and joy that the narrator once experienced before he and Freddy became estranged. Storytelling and imagination are at the center of Freddy's family life, which fits much better with the narrator's personality than Clark's household does. The narrator and Freddy's friendship was based far more on common interests than the narrator's current friendship with Clark is. The mention of Tanker's death begins to suggest what may have driven the narrator away from a place that had been so important to him.*



*The narrator's observations of the home are tinged with his recognition that Freddy's family is less well-off than his or Clark's. Though the home is clean and cozy, everything is a bit worn. Clark, for his part, seems oblivious to the disparity in wealth, just as he is in the dark about the history between the narrator and Freddy.*



*The narrator's subtle pity for this poorer family is mirrored by his pity for Freddy's mother. He can see in her the physical manifestations of the hardship she has endured and he is repelled by it. The narrator's sense of guilt continues to grow as they discuss how long it has been since he visited, but he just as quickly falls back into the family's playful use of language games, which shows that he's both drawn to and repelled by this family.*



Freddy's mother then asks about the **airplane**, and Clark responds that they have just begun construction and are eager to return to the task at hand. He says they are looking for a canopy, but the conversation then falls quiet. Freddy's mother encourages her son to tell the other boys about the book he's reading, so Freddy describes the story of Tamerlane and his revenge on Persia, relishing the gory details and reciting phrases from the book. The narrator remembers that while Freddy is a gentle person, he is especially captivated by historical tales of danger and adventure, an interest they share. Clark, in contrast, is taken aback by Freddy's story.

*Though Clark, who loves getting into finer details, is eager to talk about the specifics of the airplane, no one engages with him on the topic for very long. Instead, Freddy's mom continues to be very involved in their conversation, prompting her son to share a topic she knows the narrator and Freddy have in common. The narrator is still very interested in these kinds of intrepid tales, but he is self-conscious about Clark's incredulous reaction. The narrator is torn between his and Freddy's old, shared interests and his new, stable friendship with Clark.*



The narrator thinks of Tanker again, who was killed in a motorcycle accident. In contrast to Clark's lucky family, the narrator describes Freddy's family as deeply unlucky. They have experienced bat infestations and chronic car issues, and Ivan, Freddy's stepfather, is always caught when he dumps garbage illegally or forgets to pay back taxes. It seems to the narrator that Ivan is the source of the majority of the family's troubles, not out of malice but because of his lack of forethought. Tanker was the only person who could get through to Ivan. When Tanker died, Ivan disappeared for a long time.

*The narrator's descriptions of the bad luck Freddy's family has endured show more explicitly how different Freddy and Clark's families are. He feels Clark's family is inherently lucky and wealthy, while he describes Freddy's family's poverty and hardship as a result of bad choices. Subconsciously, the narrator has come to believe that Clark's money and practicality have exempted him from the kind of problems that are so prevalent in Freddy's life, but he's also not acknowledging that Freddy's family seems much more loving and present than Clark's, which is one way in which Clark is unlucky.*



The narrator remembers how, when Tanker was home, everyone would sit at the table listening to his stories. He told stories about himself that were often embarrassing, but the way he shared them, sometimes tearing up, made them seem like they were "the most precious thing that ever happened to him." The narrator remembers how Tanker was the center of the household: the house was always filled with his friends, he could fix anything that had broken, and he often took Freddy and the narrator on camping trips where he gave them Indian names.

*Up to this point, the narrator has struggled to handle the feelings of others. Displays of emotions only stir pity and discomfort in him, and his usual response is to turn away. His memories of Tanker differ, though. Tanker expressed feelings readily, even negative or embarrassing emotions. At the time, instead of repelling the narrator, it drew him in and showed him that hard emotions can be a tool for connection. It's clear that the narrator is grieving Tanker, too.*



After Tanker's death, the house lost its joy. It became quiet and empty, even after Ivan returned. Freddy's mother stayed home in the dark all day, and when she made the effort to come out of her room to ask him and Freddy about their day and offer to feed them, the narrator wished she'd stayed in her room. Her sadness "appalled" him, and more than that, he was horrified by watching her failed attempts to overcome that sadness. In watching her grief, he came to understand that pain does not always heal, and things do not always work out.

*Tanker was a model for healthy emotion, but after his death, the narrator seems to have lost his ability to navigate complex feelings. He found it particularly hard to interact with Freddy's mom in her grief, to the point he wished he didn't have to see her at all. In her grief, his view of the world became less hopeful, which deeply affected his ability to handle his own family's problems. Still, it is important that Freddy's mom continues to show up. She still offers to make sandwiches (a symbol of care), even if she is overwhelmed by her pain. Ivan, too, continues to try, even if he initially left to mourn.*



In this period of time after Tanker's death, the narrator recalls one day where he and Freddy were outside shooting baskets. Freddy's mother called her son inside, and the narrator practiced his shooting for a long time without Freddy returning. He was overcome with a sense of unease as he listened to the ball bouncing under his hand, but he was scared to break the rhythm. The ball hitting the ground over and over sounded to him like "emptiness itself." He finally held the ball still and looked to the house, where he imagined Freddy and his mother trapped inside the house with their grief. Suddenly, the narrator broke into a run, sprinting all the way home. It was this day that the older boys had chased him, attracted to his panic.

During his recollection, the narrator is still unsure where his panic on that day originated, though he is confident that it was not just about Freddy's family. At this same time, the strife of the narrator's own family was beginning to dawn on him, though he tried not to notice it. Even without the ability to name it, his sense of foreboding lingered, triggered by the hardship and vulnerability of others as if misfortune were contagious. The grief of Freddy's family made it harder to ignore his own family's fragility.

It was an asthma attack that sent Freddy into the hospital on this same day, which the narrator learned from his teacher in school the following week. She encouraged the class to write get-well-soon messages and gave them the address of the hospital, but the narrator could not bring himself to visit. Ashamed of his failure to do so, the narrator could not face Freddy when he returned to school. The two boys began to mutually avoid each other. Clark and the narrator became friends soon after, and this is the first time the narrator and Freddy have interacted since.

Back in the present, Clark eats the rest of the cookies on the plate while listening to Freddy talk about Tamerlane. When Freddy finishes, the narrator then offers another gruesome story about Quantrell's Raiders. As he speaks, Freddy is enraptured, and Freddy's mother exclaims at all the plot twists. Clark, however, listens without interest, impatient to return to their work and too pragmatic to enjoy their storytelling. The narrator is aware that Clark is seeing a new side of him that he likely judges. Still, the narrator continues to elaborate and play up the drama of his tale, pleasantly reminded of the joy he used to feel knowing Freddy was hanging onto his every word.

*The narrator's inability to handle the massive grief that Freddy's family was experiencing is the reason that his and Freddy's friendship ended. His reaction was to avoid that pain by literally leaving the house and figuratively leaving his friendship. That same instinct propels the narrator's desire to build a jet plane. The design process is one type of escape—he goes to Clark's to spend time outside his own troubled home—and the completed plane would allow him to fly away even further from his family's problems.*



*Ultimately, the narrator's urge to flee had far more to do with the issues happening in his own home than it did with Freddy. Because the pain he witnessed at Freddy's made him less able to ignore his own slowly dissolving family, he chose to cut Freddy off rather than face his own pain. This is also why he is drawn to Clark; his stable, happy home life (or at least the appearance of it) continues to seem like a safer choice than a friendship with Freddy, whose family problems are out in the open and inescapable.*



*By refusing to visit Freddy in the hospital after his asthma attack, the narrator cemented his decision to break off contact with him. However, the guilt of ignoring his grieving friend is only compounded by the additional misfortune of such a bad health scare. Freddy's motivation for avoiding the narrator in return is unclear. Like the slight imbalance of power between Clark and the narrator, the narrator seems to have had the upper hand in his relationship with Freddy. Class is the implicit reason given for those power dynamics.*



*Throughout their time in the kitchen, the narrator is caught between two very different friendships. On one hand, he wants to preserve his current friendship with Clark, who is his ticket toward finishing their plane design and achieving the escape that he needs. On the other hand, the narrator feels intense guilt about abandoning Freddy and has been reminded of the connection they once had. In the end, his own enjoyment of letting his imagination run wild and titillating his audience wins out over Clark's annoyance and possible judgement, showing where the narrator's natural inclinations lie.*



Ivan then enters the kitchen, interrupting the narrator's story. He, like everything else in the house, is exactly how the narrator remembers: a big white face wearing a too-small, red hunting cap. Ivan is caked in thick, black **mud** up to his knees, and he exclaims when seeing the narrator at his kitchen table once more. One of the lenses in his glasses has a dot of mud in the center, making it look like a pair of joke glasses to the narrator. Ivan explains that the truck is stuck.

*The narrator's assessment of Ivan's appearance supports the haphazard, foolish demeanor the narrator associates with Freddy's family's bad luck. It is also unsurprising to the narrator that Ivan has gotten himself in a sticky situation, as he has done so often in the past. While the previous scene showed the narrator enraptured by storytelling with Freddy's family, here he's reminded of what makes him uncomfortable in their household, illustrating his complicated feelings.*



All three boys follow Ivan outside and consider the dilemma of Tanker's old, beat-up pickup truck stuck in the **mud**. Ivan says the truck is "past her prime," then Freddy and the narrator pile on their own colloquial phrases, just as they did with Freddy's mother in the kitchen. The joke ends when Ivan says he can't bring himself to sell Tanker's truck, nearly breaking into tears. The narrator is horrified by the rush of emotions, but Ivan bites his lip to catch himself.

*Despite the narrator's judgement of Ivan's past mistakes, their idiom-laced repartee in the yard shows they too had a bond before the narrator ran away. But the lightness of their jokes is suddenly broken by Ivan's rush of sadness over the truck—another instance where the narrator feels repulsion at displays of grief.*



Ivan instructs them to empty out the truck bed, which is full of logs from the trees Ivan has been clearing from the property. Freddy and the narrator used to hide in the trees at the back of the property to spy on the family next door, but Ivan has cut down so many trees that the neighbor's house is now in plain sight. Ivan has been felling trees to sell as firewood, which the narrator knows is foolish and unprofitable. He recalls how he and Freddy used to spend their summers in these woods pretending they were in unexplored American territory, a tropical jungle, or on Mars. Nearly all the forest, and everything the boys imagined it to be, is now gone.

*The forest embodies for the narrator the best of his friendship with Freddy. It was a place where the two got lost in their imaginations, having adventures that distracted them from their real-life cares. To the narrator, Ivan's decision to cut down those trees is sad, but mostly it reinforces for him the hopelessness of Ivan's hair-brained schemes. Ivan's orders to empty out and then reload a full truck bed of logs—hours of work—is just another instance of how Ivan tends to put in the most amount of work for the least amount of profit.*



Ivan believes emptying the logs will be enough to get the vehicle out, but Clark disagrees. Ivan, Freddy, and the narrator exchange more colloquialisms while Clark walks over to the truck, tiptoeing through the **muck** in an effort to stay clean. Only when he sinks to his ankle in the mud does he give in to the mess. Clark assesses the truck and suggests that they lay down logs to give the tires more purchase. The narrator says he thinks they should just unload the truck, but Ivan is intrigued by Clark's idea.

*The narrator and Freddy are skeptical of Ivan's plan but choose not to fight him on it. Clark's preoccupation with logistics, on the other hand, prompts him to suggest this alternate plan. While Clark is explaining his idea, his attempts to stay clean come across as prim and upper-class to the narrator. At the end of the story, though, it's revealed that the motivation for Clark's futile attempts at avoiding the mud isn't him being prim—it's his fear of his mother's wrath. Clark benefits from his family's status and respectable appearance, but it's clear later that he also suffers from it.*



Freddy and the narrator walk up to the barn for shovels to dig out the ruts, and when they are alone, the narrator realizes how skinny Freddy has become. He then tells Freddy that his family is going to move, though his parents have not told him so. Freddy responds that he hopes they end up staying. Both boys are uncomfortable, and they exchange more cliché phrases to lighten the tension, saying “there’s no place like home” and “home is where the heart is.”

*The narrator’s care for Freddy is apparent in his concern for his health, but his guilt persists too. Freddy is also the only person the narrator confides in by sharing his fear of impending upheaval: the narrator doesn’t say so, but it seems like his parents may get a divorce. This moment of sincerity is only possible between the two of them because they are alone for a short while; the narrator would not be so candid if Clark were around. While this conversation could be a moment for the two boys to clear the air around their falling out, the awkwardness is too much for them to handle. As they often do, they fall back into their habit of spurring off idioms to deflect from emotions they are afraid to face.*



Back at the truck, they take turns digging out the wheels. They all struggle to find footing, slipping and kneeling in the **mud** until they are covered up to their waists. Clark directs Freddy and the narrator as they dig out trenches and lay down wood, yelling instructions at the other two boys. Once they finish engineering the trenches, the three of them push while Ivan starts the truck.

*After a day of constant tension and conflicting emotions (most apparent on the narrator’s part), the three boys are finally in unison as they work to dig the trenches. They start out with different approaches, but they soon take on the same tactic, giving into the mess. The mud serves as a symbol of all the concerns and pain they each carry. In the mud they are all equal, just as they are all equally affected by complex emotions, family hardships, and insecurities. And instead of avoiding the mess of those issues, they must dig in deeper until they can get their footing. Like the stuck pickup, it is the only way to break free.*



The wheels spray **mud** as they spin, covering Clark and Freddy while the narrator misses a majority of the spray. Ivan rocks the truck back and forth. The exhaust fumes make the narrator’s eyes burn, and he watches as a log flies back past Clark’s head. Clark is too focused to notice the near miss. Finally, the truck breaks loose and Ivan drives away.

*As the boys push, the narrator’s spot in between Freddy and Clark is symbolic of how the narrator is caught in the middle throughout the story. He is stuck between wealth and poverty, and he is also stuck between these new and old friendships. Clark’s failure to notice the log nearly hitting his head also reinforces the way he uses focus as a coping mechanism. While they push the truck, he is so dialed in that he becomes oblivious to the danger around him. In the same way, he throws himself into complex engineering projects to distract from his problems at home.*



The boys are left exhausted and plastered with muck. Freddy tries to catch his breath, gasping loudly as the three stand in the sudden silence in the absence of the roaring pickup. Clark methodically tries to scrape the **mud** from his body with a stick, which the narrator finds overly optimistic due to the sheer amount of it. Freddy finally recovers and stands up, looking unwell. He suggests they go back up to the house to get cleaned up, but Clark asks if they can at last go look at the **plane** canopy in the barn.

*Once the truck skids out of the mud, the boys’ moment of unity passes. Once more, the narrator stands between them, observing how different they are. Freddy has given all his strength to the effort and struggles to recover. As always, his problems are on full display, and the narrator feels embarrassed to witness it. What he doesn’t realize is that Clark’s problems are on display, too. What the narrator sees is a futile attempt to scrape mud off with a stick; he does not know that Clark trying to clean up as best he can, hoping to minimize his mother’s reaction.*





The narrator admits that he had hoped all afternoon that Clark would forget about the canopy because he is sure Freddy does not have one. He is shocked when Freddy presents the airplane canopy to them. Though the narrator has been in the barn hundreds of times, he never noticed the canopy hidden among the other junk. Unlike the rest of the things in the barn, the canopy has been dusted and polished. Besides some minimal scratches and the canopy being slightly smaller than the plans accounted for, it is perfect and real. The narrator is sure their **plane** will get built. Clark asks what Freddy wants for it, and he responds that they can have it for free.

They return to the house, and Freddy's mother insists that the boys take off their messy clothes and wash up. Clark refuses, only washing his face and hands, while Freddy and the narrator each take long showers. Freddy's mother gives the narrator some of Tanker's old clothes to wear and sends him home with his **muddy** clothing wrapped in butcher-paper. Freddy walks Clark and the narrator to the end of the street and then disappears. The two boys stop at the bridge and throw rocks at bottles. The narrator is amped up from their success and by Tanker's old motorcycle jacket, which he was given to wear home.

Clark tells the narrator that Freddy wants in on their project, which the narrator is immediately opposed to because they would need to redesign the whole cockpit. He confirms that Freddy will still give them the canopy, then asks Clark what he said to Freddy. Clark assures the narrator that he did not commit to having Freddy join. Clark asks his opinion, and the narrator tells him that Freddy is great, then trails off. Clark responds that they can do whatever the narrator wants, and he says he would like to keep the project between the two of them.

As they cross through town, Clark asks the narrator to join him for dinner to help moderate his mother's anger when she finds out what happened to his clothes. Clark drags out the walk home, lingering to look at window displays and car lots. When they finally reach his house, the lights are on and music plays loud enough to reach the street. Clark pauses on the sidewalk, listening. Finally, he determines that the music is from *South Pacific*, which means that his mother is in a good mood.

*Freddy's offer to give Clark and the narrator the airplane canopy is a peace offering, a gesture he likely hopes will repair his lost friendship with the narrator. He is eager to please them, taking care to dust the canopy until it shined and even letting them have it for free. While planes are not of particular interest to him, he wants to reconnect with the narrator on these new terms. The narrator is not thinking about Freddy's motivations at all, though. Instead, he is overwhelmed with hope that the plane will actually come to fruition now. Soon, he'll be able to fly away.*



*The tension that the narrator has been experiencing between his friendships with Freddy and Clark throughout the day seems to evaporate with the acquisition of the canopy. He is buoyant on his hope, taking a long shower to rinse away all the traces of mud. He is only thinking about flying high in the sky, no longer bogged down in the muck. Getting to wear the clothes of someone he idolized only adds to triumphant mood.*



*The narrator's excitement about their plane is abruptly checked when Clark asks him if he wants to include Freddy in their plans. Though the narrator has struggled with guilt over abandoning Freddy, his anxiety about his own family and his fresh hope about his and Clark's project wins out. He and Freddy share history and care for one another, but the narrator wants to leave that behind. He believes that Freddy will always be mired in the muck of pain. To him, Clark—someone with wealth and composure—is his ticket to being able to break away.*



*What the narrator has assumed about Clark proves to be all wrong. Clark's happy family is just a façade, something made possible by their wealth, withholding emotion, and lack of presence. Like Freddy and the narrator, Clark has his own issues and anxieties. The calm demeanor and intense focus that the narrator has revered in his friend are just another way to cope with pain that the narrator couldn't see.*





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